Devising Strategies to Support Jewish Arts & Culture

Report of Findings from JFN Focus Groups

February 2016

Righteous Persons Foundation

Partners in Performance
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One of 12 finalists showcased in the architectural design competition “Sukkah City”
Those of us who keep an eye on such things see glimmers of a new Jewish cultural renaissance taking shape in the twenty-first century. There is an entirely new generation of artists, authors, musicians, performers and designers exploring innovative ways to preserve and reimagine Judaism and Jewish identity, making them relevant for our times.

But as vigorous as that creativity seems to be, we have yet to see a similarly energetic and strategic response from the philanthropic community. It is for this reason that we partnered with Jewish Funders Network (JFN) to ask why. With JFN’s leadership we convened a series of conversations in the fall of 2015 to ask funders from across the country a series of questions:

• Why does Jewish arts and culture matter?

• What are key trends influencing arts and culture funding?

• What are the barriers to increasing support?

• Could we generate new strategies for increasing support? And if so, how?

We worked hard to ensure that participants represented all sides of the argument—whether arts and culture were essential to their philanthropy or merely an afterthought. The following report encapsulates what we heard from our peers in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. As such, this paper represents a first step, one that will need to be followed by discussions with funders in other cities as well as with artists and practitioners. The views provided here tell the story from one side of the multifaceted jewel that is Jewish arts and culture. We know there are many more.

What was the motivation for these discussions?

For the past 20 years we have worked at the intersection of generational change and Jewish creativity: from the Fund for Jewish Documentary Filmmaking to the Yiddish Book Center; from the Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education to the Contemporary Jewish Museum of San Francisco; and from Reboot to PJ Library. Throughout these years, we have been especially drawn to initiatives that promised the highest level of artistic merit and the greatest potential for impact—and we have not done this work alone. Rather, this work has built upon the work of those who came before us and has often been done in partnership with visionary and passionate funders, founders and practitioners.
Here is one example: in the fall of 2010, we were part of a team that brought “Sukkah City” to New York City’s Union Square Park. No project better exemplified for us this aforementioned marriage of creativity and connectivity, confirming that when Jewish arts and culture initiatives are conceived, executed and supported at the highest levels, magical things can happen.

“Sukkah City” was an unusual Jewish arts and culture project: an international architecture competition held by Reboot, the think-tank and incubator for modern Jewish culture that Rachel co-founded with Roger Bennett and that Lou was running at the time. The event challenged the best designers, architects and artists in the world to reimagine the ancient practice of constructing a Sukkah, the temporary structure raised each year by observant Jews during the holiday Sukkot. The competition’s 12 winners—selected by a jury led by Michael Arad, designer of the National September 11 Memorial—were erected in public space and remained on display for 48 hours. During that short time, the Union Square Partnership reported to us, more than 175,000 people came to see “Sukkah City,” along with Mayor Bloomberg, who joined us to pronounce the winner of New York Magazine’s “The People’s Choice” Sukkah. A few months later, The New Yorker declared the project one of the most important New York architectural events of 2010. In the five years since, “Sukkah City” has inspired half a dozen similar events and has helped thousands of people access an age-old ritual in new and compelling ways.

Concepts like “Sukkah City” are being hatched with increasing frequency; efforts like Asylum Arts are working to find, engage and foster a community of artists; and some individual funders and foundations do see Jewish arts and culture as important to their mission. Yet, the Jewish philanthropic community does not seem to have a coherent strategy for identifying or supporting winning ideas or their creators. Which organizations are best poised to capture the imagination of our generation? Which artists have the potential to be the next Sholem Aleichem, Barbra Streisand, or Amos Oz? The next Mark Rothko, Wendy Wasserstein, or Michael Chabon? And how do we encourage them to explore their Jewish roots?

We have few indicators to shape our decision-making, and fewer curators to guide us.

There are many reasons for our failure to better foster a nascent cultural renaissance: a decrease in earmarked communal funds for arts and culture, the limitations of under-resourced Jewish culture institutions and start-up efforts, the demise of the Foundation for Jewish Culture, and the absence of a coherent map of the field. To that list we would add the lack of a national plan or robust regional efforts for funding this sector.

