



“Direct service—a hot meal, a night in a homeless shelter—may benefit people one by one, and it may be very satisfying for the giver, but it may not be the best solution for the social need. I believed in ‘power to the people’ before I ever read Maimonides [whose highest degree of tzedakah was to help a person become self-sufficient]. The world understands direct service, but it’s harder for people to understand what grassroots organizing is, and how it works. Slow and often small changes make a difference, and people stop feeling ‘I can do nothing,’ ‘I am nothing,’” says Judith Herr, an activist philanthropist in Bethesda, Maryland.

This article gives snapshots of the experiences—and ideologies—of women whose philanthropy is largely directed towards Jewish “renewal” organizations, women’s issues groups and progressive social causes. While many of the women interviewed for this article also write checks to UJA or to Jewish social-service agencies and federations, their energies are more likely to go to the “alternative” causes they support both emotionally and financially.

Marlene Provizer, Director of the Jewish Fund for Justice, which funds grassroots social change efforts such as training women of different backgrounds to work together as advocates on economic issues affecting women and children, bristles at the use of the term “alterna-

Part One of LILITH’s series on Jewish women’s philanthropy [Winter 1992] was an in-depth report on the ways women give money to “mainstream” Jewish institutions—Jewish federations, United Jewish Appeal (UJA), synagogues and such Jewish women’s organizations such as Hadassah and B’nai B’rith Women. That article revealed that women give differently than men do (they’re less competitive), ask more questions when they write a philanthropic check, do not want to stand out from their peers, feel comfortable in the company of other women and (unlike men) respond to issues and causes rather than to the social status of the person asking for the money.

Feminist Philanthropy

by Susan Weidman Schneider

“tive” to categorize non-UJA-Federation-synagogue philanthropy. “Some of our givers use us as their sole Jewish giving,” she points out, “and tikkun olam [repair of the world] may be the only way they express their Jewish identity.”

The women involved in what we’ll call traditional philanthropies reported [in Part One of this series] that their contributions of money evolved from their volunteer work and was an outgrowth of their other Jewish commitments and interests. In contrast, for several of the women interviewed for this article, social-change oriented Jewish philanthropy, through one or more of the organizations created in the past 15 years, was a first step into other Jewish connections, rather than a culmination of their Jewish involvement. Phyllis Goldman, Director of the New York office of the New Israel Fund, which provides direct giving to projects in Israel as an alternative to or supplement for UJA giving, says, “the NIF is an entry point. For some women this is their Jewish link.”

“It’s not as if there are two rigidly separate groups,” says Provizer. Some women support mainstream organizations while at the same time contributing time, money and leadership to social change organizations.” Provizer speaks of these as “crossover givers.”

One such crossover giver is Barbara B. Dobkin of New York, who in 1993 gave a one million dollar grant (with her husband Eric) to start Ma’yan, The Jewish Women’s Project at the Jewish Community Center on the Upper West Side. Dobkin has also been heavily involved with New York UJA/Federation. “The bottom line for me is simply this: what the money does.” Ma’yan creates women’s programs—a conference on Jewish women’s philanthropy, a feminist seder, outreach to Jewish lesbians and an annual research-based report which quantifying the anecdotal data on the status and roles of Jewish women—“the gaps as well as the areas of progress.” leadership in the Jewish community. But, she says, “the direct social service work UJA/Federation does is as important as the progressive stuff I fund.”

Here’s a day in the life of this crossover

giver. She turns her Manhattan apartment over to the UJA for a fundraising effort one afternoon, to a female political candidate that evening, hosts Alice Shalvi, founder and chair of the Israel Women’s Network, as an overnight guest, and is approached the next morning in her study by an independent feminist filmmaker trying to raise funds to shoot E.M. Broner’s novel *A Weave of Women*, by the Women’s Legal Defense Fund and by EMILY’s List. She’s unusual because of the passionate generosity she brings to the causes she supports, and the amount she gives, but the scope of her giving defines a small but growing cadre of savvy women donors who contribute to social-change causes at the same time that they maintain their mainstream Jewish philanthropy. Some stay connected to traditional Jewish organizations, partly because they hope to move traditional Jewish organizations in feminist—or at least egalitarian—directions.

Another crossover giver, Leora Fishman, a Boston physician, says that her tzedakah path started with “alternative” funding and then moved into the mainstream. “Ten years after I first gave to the New Israel Fund I made my first contribution to UJA-Federation. The federations really are the backbone of domestic social welfare programs, and until a better structure evolves I’ll continue to support them. But my major interest is in the organizations that support women’s issues and social justice.”

