

Through Wealth to Justice

By Jeffrey Dekro

Whether it's the world-to-come or the world here-and-now that we're talking about, there is simply too much opportunity, too much ripeness surrounding our work, for us to be casual about it as we close out this century.

The renewal of the battered peace process in Israel; the hunger for "Jewish continuity," or the fountain of youth, here in America; the salvaging of liberalism, in word if not in deed, by Bill Clinton, after 12 years of Reagan and Bush; and the transfer of an enormous amount of wealth from one Jewish generation to another at this very moment — these factors have created, I believe, an opportunity, unprecedented for 40 or more years, for progressive Jewish organizers to attain some of their goals of tikkun olam and to transform the Jewish community itself into one of greatly heightened inclusiveness, democracy, authenticity and creativity.

Rabbi Stacy Offner, one of your local rabbis, who is also one of my teacher/colleagues, has helped make me aware of this. It was Stacy, in her role as chair of the social responsibility subcommittee of the Reform Rabbinic Pension Fund, who first responded to my idea of a national campaign to organize Jewish investment in community development financial institutions. The Pension Fund's 1995 investment of \$200,000 in four community development banks was the first "mainstream Jewish" investment that we at The Shefa Fund could say we leveraged. In doing that, Stacy taught me to be confident in my vision, confident enough to cross what Nachman of Bratzlav called "the narrow bridge" of opportunity.

Four years later, the figure of community development investments leveraged by The Shefa Fund has grown to \$5 million. Just this year, our Tzedec/Justice Economic Development Campaign – Tzedec for short – became the first institutional Jewish investor in the multi-million dollar National Religious Investors Initiative, which is organizing religious investments in loan funds and credit unions. On a parallel track, Tzedec began working with federations, synagogues, family foundations and others to organize local community development investments – investments that we catalyze through our research, our matching funds, and our Jewish legitimacy.

Each successful day for Tzedec brings to light a deeper level to Stacy Offner's teaching: the knowledge, which she has always embodied, that we, you and I, are now among the meaningful stakeholders and decision-makers in Jewish life. It is a station that we have inherited, as a matter of generational progression – but also that we have earned, through the Jewish rootedness, relevance and vitality of our vision.

You see, the “chaver” relationship goes beyond me and some individuals in this audience. It is our organizations, The Shefa Fund and Jewish Community Action, that are bonded through a shared understanding of the history, and the changing face, of Jewish social activism.

For one thing, we share an esteem for the landmark Jewish figures who comprise a virtual outline of American social struggle. Emma Goldman, Rose Schneiderman, Betty Friedan, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, Abraham Joshua Heschel, I.F. Stone, Bella Abzug, Harvey Milk, Abbie Hoffman – name them and you find that we share a common memory, a common heart, a common determination to continue in their path, which leads to the street, the picket line, the election booth – all the classic sites of Jewish social activism, which are very much a part of our organizational lives.

Yet we also share an understanding that the sites of Jewish activism have changed – because in two or three generations, our people have dramatically changed. Many of the “old” modes of grassroots activism that engaged Jews as trade unionists, students and community residents have become less natural, less relevant to the daily lives of Jews of today. And the American Jewish success story – an amazing story, in which a poor and persecuted people become the wealthiest minority in the wealthiest country in the world! – has simply undermined the classic anti-capitalist sentiment that fueled Jewish social struggle through the first half of this century. Now the political significance of our roles as investors, as consumers, as employers, as inheritors of wealth – and as givers of tzedakah – comes to the fore. And so does the other part of the Jewish contribution to American social history – the part played by Jewish capitalists.

Their impact has been no less profound than those of the radical activists.

Again, let’s look at a little history. Confined to the experimental zones of economic life by corporate anti-Semitism, Jewish capitalists have radically “democratized” the economy throughout the past century. Art became mass entertainment under Goldwyn, DeMille, Loew, Sarnoff and other Hollywood machers. Julius Rosenwald invented mail-order shopping through Sears, Roebuck, while A. Alfred Taubman almost single-handedly created the shopping mall. Felix Warburg and Jacob Schiff were two of a handful of financiers backing mass transportation (railroads) and communications (AT&T) early in this century. Louis Blaustein and his son Jacob responded to the growing automobile industry by inventing high-octane gasoline and founding Amoco. William Levitt’s mass-housing construction techniques opened the suburbs to thousands of working families after World War II. Muriel Siebert became the first woman member of the New York Stock Exchange (1967) and promptly expanded popular access to stock ownership by launching one of the first discount

brokerage houses. Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream have created innovative forms of corporate ownership and worker compensation.