Students of history know that the Renaissance of the fourteenth century would never have happened without the Medicis and other patrons who shared the hopeful belief that creativity begets creativity, that innovation drives engagement, that a rich culture is the glue
that holds a community together. Cultivating such a culture requires more than funding, but financial support is a crucial tool.

We hope today’s Medicis, large and small, will join this national dialogue and consider the issues raised by our peers in this report.

We look forward to hearing from you,

Lou Cove
Senior Advisor, The Harold Grinspoon Foundation

&

Rachel Levin
Executive Director of Righteous Persons Foundation and Co-founder of Reboot
Introduction
We started with a question…

Surveys consistently demonstrate the vital role arts and culture plays in creating and enriching Jewish identity. This role is made clear not only through convincing data, but also through compelling stories of personal experiences. When properly supported and showcased, Jewish creativity can act as a powerful, “sticky” entry point for a healthy and vibrant community. And yet, the philanthropic support of Jewish arts and culture remains uneven. Few dedicated institutions are national in scope, and an organized effort to gauge or increase the importance of arts and culture among communal priorities does not yet exist. While there are many islands of creativity, little connects them. Together, these facts raise a fundamental question: What could be the future role of arts and culture in Jewish life with more coordination?

That question inspired action.

With a grant from the Righteous Persons Foundation, the Jewish Funders Network (JFN) contracted Partners in Performance—a consulting firm in the arts and education fields—to design, facilitate, and summarize a series of four meetings. The goal: to gather perspectives and guidance that could inform future strategies designed to increase awareness and funding for Jewish arts and culture.
The Methodology

*Mishy Harman (center) interviews Professor Efraim Isaac for his radio show Israel Story*
Partners in Performance worked closely with the project’s Leadership Team: Lou Cove, Senior Advisor to the Harold Grinspoon Foundation; Rachel Levin, Executive Director of Righteous Persons Foundation and Co-founder of Reboot; Tzivia Schwartz Getzug, West Coast Director for Jewish Funders Network; and David Ezer, Senior Director of Programs for Jewish Funders Network.

Half-day-long discussions were held in Chicago, New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles in November 2015. A diverse array of 40 philanthropists, including those who administer family foundations, community foundations, local federations, and individual donors, participated. Organizers understood from the onset that facilitating a conversation among funders was an important first step, but that to achieve a fuller understanding of the ecosystem they would need to engage practitioners in the field of Jewish arts and culture, too. The Leadership Team looks forward to learning from these stakeholders in the future. A complete list of participants can be found in Attachment “A.”

Each session was convened by a local host and two or more members of the Leadership Team. To guide the process, the team defined Jewish arts and culture as:

_The expression of ways of living, built-up by the global Jewish community and transmitted from one generation to another, including history, music, theater, cuisine, dance, visual art, ceremonial art, literature, humor, games, professional and economic activity, and other traditions._

Working from a discussion guide developed jointly by the Leadership Team and the consultant (Attachment “B”), the sessions focused on determining the following:

- Why Jewish Arts and Culture Matters
- Key Trends Influencing Jewish Arts and Culture Funding
- Barriers to Increasing Support
- Strategies for Increasing Support
Why Jewish Arts & Culture Matters

PJ Library founder Harold Grinspoon reading to children
“Jewish arts and culture is the glue that holds us together.”

It Keeps Jewish Rituals and History Alive
Discussion participants described arts and culture broadly as “the heartbeat of humanity,” while they described Jewish arts and culture as a way of:
- Recognizing the “influences of yesterday”
- Preserving the Jewish cultural legacy
- Celebrating Jewish life in often fun and always meaningful ways

“[Arts and culture] influences our understanding of Jewish history, and provide ways of accessing our history, like archived radio shows from another era help us understand, ‘what it was like…then.’”

It Bridges Cultural Differences
A robust range of Jewish arts and cultural expression was also seen as a true bridge builder across groups in that shared cultural experiences lower the barriers to interpersonal understanding. Thus, the arts have the ability to increase tolerance between cultures as well as serve as a meeting point for self-defined “cultural Jews” and religious Jews.

“Storytelling across communities breaks down silos, and quite simply builds stronger communities.”