Herewith, some observations based on dozens of interviews with Jewish women thoughtful about their own philanthropy:

These women are pro-active givers, looking for causes consonant with their own beliefs and their life experiences. Philanthropy is not an isolated part of their lives. The motives behind their highly purposeful charitable giving are the ideologies which drive many other aspects of their lives as well. They want to make systemic change in social institutions which they have examined and found wanting.

Their work lives, or their professional training, often has an effect on what they fund. Leora Fishman says, “I’ve worked

Women Changing the World with their Dollars

for fourteen years with immigrants from Central America in a Boston clinic; I know through them what conditions are like, so I support various kinds of medical aid in El Salvador.

"A family joke is that from the age of six or so I wouldn't ever finish a game of Monopoly. After all the property was bought up, and it was time to start trading, I couldn't play anymore. I wouldn't be a party to someone else's going bankrupt. I was always hyper-vigilant to other people's needs. The whole progressive movement is about fairness and equal opportunity, about not being limited for life by the circumstances into which you were born—sex, race, country.

"My first awakenings to injustice in Judaism were through feminist questioning. I was good at reading Torah and never had a chance to use it. This was my eye-opening in how the mainstream Jewish community was not always right; I had a traditional Jewish education as a child, and then I found out that girls couldn't do all that boys could do."

Judith Herr, whose three million dollar family foundation she now helps direct, grew up in a mixed African-American and Jewish neighborhood in the Weequahic section of Newark (immortalized by Philip Roth in *Portnoy's Complaint*). There she witnessed firsthand how her Black friends were harassed by the police, threatened because they were hanging out in public places with their White classmates. Herr now belongs to a synagogue in Washington, DC, Adas Israel, which she describes as a "congregation of plenty" which decided not to move to the suburbs as the Jewish community in Washington shifted northward.

"I've given to a number of local housing organizations—and to projects trying to correct the conditions that cause homelessness. My graduate work was in community organizing; when I support a group I go and talk to them—'How do you involve the people you serve? Beyond recreation programs, how do you do leadership development for youth?'"

Ronna Stamm of Chicago, vice-president of the New Prospect Fund, which addresses "the underlying causes of poverty and racism" and a member of the

board the Jewish Fund for Justice, is, like Barbara Dobkin, a former social worker. "Part of me is still the social worker; I want to say when I hear of a needy project, 'I'll come volunteer.' That impulse helps me to be a better grant maker." Stamm, a specialist in funding advocacy projects. Like most women donors, Stamm reports that she asks a lot of questions, and spends a lot of time with its workers to learn how an organization functions. "It took me a long time to see philanthropy as a form of doing my work, which before had always been hands on. Part of me is still the staff person from the '70s."

Women understand how to make systemic change

What makes feminist philanthropy? Don Pearlstein, Director of the Boston office of the New Israel Fund answers: "A feminist orientation says we need system change, not just Band-aids. We need to overcome institutional barriers, not just provide services."

Susan Crown of Chicago, President of the Arie and Ida Crown Memorial and Vice President of Henry Crown and Company, merges direct-service philanthropy with an understanding that fundamental attitudinal change is often the necessary precursor to changing entrenched institutions. She has just been elected president of the Juvenile Protective Association in Chicago, "which takes the worst cases of abuse and neglect in town, focusing on kids under three years of age. We are looking at families at risk for abuse and we look not only at what's done, but at the family's attitude. We believe that every parent wants to be a good parent; we try to tap into that with a great degree of respect." Through the Covenant Foundation, created by the Crown family in 1991, Crown is trying to bring about fundamental shifts in attitudes toward Jewish education to cultivate "excellence, effectiveness and creativity."

Like other adventuresome Jewish women philanthropists, Crown is willing to put her money where her outrage is, to move from dissatisfaction with some social reality to making a positive change in that reality. "There was an entirely self-



ish motive in the creation of Covenant—we were all unhappy with the Jewish education we'd had, and we were afraid that our children would be as turned off as we had been. We felt that the state of Jewish education today could be likened to a huge knot, and we decided to start untying the knot at its ends, one by one. We want to build on strengths, rather than standing on the sidelines being critical. The strengths here are people—the teachers, mostly women, who are unrewarded and viewed as nonprofessionals. Our goal is to shine a spotlight on people across the whole spectrum of Jewish education; we hope that one result will be that Jewish education will be taken seriously as a career."

