

**What do you think are the important Jewish issues that could be significantly influenced by philanthropic intervention if the Jewish community could devote sufficient resources on a large scale? What types of interventions would be most effective?**

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## **The Global Jewish Creativity Initiative**

### **Inspiring Scenes from the Near Future**

- In Los Angeles, an international conference of Jewish filmmakers meeting with local colleagues, producers and directors.
- In Budapest, Jewish physicians and public health officials gathering with counterparts to advance pioneer thinking and practice in emergency medical care.
- North of Tel Aviv, an anti-hacking unit monitoring potential threats to Jewish communal websites.
- In Buenos Aires, a Jewish writers' colony of Spanish-language novelists and poets from throughout Latin America, working with local counterparts and Jewish writers from Israel, Europe and North America.

### **From Organized Action to Individualized Initiative**

Over the last two decades, one master theme has been the shift from large collective enterprise to individual initiative. This broad-based pattern can be seen in quite diverse spheres of human endeavor. On the one hand, we have witnessed the decline of political parties, mainstream newspapers, record companies, labor unions, and long-standing religious denominations. At the same time, we have seen the rise of social change-oriented NGOs, alternative news sources, independent producers and filmmakers, specialized consulting, individualized spirituality, and non-denominational churches. Learned observers credit the striking advances in information technology with helping produce and further these nearly revolutionary developments, as well as helping foster genuine revolutionary movements and violent uprisings around the globe.

The Jewish world is not at all immune to these trends; indeed, we have experienced parallel developments. In the United States, numerical declines have been recorded in a wide variety of domains: Conservative Jews, Reform Jews, donors to Jewish federations, supporters of community relations agencies, and members of national organizations (Hadassah, B'nai B'rith, and NCJW). At the same time, we've seen the rise of independent minyanim, individual philanthropists, designated giving,

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Israel advocacy organizations, small-scale social justice organizing, new media endeavors, and self-directed Jewish learning. Here too, the Internet and social media, along with low-costs and powerful new technology, have wrought remarkable changes in how Jews access information, connect with each other, and shape their social networks, communities, and areas of common endeavor. (Minyan Hadar, established in the year 2000, claims it is the world's first paperless Jewish religious community.)

Back in the day, in the still memorable mid-twentieth century, it could have been said that massive communal, religious, social, and philanthropic organizations roamed Jewish America. Today, while these once all-encompassing institutions still contribute enormously to Jewish life, thousands of individual actors now operate semi-independently, and in so doing, significantly shape both today's Jewish world and tomorrow's Jewish future. Examples include ... social entrepreneurs, family foundations, free-lance rabbis, as well as thought leaders and cultural figures (filmmakers, musicians, writers, academicians).

To be sure, we are not seeing (yet?) the total eclipse of the large and institutional in favor of the small and individual. But the locus and focus of energy has certainly shifted in the direction of the more autonomous, more nimble and arguably more creative individuals, many with small, yet devoted, constituencies of fellow actors and followers.

### **From Collective Community to Social Networking**

The second master theme in society at large has been the decline of fixed and compelling group identities. On many levels, people are less attached, or less enduringly attached to ... family, friends, neighborhood, consumer brands, and political movements, as well as to their religious groups and ethnic identities. They exhibit more fluidity (change of identities), malleability (re-shaping identities), and hybridity (mixing of identities).

In parallel, much of the Jewish population (those outside of Orthodoxy), exhibits looser connections to other Jews, more tentative commitment to Jewish life, and greater readiness to see themselves as Jewish and something(s) else. The result is a deep-seated challenge to Jewish collectivity – in terms of the related trends of weaker Jewish communities, a diminished sense of Jewish Peoplehood, and distancing from Israel.

### **Identifying, Nurturing and Connecting the New Jewish Creators**

But fluidity, malleability, and hybridity do not only mean the decline in collectivity. The same forces have helped propel new forms of individually initiated action, resulting in a burst of new Jewish creativity and new Jewish creators. Among them are hundreds of social entrepreneurs, whose diverse efforts include launching new ventures in religious community, Jewish learning, social justice, culture, and new media. Simultaneously Jewish scholarship in general, and social sciences in particular, have expanded in scope and numbers, and arguably in quality and sophistication as well. Rabbis and educators are breaking new ground with innovations in spirituality, outreach, community-building, and learning. Independent philanthropists have been charting new courses of action engaging in innovative approaches and strategic, goal-oriented philanthropy. A new wave of Jewish communal leaders – both lay and professional – has arisen in several parts of the globe, perhaps most notably in central and Eastern Europe. Israel has seen a large number of initiatives designed to reclaim and reshape Jewish learning, scholarship, spirituality, arts, and culture. The US, Israel and elsewhere have seen the rise of thousands of writers, poets, fine artists, dancers, actors, directors, filmmakers, musicians, and other culture makers. Together with the venues they present their work – bookstores, museums, galleries, clubs, and film festivals as well as the rich virtual landscape of You Tube and beyond -- they constitute the critical elements in a global “Jewish cultural ecology.”