It Provides a Gateway to Judaism and Jewish Life
Jewish arts and culture was described as a gateway into learning. In a secular context, arts and culture is proven to improve learning outcomes in other educational endeavors. On the topic of Jewish arts and culture, participants said they believe it creates tremendous opportunity to explore and better understand what it means to be Jewish in the twenty-first century—that Jewish arts and culture is often an entry point for learning what it means to be Jewish, including the values, principles and important social dimensions of Jewish life.

“Arts and culture is a ‘delivery system’ for Jewish identity.”

For Its Own Sake
While arts and culture is an effective means to many ends, it is also an end unto itself.

“Arts and culture is, simply put, a necessary slice of life.”
Trends Influencing Jewish Arts & Culture Funding

An onlooker takes in This Place, an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.
“New distribution channels are opening all the time, allowing people to experience arts and culture on their own terms.”

1. The Rise of the Artist as Entrepreneur

Participants identified a philosophical shift that’s changing the shape of the arts and culture world: funders are investing less in sustaining specific organizations and concerned more with impacting individual lives. At the same time, many artists (Jewish and otherwise) are breaking free of gatekeepers and becoming agents of change less dependent on traditional arts organizations, like formal 501c3 organizations. In 2014, the total dollars raised by crowdsourcing to support individual artistic works exceeded the entire budget for the National Endowment for the Arts ($146 million).

2. Increased Desire for Meaning & Connection

Audiences are looking for a “deeper dive,” seeking out meaningful and authentic experiences, and yearning for spiritual engagement via Jewish arts and culture.

3. Consumers Are Becoming Cultural Curators

With greater access to artists and their work, many people are curating their own experience with the arts. As informants pointed out, this further fragments society by creating an environment in which people engage more with the voices and viewpoints with which they agree, and less with the voices and viewpoints with which they disagree. Ironically, this is happening despite digital technology’s power to bring people together.

4. There Are More Ways Than Ever to Distribute/Experience Arts & Culture

The ways in which people engage with artists and the arts are rapidly diversifying. Participants cited the reemergence of salons and dinners complete with performances and discussions with artists, the popularity of art in non-traditional venues (ranging from house concerts to Hopscotch, an opera set in cars), the emergence of short-form videos embedded within social media platforms, and more. As one informant put it, “There is simply an endless set of ways to experience the arts.” These changes are challenging established distribution models, setting up a shift that can be described as “laptops vs. theaters.”
Key Barriers to Increasing Support
To create an effective strategy for increasing funding for Jewish arts and culture, participants were asked to identify perceived barriers. These obstacles emerged:

1. **No Leading Voice Is Making the Case for Jewish Arts & Culture in the U.S.**

Some participants cited the demise of the Foundation for Jewish Culture as a significant obstacle to building a consensus around the importance of Jewish arts and culture. Today, despite a flowering of local efforts and some new national and international initiatives focused on artists, few large-scale national or international entities have sustaining Jewish arts and culture as a core mission.

2. **Jewish Arts & Culture Is Seen as Apart from Other Areas Funders Care About**

Arts and culture initiatives (Jewish and otherwise) can positively impact other societal causes, such as education, social justice, the environment, family and community building, and more. But they are rarely recognized as such. For example, PJ Library is widely considered to be an educational program, not an arts and culture initiative, but its core product—children’s literature—is an art.

3. **Funders Lack Confidence When It Comes to Supporting Jewish Arts & Culture**

Simply put, many foundations—including family foundations, community foundations, and federations—have an imperative to measure and report the impact of their philanthropic investments, and they question how to gauge quality as well as impact when it comes to artistic presentations and programs. Few funders feel as if they know which opportunities to fund Jewish arts and culture exist, and when they do, the subjective nature of art makes it difficult to know which creative endeavors one should support and why. A number of participants remarked that they are not seeing enough high-quality Jewish arts and culture offerings.

