

Motivations for Innovation

Naomi Levine

In recent years a narrative has developed that “innovation” in the Jewish community is the exclusive purview of the “young” and of those who exist “outside” the walls of the established Jewish or even nonprofit world. This narrative was exemplified in the 2009 Winter/Spring edition of the *Journal for Jewish Communal Service*, entitled “The Changing Paradigm of Jewish Philanthropy.” It was stated quite bluntly by Felicia Herman in her article, “Funding Innovation,” when she wrote, “New ideas usually come from new people, young people, or communal outsiders.” This theme goes through nearly all the articles in the *Journal*. I heartily disagree with it and would like to devote this article to the reasons for my disagreement. I believe creativity knows no age or boundaries. There are creative and innovative people who are old, middle-aged, and young. To believe that only the young or the outsider can be innovative and creative flies in the face of reality.

Birthright, for example, which is cited extensively as one of the most innovative and creative ideas of recent years in the Jewish community, was the creation of philanthropists Michael Steinhardt, Charles and Edgar Bronfman, and Leslie Wexner—all in their fifties, sixties, and older.

Let me just give a few other examples. One of this country’s most innovative Hillels with some of the most creative programs for students is run by Chaim Seidler-Feller at UCLA, who is in his sixties. Several other Hillels that have developed extraordinarily creative student programs are also run by men and women who would not be classified as young.

When I asked Edgar M. Bronfman to help me build a Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University, I was already 70 years old. I was moved by the fact that we at NYU had one of the largest Jewish student bodies but had no Hillel and no center dedicated to provide education and social activities for our Jewish students. Creating a Hillel was not a particularly new or innovative idea. But building on Mr. Bronfman’s interest in Jewish university students, his involvement in Hillel, finding the right building, designing it appropriately, finding other donors to match his financial contribution, involving students in our efforts, and creating an *intergenerational* board to help us design our programs—all these efforts did involve creativity. (As an aside, all effective fundraising requires creativity.) This advisory board, made up of men and women *of all ages*, has developed some extraordinarily innovative programs, including programs with Muslim students (which we believe have been of great help in keeping our campus civil), particularly a social action program with the Muslim students in New Orleans; a Shabbat for 2000; and a myriad of programs in the arts, film, music, social action, and education spheres that have been recognized nationally as

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creative, new, inspiring, and successful. These programs are dramatic examples of the creativity that can grow from all ages working together and melding the special perspectives that come from the young and the not-so-young.

One of the most important developments that has occurred in Jewish life recently is the renewed interest in Jewish camping. Few experiences are as profound in a young person's development as a summer camping experience. Although camping is not a new or innovative idea, its renaissance is a result of bringing new ideas and creativity into the programs and marketing of an area that for many years was neglected. Jerry Silverman, the former executive director of the Foundation for Jewish Camp and now CEO of Jewish Federations of North America, played a major role in this renaissance. He is not a young man in the current use of that phrase. His contributions have been invaluable and have helped more than 150 camps and 70,000 campers.

Here is another example from history in which I was intimately involved. One of the most innovative and creative contributions to Jewish life in this country was made by the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress) in the 1940s and 1950s when it created a Commission on Law and Social Action predicated on the notion that law could be used as a weapon in the fight for social justice. This idea seems like "old hat" today, but it transformed the way the Jewish community handled and currently handles anti-Semitic attacks and violations of civil rights, civil liberties, and separation of church and state.

AJCongress also involved the Jewish community in the struggle to eliminate the segregation laws of the South on the premise that, if one minority in the country was subject to racism and discrimination, then no minority could be safe. AJCongress was the first to go to court with the NAACP in the *Sweat v. Painter* case in Texas, the *McLaurin v. Oklahoma* case, and the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka—Supreme Court cases that led to the breakdown of segregation in the South.

It is interesting to point out that the *Brown* decision was not based on any law, but rather on two studies of the psychological effects of segregation on black children. These studies were written by Kenneth Clark and Isadore Chein. Chein was used as a consultant by AJCongress, which also had close relationships with Kenneth Clark. The use of psychological evidence to influence the court was a major innovation in those days.

These cases, and the theory behind them, were innovative and creative, and the leaders who implemented them—Rabbi Stephen Wise, Shad and Justine Polier, Will Maslow, Leo Pfeffer, and a staff of very smart, creative lawyers—were all forty, fifty, sixty, and older. I know this is "yesterday," but the principles are the same. Creativity and innovation require creative and innovative people, and they can be of any age. History has always made this clear.

The AJCongress case also raises another issue that is relevant to the growth today of so many new and small nonprofits and foundations: the interrelationship of new groups to fundraising. New ideas and new organizations cannot continue to be effective without long-term funding. They may be able to start up with a small amount of financial support, they may have the help of volunteers, but unless they have a plan to raise money, they will not remain a viable institution for the long term.

The AJCongress was never an effective fundraising organization. It raised little in my day and very little today. In the early days it was supported by the Federations throughout the country and by a travel program. Today both sources of funds have dried up. It is a shadow of its former self. Its creativity is zero. Its membership is too small to mention. Its staff is minimal. It sold its beautiful headquarters at 15 East 84th Street and works out of small rented space. Why it continues to exist, I do not know. I say this with a heavy heart. But creativity requires creative minds. Creative minds require creative people. People need salaries. Programs need money. Effective long-range fundraising is absolutely imperative if a creative idea is to become a reality and remain creative in the long run.

New York University knew the importance of fundraising from its inception. In 1973, it was almost bankrupt. It brought in a new president, John Sawhill, and a new chairman of the board, Larry Tisch; established a board representing the most influential and affluent people in New York City; and went from raising \$30 million a year to \$400 million a year. Yes, it had creative ideas, creative deans, a creative board, and extraordinary presidents. But most important, it made fundraising a priority. Money made the ideas real. Money encouraged creativity. Money helped make NYU today a great urban university—a lesson the AJCongress never learned.

