



# Giving to Jewish Organizations: A Short History & Discussion Questions

## A Short History

Depending on who you ask, “Jewish giving” can mean:

- 1: Using Jewish values to inspire giving of any kind.
- 2: Supporting primarily Jewish (and/or Israeli) causes that serve all people.
- 3: Supporting primarily Jewish (and/or Israeli) causes that primarily support Jews (and/or Israelis)

For centuries, “Jewish giving” was almost exclusively limited to the first category - giving to support other Jews. Wherever Jews settled, they followed Jewish law and tradition dating back to the Torah and created a panoply of communal charitable institutions to care for the needy of their community. Supporting the Jewish poor and needy was animated by multiple core Jewish values such as the Biblical injunction not to “harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy kinsman” (Deuteronomy 15:7); the Talmudic teaching that “Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh - all Israel is [all Jews are] responsible for one another” (Babylonian Talmud, Shavuot 39a); and later rabbis like the medieval scholar Maimonides, who believed that Jews could only rely on each other for support (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:2).

In the United States, the need to care for other Jews was embedded in the community’s very DNA. Before Jews were allowed to settle in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam (later to be renamed New York), they were forced to make what came to be known as the “Stuyvesant Promise.” In 1654, Governor Peter Stuyvesant asked his superiors at the Dutch West India Company to forbid the first Jewish immigrants to settle in the colony. The company decided to allow the settlement, but only on the condition that “the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.” The Stuyvesant Promise held until the Great Depression, when even the combined resources of the Jewish community could not meet the needs of the much-increased numbers of Jewish poor, and Jewish

social service agencies encouraged their clientele to apply for public welfare for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

Equally influential was the fact that non-Jewish organizations seldom welcomed Jewish philanthropic dollars - or were averse to publicly acknowledging Jewish contributions. Just as Jews were not allowed to live in certain neighborhoods, attend certain schools, work in certain firms, or stay in certain hotels, so, too, were their philanthropic options constrained by antisemitism.

These constraints loosened in all spheres after World War II, and particularly after the 1960s. Jews can now give anywhere (and go to any school, and marry anyone) - and that has led many people to replace at least some of their giving to particularly Jewish causes with giving to any cause they feel is important. Like all other aspects of Jewish life in an open society, giving to Jewish causes is now purely voluntary.

In this voluntary, open society, giving to Jewish causes is declining - younger American Jews, for example, are significantly less likely to contribute to Jewish organizations than older Jews.<sup>2</sup> Part of decline this is inevitable and good - not only should Jewish givers be free to support any cause they wish, but it is also apparent that not all Jewish organizations are worthy of the volume of philanthropic support they have received in previous generations. Not all organizations should exist in perpetuity, and competing in an open market provides healthy incentives for organizations to remain relevant, efficient, and effective.

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<sup>1</sup> Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 140-142.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Gerstein, Steven M. Cohen, and J. Shawn Landres. 2013. *Connected to Give: Key Findings from the National Study of American Jewish Giving*. Los Angeles: Jumpstart. See also Discussion Catalyst #6 in this document.

This decline, however, is also partly due to an inefficient flow of information: givers simply do not know about the many philanthropic options now open to them in Jewish communities around the world, nor have they had the tools at their disposal to think proactively and in a values-inspired way about their giving goals.

For indeed, although it is still under the radar of many givers, we are in the midst of an explosion of innovative thinking in Jewish communities around the world, which expresses itself both in the creation of new startup organizations and in the intentional evolution of many established institutions. New and renewing organizations are reinventing what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century. In their integration of Jewish values and wisdom with every issue under the sun - environmental sustainability, arts and culture, family education, new media, social justice, health care, language, food, and, yes, religion and spirituality - the new

organizations bring to mind Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's assertion that Judaism is a holistic "civilization," not only a religion or a people.

Part of Amplifier's mission is to use the model of the giving circle to enable givers to make informed choices about what to support - both to provide a framework for learning about giving and exploring one's giving values, and to provide access to information about the broad and inspiring range of organizations that other giving circles are supporting. This access to information comes through the giving circle process itself, through which members gain at least an awareness of, and at most a deep understanding of, the many different types of organizations that fit their giving goals. And it comes through the many tools we are developing to share information across giving circles, especially our shared application system and grantee database.