They supply venture capital for ideas

Like investment bankers, Crown and her cohort of progressive women philanthropists are underwriting nonprofit startups. "We provide venture capital for ideas," says Crown.

Marcia Cohn Spiegel of Los Angeles uses similar language when she describes how she used a windfall "to leverage social change." With a one-time-only amount to give away, Spiegel decided, "There was no point in giving the money to the local Jewish federation because, among other things, they'd expect the same size contribution the next year, which was impossible. I had written my master's thesis—"The Wrath of Grapes"—on Jews who were alcoholics, including Jewish women. I decided to multiply the effectiveness of the money I had by underwriting a course to teach rabbis and other educators about substance abuse in the Jewish community. They then ended up starting treatment programs and teaching others. If you don't have tons of money, use it to train professionals who will have power to make change."

New or untested projects don't scare them. Remembering that the Chinese character for risk can be read as Danger or Opportunity, these women are bold.

Susan Crown comments, "Most of the

women I know like to shake things up." Lee Meyerhoff Hendler of Baltimore, for example, has helped to underwrite an experimental education program for girls (based on a Carol Gilligan model) at a private school in Baltimore. She says, "My mother was a tenacious risk-taker who had great ideas and made them happen. She threw her kids into the pool at age two and said, 'Swim out.'" Hendler herself is willing to put her philanthropic dollars behind controversial causes she believes in, but notes that "A problem for many women is that they're afraid to own their interest in a new idea, because if any idea fails, the woman who funded it is associated with the failure. Risk doesn't scare me; I had my mother as a role model." Hendler's citing her mother's innovative philanthropy is paralleled by Susan Crown, who says "Philanthropy was always a project for my parents. Multiple sclerosis was a favorite project of my mom's—a good friend of hers had M.S.—and I remember going around with her to investigate wheelchair accessibility in 1965, when no one else was concerned."

Judith Herr recounts her own influences: "My dad's mother was the one people would come to if they needed a home. And my Dad taught us. The first night of Passover, before we went to my aunt's for Seder, Dad would take us to the Hebrew Sheltering Home to help serve dinner; he did this with all his 45 nieces and nephews. He taught us to appreciate what we have, to look out for other people and be responsible for them, and also to let people learn from their own mistakes, not just doing for them.

"When I was going on civil rights marches in Newark, my mother was frightened. Father said 'It's okay for her to go and march even if the police are beating people. She has got to take chances, take risks, know how the world works.' On one march I saw my father in the background. Mother must have told him to go see what was going on for me."

These women see themselves as instrumental, agents of change not passive executors of others' wishes.

"We have to take control of the money that is already in women's names," asserts Esther Leah Ritz of Milwaukee. Ritz, who has served on the board of several national and international Jewish organizations, makes generous contributions to Jewish federations, to Jewish causes in the USA and Israel and also to the New Israel Fund, was involved in Jewish-Palestinian dialogue groups years before the current peace efforts. "We know that women control the majority of

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KAREN STOLPER



wealth in this country because they inherit it from men. And when we do take control we're likely to spend it differently. I now give far more than my late husband and I would have given jointly—because I am willing to touch the principal. He wouldn't have been.

"I derived a formula. I decided to give X percent of my net worth each year. Invest the rest and you can build it up again. I recognize that I'm an anomaly. I'm unhappy that more women aren't doing this. And men too."

An unsurpassed amount of money is going to pass into women's hands in this generation as husbands die and fathers leave their estates to their children. (*The Chronicle of Philanthropy* estimates that this will be "the largest transfer of wealth in the nation's history") As more women use their risk-taking abilities, the face of philanthropy will change also—with larger sums being made available by women who want to see the good their money can do in their own lifetimes, rather than giving in small ways now and leaving large bequests.

Thoughtful women are willing to confront uneasiness they—or their children—may have around wealth.

"In some progressive circles, you had to

park your wealth at the door. You could not be your whole self, a person with money," says Margie Fine, former Director of the North Star Fund in New York City, which distributes money to progressive causes, and a majority of whose funders are Jews. North Star has become "a safe haven for women and men, a community in which they can talk about issues around money."

Lee Meyerhoff Hendler, a third-generation philanthropist, says she has none of the guilt some wealthy women admit to. Hendler says "Having money to give away to make a difference in the world is nothing I feel uncomfortable with. I'm just aware of the awesome and powerful responsibility it carries, because you hold in your hands the ability to make real change."

