

“Envisioning the Future: Philanthropic Support for Jewish Children and Youth”
The Jim Joseph Foundation

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How wondrously refreshing to be asked to advise a foundation how to spend twenty million dollars annually. And on Jewish education!!! Those of us who invest our energies advancing Jewish life take hope from an institution and its leadership that has focus and is courageous enough to ask challenging questions.

I have spent most of my life involved, professionally and as a volunteer, in most aspects of Jewish education, formal and informal. My tenure as president of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life provided me with something of a global view both of our people and their needs, as well as young people and their dreams. My current tenure at Yeshiva University has given me still another confirming perspective.

I firmly believe that this is a time when being Jewish has become an option, not a condition. After generations of our identity being determined as much by an excluding world as by a proud peoplehood, most Western society today welcomes the Jew into the prevailing culture. As we confront the full impact of assimilation it is clear that no one is forced to be Jewish. Indeed, we have had a significant enough influence on aspects of popular culture that in so many ways contemporary life is ours. In an assimilationist and welcoming society, the past totems and taboos of Jewishness no longer loom large. Anti-Semitism, Holocaust, Israel, sights, sounds and smells of Eastern European neighborhoods are no longer ingrained parts of Jews' beings. I strongly believe that Jewish feelings or feeling Jewish, what once was termed “the pintele Yid,” does not transmit generationally. Indeed, Jewishness is an option not a condition. Only if there is a reason to exercise that option will one choose Jewish.

But I know that Jewishness is so much more than sights and sounds, tastes and touches. It transcends tribal. We are a people of history and destiny, of pride and purpose, of covenant and consequence, and community. But it is clear to me that these riches are not accessible through catechism or through visits with grandparents or with simple aphorisms. In an elective society, in order to “choose Jewish”, our children have to be Jewishly literate and more; have to be Jewishly experienced. Simply put, they must know their story, and they must own their story. Without basic literacy, without the family narrative, we are bereft; beyond being illiterate, we are homeless and hopeless.

I saw from my years at Hillel that, ultimately, we need a common story to speak of, to think about, and to build upon. Yet, knowing the story is necessary but not sufficient. We also need to own the story; to feel it; to experience Jewishness, individually and collectively; to celebrate our being. As the Torah speaks of “Lishmor v’laasot” – “to learn and to do” - we need to teach learning and doing. We are a people of text and context. Therefore, formal and informal education, textual and contextual exposure, learning and doing Jewish is the essence of

education. It is the ticket to a Jewish journey. Community, Israel, folkways, philosophy, practice - all are contingent on knowing the story and owning the story.

I believe our task as educators is not to be diverted by contemporary faddishness, by post-modern views of identity. In a simple and clear way, just as we have as a people treasured providing our children with education, we must provide our children with Jewish education. And Jewish education must be textual and experiential; it must be more than just another subject.

Our people are fractious and fractured - there are threats to the Jewish future that are existential and schismatic. Many can be resolved, if at all, only over the passage of time with solutions beyond my ken. But this I know: any hope we have for sustainability of our peoplehood and our opportunity to influence the world will come from a shared commitment to make our children both know and own their Jewishness. That is the great challenge of today. And that is the great opportunity that Jim Joseph, of blessed memory, has presented.

With my Jewish educational bias thus established, I am happy to share such thoughts as I have with the Foundation. The Foundation has core choices only it can make as to how focused it chooses to be. It also must decide whether it wishes to be an operational foundation or a funding source, or a combination of both. I cannot presume to advise you on that decision.

I do know there are many institutions and gifted professionals deeply invested in various realms of informal and formal Jewish education. They would be strengthened by serious support of resources. They also need to be in an environment where the community reinforces the imperative of Jewish education as the *sine qua non* of purposeful survival. And we all need to be held to standards and to develop measurement tools for success.

In terms of operating principles, I would urge the Foundation to follow some key rules:

- Keep it simple - partner with your grant recipients; do not jump them through hoops. The work is too important, the resources and time too precious.
- Encourage investment in what is successful.
- Structure grants so that they can have lasting impact.
- Trumpet the successes.
- Develop the brand so that a Jim Joseph investment represents the quality that Jewish life must demand.
- The Foundation should stand for the proposition that Jewish education requires text and context, formal and informal teaching, information and experience
- The Foundation should be viewed as an asset and a resource across the spectrum of the Jewish community.

I suggest offering five categories of initiatives that would:

- 1. Incentivize the profession of Jewish education;**
- 2. Challenge Jewish educational program development for local initiatives;**
- 3. Invest in training institutions;**
- 4. Preserve and strengthen existing educational program successes; and**

5. Encourage the advancement of knowledge and research in Jewish education;

I have arbitrarily attached budget numbers to each initiative. Clearly, the Foundation would have to develop realistic budgets.