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## Discussion

### Classical Jewish Texts

"You shall surely open your hand to your brother, your poor, and your destitute of your land."

*Deuteronomy 15:11*

"We sustain the non-Jewish poor with the poor, visit the non-Jewish sick with the Jewish sick...for the sake of peace."

*Talmud Gittin 61a*

"A Jew and a non-Jew, the Jew has preference; the poor or the rich, the poor takes precedence; your poor [i.e. your relatives] and the [general] poor of your town, your poor come first; the poor of your city and the poor of another town, the poor of your own town have prior rights."

*Talmud Bava Metzia 71A*

### Questions

- Who are "your brother, your poor and your destitute of your land"?
- Does "your brother" mean only other Jews?
- What do you think "for the sake of peace" means, and is this still a motivating factor for Jews?
- Does the order of preference in the third text resonate with you - either the actual examples or the underlying value of "charity starts at home"?

## Modern Jewish Giving

“Many Jewish donors believe they must contribute to societal institutions outside the Jewish community because the donor desires to ‘put something back into the community’....Some Jewish donors do not want non-Jews to assume that Jews support only Jewish causes, that Jews are too insulated or self-concerned.”

Gary A. Tobin, 2001.  
*The Transition of Communal Values & Behavior in Jewish Philanthropy.*  
San Francisco: Institute for Jewish & Community Research.

“The great vision of Judaism - and its main impact on world civilization - is in its teaching of tikkun olam: that this world can be repaired to make it a paradise of justice, equality, human dignity and peace for all. Many utopian movements with the same agenda have misfired and inflicted great harm on humanity. So Judaism has made no less a contribution by teaching a method of repair - a partnership covenant between God and humanity for tikkun, repairing one step at a time, as fast as people can go without coercion.

In this model, you follow and honor the human way: start with your family first, then your neighborhood, your country. You expand philanthropy and tikkun work outward, until the whole world is perfected. You also accept that you will not likely complete the work in your lifetime. Therefore, you move the world as far as you can, and then you recruit and educate your children to pass the mission from generation to generation. As long as the chain of covenant transmission is not broken, then we shall overcome some day.”

Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, 2014

“Everyone will give to secular causes like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Greenpeace, and the Red Cross. But in most cases, only Jews will give to Jewish causes. If I don’t give to Jewish causes, who will?”

*Jewish philanthropist at Natan event, 2006*

“Among Jews who make charitable contributions, nearly all of them (92%) give to a non-Jewish organization and the vast majority (79%) gives to a Jewish organization. For American Jews, once an individual takes the step of becoming a donor, there is a high likelihood that she or he will donate to a Jewish organization. However, overall, Jews are more likely to support non-Jewish organizations than Jewish ones; and this difference is particularly striking for basic needs, health, arts, and environmental causes. 21% of Jewish donors gave only to non-Jewish organizations; 4% gave only to Jewish organizations. ...Although age is not a driving factor in the incidence and amount of charitable giving overall, younger Jews clearly are less likely to give to Jewish organizations. The data suggest that giving will increase as individuals get older and earn higher incomes. While younger Jews appear at first glance less likely than older Jews to give to any cause, the differences are less significant after taking income into account. Nevertheless, younger Jews are less likely to give to specific types of causes, including those serving a combination of purposes (such as Jewish federations or the United Way), and they are less likely to give to Jewish organizations (49% of non-Orthodox Jews 18-39 give to a Jewish organization, compared to 62% of those over 40 years-old). Moreover, younger Jews are more likely than older Jews to have made contributions through new methods (such as text message, giving circles, and crowdfunding sites).”

Jim Gerstein, Steven M. Cohen, and J. Shawn Landres. 2013.  
*Connected to Give: Key Findings from the National Study of American Jewish Giving.* Los Angeles: Jumpstart.

### Questions

- Many of these texts are contradictory. Which of them speak to you more than others? Can you find a way to harmonize their apparently disparate points of view?
- Do you agree that Jews have a special responsibility to support Jewish individuals and/or organizations? If not - where do you think support for Jewish individuals and/or organizations can/should come from?
- What are the implications of the fact that younger American Jews are less inclined to support Jewish organizations than previous generations? Does this matter to you?
- Most American Jews support both Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. What do you believe is an appropriate ratio (for you and for your giving circle) of Jewish to non-Jewish giving?