The very efflorescence of Jewish creativity, imagination and productivity should not be cause for complacency, as if to say, “If things are going so well, why intervene?” Rather, this age of productive potential presents a pivotal opportunity to be further enhanced and propelled to a higher level. Among the critical objectives:

- Identify, recruit and nurture **new cohorts of creative individuals** to succeed the recent waves of community-builders, culture producers, thought leaders, and spiritual pioneers.
- **Connect** new and existing members of the Jewish creative class to one another.
- Foster ongoing **collaboration** among them, especially across countries so as to both enrich the interactions and further a sense of global Jewish Peoplehood.
- Tie them more firmly both to their respective **communities and to Israel**.

In other words, we need more creative Jews (as well as Jews who are more creative), more connection among them, more collaboration by them, and more engagement with the Jewish collective on all levels – with their communities, with Jewish Peoplehood, and with the State of Israel.

### **Colonies of Jewish Creativity and The Global Jewish Cyber-Laboratory**

To be sure, a small support infrastructure has already emerged to identify and nurture rising Jewish social entrepreneurs and to support the early stages of their work. So too have federations and private philanthropy stepped in, albeit sporadically, to fund the arts, cultural production and performance, spiritual communities, Israel advocacy, and social justice endeavors, among other areas.

These notable initiatives testify to the strength and value of this latest era of Jewish innovation, and they underscore the need for additional – and systematic – attention. In this regard, two specific instruments come to mind:

- **A Global Network of Colonies of Jewish Creativity, and**
- **A Global Jewish Cyber-Laboratory.**

The Colonies of Jewish Creativity would provide physical concentration, real connections and opportunities for collaboration among members of the Jewish creative class. The Jewish Cyber Laboratory would stimulate innovation in Jewish Cyber-space and promote collaboration among software programmers, developers and investors.

To elaborate ...

The **Global Network of Colonies of Jewish Creativity** would consist of physical structures located in at least a half dozen centers of Jewish life in creative metropolitan areas around the world. By illustration, they could be situated in Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, New York, Budapest, Moscow, and Jerusalem. Taken together, these six locations provide geographic span and cultural diversity; and they are situated near most of the major centers of Jewish life. Many are also contemporary Jewish crossroads, places where Jews from different parts of the world often gather; and most are located in areas with significant representation of the creative class, be it in philanthropy, culture, information technology, intellectual life, community-building, or politics.

Each colony would house a professional staff consisted both of programmatic oriented professionals and resident innovators. Among their potential functions and activities:

- Host **short-duration visits** by artists, intellectuals, community leaders, educators, cultural figures, and other creative individuals (a cross between, say, Jerusalem’s Hartman Institute and Mishkenot Shanaanim).
- **Conduct numerous programs** such as lectures, consultations, and conferences (much like the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem). The events would seek to cross the usual religious,

ideological, political, disciplinary, and sectoral boundaries, bringing together lay leaders, philanthropists, communal professionals, thought leaders and cultural producers of different stripes and persuasions, including both Jews and non-Jews.

- Establish and manage relationships with area **performance and exhibit spaces**, such as museums, concert halls, theaters, and cafes.
- Engage **local cultural and intellectual resources**.
- **Link with other Colonies** around the globe.
- **Develop local supporters** and advocates who would come to treasure and take local pride in these powerful magnets of culture, philanthropy, and intellectual resources.

The **Global Jewish Cyber-Laboratory** – the second proposed functional arm of this initiative -- would be charged with systematically extending and developing Jewish cyber-space. While Jewishly engaged individuals and institutions have certainly made great use of the Internet and social media, ongoing advances are not now systematically adapted to Jewish purpose. The Jewish Cyber-Laboratory, probably best located north of Tel Aviv in Israel's equivalent of Silicon Valley, would house a permanent small staff of software developers and high tech entrepreneurs, the Laboratory would be charged with the following tasks:

- **Develop new platforms** for the dissemination of Jewish ideas and opportunities for connection. Examples could include: an app to display local synagogues (with reviewer's comments); an international Bar/Bat Mitzvah partnering registry; a Jewish philanthropy marketplace and exchange; an online bank of Jewish-oriented podcasts; "Jew-tunes," where users could download varieties of melodies and musical performances; etc.
- **Adapt existing software** programs and applications to Jewish purpose.
- Seek out and **connect Jewish software developers**, to each other and to potential investors seeking pioneering projects.
- **Further the defenses of the Jewish community** against current and potential cyber-threats, by systematically monitoring anti-Semitic and anti-Israel groups and activities.

Coda: These specific ideas (both the particular structures and their missions) are meant to be taken only as illustrative. The essential core of this proposal calls for seeking ways to nourish and flourish worldwide sources of Jewish creativity working to adapt Jewish life to current opportunities and challenges. It seeks to systematically, repeatedly and assiduously bring together thousands of Jews (and allies) around the world who provide the necessary ingredients to stimulate, advance, and launch Jewish innovation in social justice, technology, culture, spirituality, intellectual life and community-building. Moreover, by linking people in disparate parts of the world and Israel, it seeks to invigorate bonds of Jewish Peoplehood and engagement with the democratic Jewish State of Israel.