Having said this, I do not want to give the impression that money is the only factor in keeping ideas afloat. Nor am I suggesting that the young do not have an important place in the world of innovation and creativity. Of course, they do. I merely want to stress the fact that money keeps creativity alive and such creativity is not the exclusive domain of the young. To make a distinction between the old and the young when we talk about innovation is a foolish one, and to ignore the importance of fundraising is a mistake.

It is also foolish to believe that the source of new ideas and creativity resides *outside major communal institutions that already exist*. Again, I reject this assumption and reaffirm my belief that new ideas and new approaches sprout in many places and in the heads of many individuals, whether such people are working in established organizations or creating new ones. Indeed, many of the most creative ideas have sprouted within existing organizations—organizations that many of the new philanthropists view as stodgy and frozen in the status quo.

Keep in mind that the first 911 emergency cell phone system was set up in Alabama in 1978 and now exists throughout this country. It was created by a “stodgy” old foundation called the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The Green Revolution in India was created by the “stodgy” Rockefeller Foundation, and the Public Broadcasting System and Pell Grants were created by the “stodgy” Carnegie Corporation of New York. And while Bill Gates’ work in malaria control is of enormous value, keep in mind that millions of dimes raised by a “stodgy” March of Dimes organization, way back in 1940, eliminated polio.

So although certainly it is of value to encourage emerging Jewish leaders, innovation and entrepreneurship, new ideas, and new foundations and organizations to carry them out, we should not neglect the existing organizations—including, of course, the Federations. Maybe their programs do not seem as sexy as some of the new ones, but it is these existing organizations established by the older generation that continue to provide food for the hungry, homes for the

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homeless, and a myriad of social services for the poor, sick, and the aged in this country and around the world. A special club for Holocaust victims, the Social Media Bootcamp, and a project to help people during economic crises are examples of innovative programs that the “stodgy” UJA-Federation of New York has recently organized and funded.

The articles in the *Journal for Jewish Communal Service* also seem taken with the new jargon among the new philanthropists—words borrowed from the business world such as “social entrepreneurship” and “venture philanthropy,” to mention just two popular terms. The truth is that both of these terms borrowed from the for-profit world are simply, to paraphrase Joel Fleishman, “new iterations of old concepts.” Philanthropists have been supporting people with new ideas (i.e., social entrepreneurs) for generations. And venture philanthropy merely describes philanthropists who are willing to support innovation and become personally involved in their grantee’s work. This is certainly not a new concept.

By borrowing terms from the for-profit world we seem to be suggesting that the nonprofit world could learn a lot from that world and become more business-like—more efficient like the corporations in America’s private sector. This amazes me. Are we talking about General Motors, the airlines, the automobile companies, the steel industry, or private agriculture and farms that need subsidies from the government to make a profit? Are we talking about Enron, WorldCom, or Tyco? Are we talking about the corruption, greed, and absolutely disgraceful salaries that some of the CEOs in private industry are making? Are we suggesting that the nonprofit sector look to the for-profit sector for examples of efficiency and ethical behavior? I doubt it.

This does not mean, however, that the nonprofits should not become more efficient in their operation—including their fundraising operations. Nonprofit organizations should have more audits. They should have more budget controls. They should have codes of ethics, and they certainly should train their boards in their fiduciary responsibilities, ethics, and the law. But to keep saying the nonprofits should be more “business-like” is a trend that ignores the realities inherent in the for-profit world and has put pressure on the nonprofits that has no intrinsic value.

Let me end on a personal note. I agree with the conclusion that Jewish life today is at a critical period in this country and that new ideas must be generated to help solve the problems we face. But as I have said repeatedly in this article, I am uncomfortable with the notion that only the young can produce the answers, and I am uncomfortable with what, I believe, are the wrong issues being discussed and the wrong programs and priorities being offered. As I see it, the real problem in the Jewish community is not the new trends or the new philanthropists. It is the fact that the programs and priorities we have do not reach large segments of the Jewish community that have become increasingly *secular* and whose ties to the Jewish community do not depend on religiosity.

The education of Jews about their own religion, its values, its history, and culture is absolutely essential if the community is to survive. Obviously, this education should and must occur in various institutions and at various levels. But it is absolutely essential that it occur at the highest levels in the Jewish Studies programs that exist at hundreds of colleges and universities throughout this country.

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While some of the new innovative programs involving music, dance, film, theater, and art are valuable in sparking interest in some aspects of Judaism, they are no substitutes for in-depth learning of texts, history, Jewish culture, its religious underpinnings, great Jewish books, and the significance of the Jewish tradition. The departments of Jewish Studies are critical in providing such education.

It is from these departments, and the masters and PhD students that they graduate, that the leadership of the Jewish community must come. These leaders must be able to project Judaism in all its intellectual dimensions. Those Jewish young people who are indifferent about their Judaism will not be won over by anything less. These departments all need financial support for scholarships and faculty. Such support should be a fundraising priority in the Jewish community. At the present time, it is not.

I believe that our current priorities must be grounded in the understanding that only Jewish education on every level—a study of texts; reading and studying Talmud; studying other great Jewish books; understanding the history of Israel and the history and culture of the Jewish people—can build a Jewish community that can understand why it should survive. All the other “new and innovative programs” may have their place, but they are peripheral to Jewish survival.



In the 18th century, Rebecca Gratz establish the first American Jewish institutions run by women, including the first Hebrew Sunday School and Jewish orphanage.