

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Defense of the Jewish Future Pledge

DECEMBER 18, 2020

Actually, the Jewish Future Pledge Is a Great Hanukkah Gift

Following the time-honored adage that “no good deed goes unpunished,” it has become fashionable to criticize philanthropists for everything. They aren’t donating enough money; they are donating too much. They are too laissez faire in their giving; they are too controlling.

Lately, however, one complaint has dominated the list: Philanthropists are not spending their money fast enough and are “hoarding” it in endowments, foundations, and donor-advised funds.

In her [op-ed this week](#) in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Lila Corwin Berman singled out the [Jewish Future Pledge](#) for condemnation, depicting as almost sinister its effort to convince Jewish individuals to set money aside for future Jewish needs. Claiming that this project betrays a “mistrust in the future,” she described the pledge as a mechanism for wealthy individuals to “leverage this inequality to maintain control, even long after they are gone.”

But endowments and donor-advised funds are not some nefarious plot for concentrating wealth in the hands of the few or of controlling the world from one's grave. In fact, they play a positive role in helping nonprofits — and the many people who depend on them — weather crises such as Covid-19.

Just this week, [UJA-Federation of New York](#) allocated \$11 million in grants and loans for pandemic relief, on top of the \$53 million it had already allocated in 2020 beyond its usual spending. This was possible because of the money in its endowments. A survey that will be published soon by my organization, [Jewish Funders Network](#), found that 76 percent of our members increased their spending this year. Many donor-advised funds are also stepping up. DAF holders with [New York's Jewish Communal Fund](#) increased their giving by 17.5 percent this year. The money was available because these individuals put it in endowments or DAFs rather than giving it away all at once.

Berman suggested that putting money into endowments is somehow antidemocratic. But future generations who operate a foundation or DAF have wide discretion about how to allocate grants. A growing number of foundations are also experimenting with participatory philanthropy models, in which grantees have a role in dividing up resources. Endowments give organizations more flexibility, not just to respond to emergencies, but to plan long term and obtain risk capital for innovative programs. And endowments lessen the burden on nonprofit staff to spend all their energy fundraising or catering to the whims of major donors.

As for the Jewish Future Pledge, Berman seems to object not only to setting aside the money for future use, but to designating it for Jewish causes. But people set aside money in their estates for all kinds of charitable purposes, and Jewish causes are hardly the only thing most wealthy Jews include in their estates. In fact, 22 percent of American Jews aged 75 and up list a secular charity in their will, and only 14 percent list any Jewish charities, according to the [2014 Connected to Give study](#).

Why is it wrong for individuals to set aside money for things they care about, particularly for ensuring that their culture and values thrive in future generations? Isn't that what all of us do when we educate our children? Isn't transmitting our values to the next generation a key Jewish principle? Isn't building a legacy a key human aspiration of transcendence?

I understand, and can even sympathize, with Berman's distrust of unfettered accumulation of wealth by the few, which creates all sorts of social and economic problems. But using philanthropy as a proxy to attack "wild capitalism" is misplaced. Two wrongs don't make a right. Philanthropy deals with capital that was already accumulated — it is a positive byproduct of wealth creation. By attacking philanthropy, we won't make a dent in wealth inequality, but we will relinquish a tool for addressing the negative consequences of inequality.

No one expects the Jewish Future Pledge to persuade every wealthy American Jew to designate 50 percent of their charitable bequests for Jewish causes, but convincing even a small portion of them would move the needle and enable vital Jewish programs to not just survive but to increase their services. With such funds, a Jewish day school endowment could provide more scholarships for low-income families; a Jewish Community Center could subsidize membership fees; a human-services organization could react quicker to urgent needs in the community, and a synagogue could repair its leaky roof.

In theory, relying on a yearly fundraising campaign forces an organization to prove its ongoing relevance. But that's not how reality works for most nonprofits. The constant pressure to make ends meet puts them in a fundraising hamster wheel and makes them more donor driven. Paradoxically, nonprofits without endowments are more vulnerable to a single major donor withdrawing his or her support.

That's why the Jewish Giving Pledge is a worthy and commendable effort. It follows in the path of pioneering programs such as the [Harold Grinspoon Foundation's Life &](#)

[Legacy](#), which has raised more than \$1 billion in bequests and legacy gifts for Jewish causes. Far from weakening democracy, these programs serve as a vector of community engagement and participation. They spark conversations about values between generations and encourage organizations to craft long-term visions that encompass present and future needs.

Philanthropy is above all an act of generosity and care for others. Yes, some may abuse philanthropy to exercise “control.” Yes, philanthropy could be more transparent and participatory, and yes, “giving pledges,” Jewish or secular, can be improved upon. But to present philanthropy as some sort of plot to control the future is false and conspiratorial.

When we look at Jewish tradition, we see a body of laws, sacred texts, and cumulative experience, an inverted pyramid of legacies built one on top of the other. We don’t say that the prophets and rabbis of yore “rule from the grave.” Rather we look at their legacy as a foundation upon which to build and display our own creativity. Endowments offer that same possibility.

Andrés Spokoiny

President and CEO

Jewish Funders Network, and a member of the Jewish Future Pledge’s advisory board

I Signed the Jewish Future Pledge to Help Build a Better World

I am one of the more than 200 people who signed the Jewish Future Pledge and strongly disagree with some of the direct and indirect statements in an [op-ed](#) published this week about the pledge.

First of all, I am not one of the billionaires. Second, my decision to sign the Jewish Future Pledge was a simple way of continuing my current philanthropic efforts, which include donating a very high percentage of my annual income annually. My wife and I are not intentionally storing anything for the future and frankly don’t agree with the

assertion of the op-ed's author, Lila Corwin Berman, that this is the main purpose of the pledge. Further, our charitable dollars today are shepherded by our volunteer efforts, which go along with our giving.

I also object to the claim that donors who pledge future assets for charity have the potential to “immortalize racist, sexist, environmentally destructive, and unjust practices” by imposing ideals from the past. Where in the world did she get that idea? Berman clearly has no idea that my philanthropic dollars today support education, social equality, care for our society's more vulnerable, and the teaching of tolerance. These are our priorities today and will likely be the priorities of our future charitable dollars. More importantly, they will likely be our children's priorities, as we have tried to set an example for them.

In no way did I assume I could control the future with my Jewish Future Pledge. All I assumed is that I could help make the future world a better, kinder, and more equitable place with whatever dollars remain in my estate after I finish giving most of my meager wealth away during my lifetime.

I cannot speak for any of the other 200 people who signed the Jewish Future Pledge and can't imagine how Berman can either. She certainly does not speak for me.

Steven Levy

Trustee

Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ; Jewish Community Foundation of Greater MetroWest; Gottesman RTW Academy

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