Yet many of the women who have gathered at annual meetings of the Jewish Funders Network (a loose association of Jewish family foundations and larger, Jewish-oriented foundations such as the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Revson Foundation) speak about the uncertainty they experience over having substantial sums of inherited money to disburse. "Coming out as a woman of wealth has been much harder for me than coming out as a lesbian," says one woman who requested anonymity. Leora Fishman comments that "Men do a lot less second- and third-guessing than women do—like feeling guilty about giving away inherited wealth. Women have to sort out lots of mixed messages about money."

Funding Jewish and feminist causes is how some women reconcile their allegiances.

"I'm trying to find my way as a white Jewish woman of privilege," offers Aviva Zukerman, 25, of Toronto, a director of the Zukerman Foundation, started by her mother and her late father in 1986. She says that she asks herself, "Where do I fit in with women in poverty? Or with women of color? I'll always be outside that, but I can help facilitate their empowerment." At the moment she is helping staff a social-action nonprofit theater troupe in Toronto, which focuses on women's rights. "Shouldn't I also be working on Jewish stuff?" she asks herself, and answers, "Especially on domestic violence? Especially in Israel?"

Why are so many women drawn to "alternative" charities? And what are the differences women perceive between social-change organizations and traditional Jewish charities? "The reason women respond so strongly to social change philanthropy is because women have a better chance at playing a leader-

ship role," says Marlene Provizer. A quick survey of progressive Jewish organizations reveals that most have made an effort to have women functioning at the highest levels of decision making. Fishman, a board member of the Philadelphia-based Shefa Fund, which provides grants to "promote Jewish social responsibility" and serves as the nexus of the Jewish Funders Network and a member of the distribution committee of the Gimprich Foundation, happily reports that "the women on these boards are as verbal, vocal and ideological as the men. Women count equally with men, and have influenced a lot of the giving."

Don Pearlstein claims that "what's missing in federation women's divisions is that there is no feminist culture. The younger or feminist-identified women look for organizations that are starting to model something fresh."

The end result matters to these women much more than the secondary gain they might receive from belonging to an organization.

Many of them are full-time philanthropists, for whom intelligent disbursement of their funds has become their life's work. They give money to create change, to do tikkun olam, and the satisfaction of the work they do sustains their interest and their participation. They don't—for the most part—get their gratification from the meetings or programs held for donors to these causes.

Olga Mack, president of the New-York-based Albert A. List Foundation, which gave away approximately \$900,000 in 1993, puts it very bluntly, "I don't like

going to functions. I'm a hands-on person. I want to give my money to causes like the environment, censorship, women's rights." No group dynamics are necessary to generate the interest of women like Mack. No highly emotional pitch for a charity spurs them to give as much as their own knowledge (often derived from the work they do professionally or from their active volunteerism) of what wrongs need to be righted. "I happen to be a real feminist," she says. "I fund reproductive rights because I think that one of the things that keeps people on the bottom of the economic ladder is having unplanned or unwanted children." And of her own role, she comments, "I don't like going to luncheons. I don't want to spend the money on the clothes or jewelry. I'd rather give it away."

This very frank approach to self-adornment reinforced by Lee Meyerhoff Hendler's comment that she is "angry at women who think nothing about buying a two thousand dollar dress, but who can't give two thousand to their kid's private school. We need to change the value system for women, so that a woman's philanthropy gives her as much status as what's on her back."

Judith Herr puts succinctly describes the differences between socially motivated philanthropy and social-change philanthropy as "the difference between narcissism and altruism in what motivates people to do good."

Are Jewish women philanthropists different?

Nan Fink of San Francisco is a Jew-by-choice and the original publisher of

Tikkun magazine, which was bankrolled in its first several years of publication by her philanthropy. She is also a member of a women's group called the Wandering Menstruals, and chairs the board of the Shefa Fund. Fink is in a unique position to note some of the differences between Jewish women philanthropists and their non-Jewish peers.

"For many women, inherited money is contaminated with issues around family relations. But it seems to me that Jewish women don't have as much anxiety or embarrassment about their wealth. Money has always been an enormous issue in my life. When I first gave money away I was always anonymous in my giving because I couldn't tolerate having anyone know that I had money."

"I grew up in a family with old San Francisco money, and a saying in our family was 'Fools' names and fools' faces are always seen in public places.' This meant we had to be under cover; something was very hidden. I was envious of Jewish women raised in families where philanthropy is assumed. When I told my own family about my philanthropy, they just saw me as an incompetent money manager, not as a charitable person. They would have had me hold on tight to the money, preserving the wealth for the family."

"Jewish women who have money are more likely to come from a tradition of responsibility for that money, the sense that something good should be done with it."

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