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The One-Sided Table

by RICHARD A. MARKER

This is a story about the shapes that define the philanthropy community table.

The two-sided table. The first communal table at which I sat had two sides. It had space for those who needed money and space for those who had it. The side of the table representing or coordinating those who had money was typically reserved for the Federation system. For many years my primary concern was the other side: reserved for advocates for enhanced support for undercapitalized, underfunded and under-recognized institutions and priorities.

The early 1990s were heady days for those of us in the Jewish educational/identity world. Many of us got our start in the late 1960s, but our message was only fully recognized in the early 1990s. The endorsement of the indispensability of Jewish education and Hillel and other “continuity” programs led to increases in funding and a new focus. The much ballyhooed, sobering 1990 *National Jewish Population Study* was one impetus, but it was also a confluence of other factors as well. Optimism about Israel, a booming economy, the end of the cold war and its focus on Soviet Jewry, perceived diminution of anti-Semitism and generational changes, among other factors, all allowed issues of the Jewish future to take center stage. Over time, the Fed-

Richard A. Marker currently is Senior Fellow at NYU's Center for Philanthropy and a philanthropy advisor to families and foundations throughout the United States.



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eration system gradually changed from being the central convener to a more monopolistic or controlling system. It was Federation dollars and those affluent philanthropists who were brought to the table which made it possible for programs committed to Jewish identity and education to move from institutional poverty to bourgeois credibility.

The three-sided table. In the 1990s, the table developed a different shape. By this time, I was exclusively on the side of the funders. I discovered that there are funders who did not have any interest in seeing the Federation system serve as a conduit or vetting agency for their philanthropic dollars. They viewed the consensus and deliberative process valued by the Federation system to be incrementalist. If it was true that the community was fast eroding, a marginal re-adjustment of funding priorities would not solve the problem. The very word “continuity” as used by the Feder-

ations became a symbol of a system that didn’t deliver the goods. These funders began to sit at the table on their own, next to the Federations and across from the grantees, and to direct their own funds to the causes and institutions they felt reflected their own priorities.

The one-sided table. The three-sided approach was of limited satisfaction to independent funders. By the mid-90s, philanthropists began to bring new, fertile and challenging approaches to their funding of Jewish futures. Free-standing partnerships, collaborations and venture philanthropy projects emerged in rapid succession. With some degree of lip service to the Federation role, mega- and not-so-mega-funders began to do their own things. Some of their projects are well known: birthright israel, PEJE, Foundation for Jewish Camping, the Israel Project, The Curriculum Initiative, The Joshua Venture and DeLeT, to mention just a few. While each of these

efforts has had its own history, strengths and weaknesses, goals and challenges, destiny and destination, all of them have been characterized by several factors that challenged communal norms:

1. they were sufficiently well-funded to make noise;
2. they had enough clout for that noise to be listened to;
3. they were about impacting masses of people;
4. they were about doing so in record time;
5. they were self-funded by philanthropists and governed by boards comprised of the funders or their staff representatives.

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tion would stand a chance with the millions of Jews who found that the Jewish enterprise had become soporific, self-absorbed, irrelevant and alienating. As Bono, the newly coronated world philosopher, recently put it, "It has to feel like history; incrementalism puts the audience in a snooze." He might well have been sitting at a one-sided table with these philanthropists.

The outside of the table. Recently, I have been a part of the world not typically present at the philanthropic tables. I have been teaching philanthropists and foundation professionals from all facets of American life and advising families and foundations outside the Jewish world. I have thereby gained a new perspective on these developments. After all, the Jewish community did not invent philanthropy. We did not invent partnerships, venture projects, or the goal of using funds to change communal behaviors. There are lessons to be learned on how to do it right.

What have I learned from the world beyond our many-sided tables? I have learned that venture projects without exit strategies from the beginning often doom well-meaning and promising projects; that disaster funding (perhaps a metaphor for the perceived state of the Jewish world) without plans for long-term, systemic change is self-indulgent and often disappointing; that there are fads in philanthropy, and "new" is often exciting, but the new may or may not be better than that which was tested over time; that partnerships can allow a creative leveraging of limited resources, but they can also be safe, prestigious ways of avoiding the hard questions of risk; that the community may be better off with a room containing various shaped tables rather than one containing only a single shape or size.

I have also learned that real change comes from learning, and learning comes from humility — an all too elusive commodity. Making a difference implies meaningful change, and change carries with it the risk of failure. Only those funders willing to risk — whether in types of funding or in scope of grantees — and to learn from those risks, will precipitate the transformational, adaptable, agile, vibrant and robust 21st century Jewish community that they hope will define their legacies. ❁

Mitzvah Heroes

by DANNY SIEGEL

Giving *tzedakkah* is a sacred trust. It must be done carefully and with a sense of *mitzvah* — that it is a high human act that ties the giver not only to the recipient but also to Jewish history, life, and the essence of meaning.

The recent trend of givers taking "ownership" of their *tzedakkah* money is encouraging. Givers want to know how their philanthropy will be used and whether they will get the maximum "bang for the *mitzvah* buck." Whether they are aware of it or not, these givers are following Maimonides's third level of *tzedakkah*, "...One should not contribute to a *tzedakkah* fund unless he or she knows that the person in charge of the collections is trustworthy and wise and knows how to manage the money properly...."

In addition, I believe there exist, above and beyond reliable people, certain individuals whom I have designated as "Mitzvah Heroes." I became so taken with these giants of *tikkun olam* that they became the very foundation of the Ziv Tzedakah Fund's work. Mitzvah Heroes are all ages; they include geniuses and those with average or below-average IQs, from every socio-economic

Danny Siegel is Founder and Chairman of Ziv Tzedakah Fund (www.ziv.org).

class, and "classy" dressers to jeans and old t-shirts types. What they have in common is that they are inspired and inspiring, selfless and absolutely devoted to the well-being of others, humble, 100 percent honest, *menschen* of the first order — and having seen something wrong in this world, they set out to fix it, with little fanfare or bureaucracy. They are life-givers *par excellence*. You would trust your life to them, so you would most certainly entrust your *tzedakkah* to them. They are the ultimate in reliability, they are the best teachers of *tikkun olam*, and they are a delight to be with and to work with. Knowing them provides donors with a superb way to personalize their giving. "Organization" is an impersonal word. Some organizations can be impersonal. By meeting Mitzvah Heroes, givers are always reminded of the human element of *Tzedakah*.

Mitzvah Heroes are everywhere, and they are easy to find. I found them when I started out 30 years ago by simply asking people, "Who is doing good things for other people?" The last Annual Report of Ziv Tzedakah Fund, which I founded in 1981, lists more than 100 Mitzvah Heroes and describes their work in Israel, the United States and other parts of the world. Find them, be with them, be inspired by them, and join them in your own *tikkun olam* work. *L'chaim!*