1. Incentivizing the Profession - \$6 Million

I believe an array of factors, particular and general, make the time ripe time for attracting the best and brightest to the education profession. Young people are looking for meaning in careers; if they think they can matter, and have a life of dignity they will train for and enter the field. Even if we find ways of dealing with the tuition crisis, we must ensure that we have quality educators across the board who can deliver excellence. While the issues of faculty salaries are a challenge for each community to meet, the Foundation can encourage the field by incentivizing the Jewish Educational career path.

I suggest the Foundation publicly commit a substantial amount of its resources to incentivize young people to enter the field of formal and/or informal education. This could take the form of a mortgage fund for educators to buy homes at highly subsidized rates, with mortgage forgiveness programs based on years of service.

Alternatively, the Foundation could support a program that would forgive the cost of educational degrees or training, tied to length of tenure. A major fund to encourage serious continuing professional education, or the like, would make a powerful statement to young professionals.

2. Challenging Local Institutional Program Development - \$5 Million

On local levels, I would suggest the Foundation establish a national grant fund for local institutions – schools, pre-schools, camps, youth programs – to receive two- or three-year grants to develop particular initiatives with the incentive of receiving endowment funding for the program upon successful establishment.

As an example, if a day-school or network of day-schools would wish to model retreat programs for their high school students (or for families) that could contextualize their learning, the Foundation would provide funding for research and development and implementation of the program for a few years; if successful, an endowment would be offered to make the program permanent. This would encourage local initiatives and creativity, would not diffuse existing resources, and could deepen the educational experience.

The Foundation would need to decide if it would develop in-house consultants or a pool of consultants who could work with the recipients. Certainly one of the hopes would be that the programs could be replicable in other venues.

3. Investing in Training Institutions - \$5 Million

There exists a wealth of ideas for broadening the work of many quality training institutions in the Jewish community. Foundation investment in developing new initiatives of consequence, through multi-year grants and endowments, would be invaluable to these bodies, both in these institutions training new professionals in contemporary professional education and in being of assistance to local educational entities. As an example, certificate programs could be developed to train camp counselors, youth advisors and the like. Moreover, perhaps more fundamentally, we must strengthen the ability of training institutions to teach and develop a generation of leadership – both lay and professional, and to impact on local educational institutions. These students of purpose and passion – our lay and *klei kodesh* – must be empowered and given the tools necessary to lead.

4. Partnering with Global Successes - \$2 Million

There exist some clear Jewish educational successes in our community. They include the Wexner Heritage Program, Wexner Graduate Fellowship, Hillel's Campus Service, and Birthright. The Foundation could partner with any of these to expand them and broaden their impact. For example, many of us are convinced that Birthright is an important Jewish journey. We are equally convinced that effective, personal follow-up is necessary to truly capitalize on the Birthright investment. The Foundation could choose to have a major effect on this area by partnering with Birthright to train and form a cadre of campus-based Birthright follow-up professionals who would work with students to connect them to ongoing Jewish growth plans. Or the Foundation could offer \$5,000 scholarships to Birthright alumni who would get to participate in appropriate long-term Israel educational programs. One million dollars per year would enable 200 participants to meaningfully build on Birthright.

Another example would be to partner with the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) to annually launch niche programs that would be modeled at CAJE conferences, providing supplemental school educators with resources to pursue a common annual project in all of their schools.

5. Encouraging New Educational Ideas and Technologies - \$2 Million

I believe it is critical for the Foundation to support the ongoing development of ideas and research in Jewish education. For example, the Foundation could commit to ten years of \$100,000 annually for serious academic conferences on Jewish education, encouraging research and writing by scholars and educators in an array of Jewish educational disciplines. Serious conferences on pre-school, camping, educational curricula, learning processes, Israel education and the like would need much educational format. Alternatively, these funds could provide visiting professorships for educational experts.

Within the rubric herein outlined, the Foundation can make several visible statements:

1. It wants to encourage young people to build careers as educators.
2. It strengthens broader creative programming in an array of local institutions.
3. It seeks to fortify and expand the training institutions.
4. It partners with successful global educational programs.
5. It advances the research and development of new educational ideas and technologies.

Most importantly, a commitment of this magnitude significantly strengthens the culture of investment in Jewish education and will be able to trumpet our successes therein. It is also a statement of the importance of investment in human capital, not bricks and mortar. In so doing, it is important that the name “Jim Joseph Foundation” be visibly branded as a hallmark of quality. Each of these initiatives could have an advising team or jury of scholars, professors, lay leaders and philanthropists to assist the Foundation. Finally, a foundation report could provoke change and advancement.

Clearly, there is no magic pill. After all, the home is the primary educational motivator. The Jewish home gets strengthened when the Jewish community sends loud and real messages that education, text and context, knowing the story and owning the story, are accessible and valuable, and provide answers of purpose, meaning and community in a world in desperate search of value and values. And, thus, the story continues.