4. **Jewish Arts & Culture Doesn’t Seem Like an Urgent Cause**

Without leading advocates, a case for support, or a national framework through which Jewish arts and culture is positioned, promoted, and strategized around, even funders who recognize the value of Jewish arts and culture don’t see it as critical when compared to other causes. It’s considered to be a “nice to have,” not a “must have.” This appears to be the most significant barrier to substantially changing to the status quo.
Strategies for Increasing Support

Participants at a retreat for Jewish artists hosted by Asylum Arts
Discussion participants identified three goals and suggested strategies for achieving each goal:

**GOAL 1: Illustrate Funding Patterns and Gaps in Existing Support**

Participants in every city expressed interest in a resource that would provide a clear and current picture of Jewish arts and culture funding and needs, for several reasons. An overview would:

- Help donors better understand how their funding would fit within a broader context. As one philanthropist stated, “If I know where the needs are, I can better apply my support in useful and influential ways.”
- Make clear where targeted and possibly coordinated giving could make a significant difference
- Provide insights into how money flows into the system, the sources of those funds (individual, business, public, foundations, federations, etc.), and the relative predictability of future funding

There was much discussion about the importance of having unfettered access to useful, contextualized data to making informed funding decisions. This is especially true for foundations that support or are interested in supporting arts and culture in service of priorities such as social justice, education, and more.

**Suggested strategies:**

1. Facilitate a “next steps” conversation with artists and culture-makers.
2. Develop a shared “mapping” resource detailing the Jewish arts and culture ecosystem and outlining areas where funds are especially needed.

**GOAL 2: Increase Jewish Arts and Culture Advocacy**

There was a rallying cry throughout the meetings to inspire a sense of urgency around the issue of Jewish arts and culture, and to communicate its true value and the importance of the endeavors and discoveries of Jewish creatives.

**Suggested strategy:**

Create a clear, concise and compelling data-driven narrative that communicates the long-term impact of investing in Jewish arts and culture, and identify individuals who will take a leadership role in advancing Jewish arts and culture and unifying stakeholders.
GOAL 3: Improve Coordination

Optimal impact demands a higher degree of shared awareness and coordinated efforts. Participants identified the need for:

- Advocating on behalf of the Jewish arts and culture sector
- Providing support amongst arts and culture groups
- Helping funders make more informed investments
- Increasing funders’ capacity to discern and support high-quality artistic expression through the development of a peer-review process similar to those that have proven to work, including the National Endowment for Arts and the Fund for Jewish Documentary Film, which was housed at the Foundation for Jewish Culture
- Creating networking opportunities between all actors in the sectors—funders, artists, intermediaries, arts organizations, service organizations, etc.
- Keeping an inventory of Jewish arts and culture initiatives and case studies detailing innovating approaches and best practices

There seemed little appetite though for reviving a new FJC model at this time. Instead, participants discussed other models for coordination.

Suggested strategies:

1. Create a national framework possibly modeled on the Jewish Social Justice Roundtable. Supported through a small number of funders, the Roundtable provides training and shared resources with some 120 member organizations in support of achieving humane social justice policy. The Council of Jewish American Museums (CJAM), an organization that plays a similar role but for Jewish museums in the U.S., was also referenced as a potential model.

2. Increase opportunities for funders to engage face-to-face on the topic of Jewish arts and culture funding as JFN has done by convening these conversations. Other models include the JFN Peer Network framework, which has been created by funders around issues of disability inclusion, education technology and other fields of interest and provides opportunities for funders to learn together, convene as desired and form a community of interest.
Next Steps

Yiddish texts at the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts
The 40 generous informants in Chicago, New York City, San Francisco and Los Angeles provided valuable insights on how to positively influence local and national funding for Jewish arts and culture.

They determined that fostering a learning community that provides access to reliable information and useful data, facilitates the exchange of good practices and innovative thinking, and enables an ongoing dialogue and communication is a holistic first step in growing a robust twenty-first century Jewish arts and culture support system.

**The next steps are to:**

1. Design and facilitate a stimulating experience at the JFN Conference in San Diego and beyond to make the subject of funding Jewish arts and culture a fixture of our ongoing regional and international gatherings.

2. Convene conversations with key artists, creatives, and professionals in the field to determine their priorities and gather additional insight.

3. Determine which funders are most engaged in this topic with the goal of later developing a leadership team consisting of funders, artists, and practitioners.

4. Determine the feasibility of mapping the landscape of Jewish arts and culture in relation to funding. This includes assessing an appropriate scope for the project, identifying the best person or team to do the mapping, and determining associated costs and potential funders.

5. With proper support, JFN could deploy an array of field-building tools that have been used to energize other funding fields, including Greenbooks, peer networks, and matching grants.

6. Gather information from, and explore partnerships with, successful secular collaborative funding models focused on the arts.

We are excited to continue building on work already underway in this arena and looking forward to further promoting and advancing the funding of Jewish arts and culture and thereby building a more vibrant and relevant Jewish experience.
APPENDIX A

JFN Focus Group Participants

Chicago
Jaré Akchin  Circle of Service Foundation
Adam Chalom  Pivnick Family Foundation
Lesley Matsa  Crown Family Philanthropies
Celene Peurye  Albert & Anne Mansfield Foundation
Kimberly Miller Rubenfeld  Circle of Service Foundation
Michael Traison
Amy Witt  Crown Family Philanthropies
Caren Yanis  Crown Family Philanthropies

New York City
Harlene Appelman  Covenant Foundation
Scott Berrie  Russell Berrie Foundation
Joni Blinderman  Covenant Foundation
Mark Charendoff  Maimonides Fund
Sonia Cummings  Nathan Cummings Foundation
Alan Divack  Lucius N. Littauer Foundation
Joseph Hollander  America-Israel Cultural Foundation
David Homan  America-Israel Cultural Foundation
Jonathan Horowitz  JPMorganChase
Abby Kaufthal  Berg Foundation
Lee Langbaum
Evi Musher  Board, Friends of the Israel Museum
Nessa Rapoport  Charles H. Revson Foundation
Dorothy Tananbaum
Michelle Tocci  Berg Foundation
Jade Netanya Ullumann  Ullmann Family Foundation
Brenda Bodenheimer Zlatin  Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation

San Francisco
Phyllis Cook  Jim Joseph Foundation
Suzanne Felson  Co-founder, thejewishskinny.com
Barry Finestone  Lisa and John Pritzker Foundation
Shana Nelson Middler  Contemporary Jewish Museum
Amy Rabbino  Lisa and John Pritzker Foundation
Stephanie Rapp  Walter & Elise Haas Fund
Adene Sacks  Gaia Fund
Mark Schlesinger  Peleh Fund
[names withheld]  Peleh Fund

Los Angeles
Jean Abarbanel  Philip and Muriel Berman Foundation
Nancy Berman  Executive Board Jewish Artists Initiative / Co-
Georgia Freedman-Harvey  Organizer, Los Angeles Jewish Arts Organizations

Collective
Tal Gozani  Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles
Yishai Jusidman  Keren Daniel
Carol Shuster Polakoff  Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles
Dan Rothblatt  Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation
Alexandra Shabtai  National Yiddish Book Center, LA Times film critic
Ken Turan  National Yiddish Book Center, LA Times film critic
Sarah Winshall  National Yiddish Book Center, LA Times film critic
APPENDIX B
Focus Group Discussion Guides
Jewish Funders Network
Funding Strategy for Jewish Arts and Culture Endeavors
Focus Group Discussion Guide

OBJECTIVE
To gather useful perspectives and guidance from a group of thoughtful philanthropists to inform future strategies for funding Jewish arts and culture

AGENDA
1:00 – 1:05  Welcome / Host
1:05 – 1:15  Thanks to the host, overall objectives and introduction / David/Lou/Rachel/Tzivia
1:15 – 1:20 Outline of the day / John
1:20 – 1:45  Self introductions with a response to the following: What’s been your participation in the funding of Jewish arts and culture; and what are you seeing---maybe a trend or so---that’s influencing your thinking in this regard?
1:45 – 2:30  Why it matters: What’s the importance of funding Jewish arts and culture? From your point of view, why does it matter? What’s the rationale for support?
2:30 – 2:45  BREAK
2:45 – 3:30  Current status and future possibilities: How would you describe the current approach/approaches to funding Jewish arts and culture in the US? What are some scenarios you can image for generating future support? What might success look like?
3:30 – 4:15  And, what are some of the barriers to such success? Are there some useful/helpful responses to those barriers?
4:15 – 4:20  STRETCH BREAK (with thinking assignment)
4:20 – 4:50  Moving forward: Are there specific areas of interests that you have? Are any of these responses really appealing to you, and would you be interested in working on moving them forward?
4:50 – 5:00  Next steps, thanks, and farewells / David/Lou/Rachel/Tzivia
5:00 +  Social time / Host
Thank You!

For more information on the Jewish Funders Network, please visit jfunders.org