Some of these pioneers, moreover, have done double-duty as social activists, largely through tzedakah. Julius Rosenwald helped found the NAACP and gave away more than \$50 million in his lifetime, mostly to empower black Americans. Felix Warburg financed the Educational Alliance, Henry Street Settlement House, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. Jacob Blaustein was instrumental in the creation of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on Genocide. Ben & Jerry's has given 10% of its profits to peace work and other progressive causes. It is as if these Jews, whatever their degrees of assimilation, have been guided by an understanding of the fundamental Torah of Money principle that "The Earth is the Lord's and all that it holds" (Psalm 24:1) — that the generation of wealth is a collective human enterprise that should benefit the maximum number of stakeholders.

Edward Filene, the socially conscious department store entrepreneur of Boston, was not only a conscientiously progressive employer, supporting the union movement and paying a living wage to his workers — he was also the leading innovator in the American credit union movement. Filene took the concept of the Hebrew Free Loan Society, the landsmanschaft, all the little credit networks enabled Jews to withstand the sweatshop economy and grow into prosperity, and Filene turned it into a widespread, mainstream American credit union movement.

Today, Filene's activism is being emulated by several progressive Jewish capitalists. In San Diego, Sol Price, who founded the Price Clubs discount chain, is channeling approximately \$3 million annually into leading-edge community development activity. In Chicago, real estate partners Howard Landau and the late Herbert Heyman have led the way in creating some 2,000 low-income housing units through the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, attracting other Jewish investors to what has become a successful program.

Now, to support such projects, you have to have some respect for the power of "the marketplace" to change lives for the better. That respect remains hard to come by when you measure the corrupting impact of unrestrained capitalism on democracy, the environment, and the human soul. Many of the innovations wrought by our Jewish forebears have had a very negative, as well as a democratizing, impact: shopping malls have homogenized the landscape; retailing has promoted rampant materialism, and so on. And as long as America permits its income chasm to exist — with 1% of the population enjoying as much after-tax income as the "bottom" 100 million citizens, and with one man, Bill Gates, possessing as much wealth as the same bottom million — well, then, "this iniquity," as the Torah says, "shall work on you/Like a spreading

breach that occurs in a lofty wall,/Whose crash comes sudden and swift" (Isaiah 30: 13).

The key is to combine the two strands of American Jewish history: to wed community organizing to community development, so that impoverished communities can mobilize their human resources and gain from our country's economic growth. That is the strategy and the challenge that our organizations share.

It is a strategy attuned to what crack organizer Gary Delgado has called "the politics of place" — the notion made famous by former House Speaker Tip O'Neal, that "all politics is local." O'Neal used to develop federal budgets on this premise, rewarding Congressional representatives with money for their districts so that they would come in line for larger interests. It was a strategy key to the implementation of the great civil rights legislation of the 1960s — as well as to the perpetuation of the military-industrial complex, for by guaranteeing that every district in the U.S. had some kind of military project, O'Neal guaranteed a bipartisan constituency for the Pentagon.

Tzedec is trying to take advantage of this model of the politics of place. First, we've taken seriously the Talmud's teaching that tzedakah priorities form concentric circles: first, to guarantee the well-being of one's self and one's family, then one's community, then the people of Israel, then the people outside the community of Israel. Always, in presenting Tzedec to Jewish institutions, I emphasize first, that Jewish funding for Jewish priorities will be unaffected by the investments we seek; we are talking about how our institutional monies, now topping \$15 billion, are invested, not spent.

Second, I speak of the Jewish self-interest at stake in community development: a), that it serves the cause of Jewish continuity by revitalizing the social action component of Jewish communal life, a component of central importance to young Jews and many other sectors of our community.

Expanding the landscape of what we call "politics" to include the Jewish money culture means nothing less than expanding the sphere of life in which Jewish identity has impact and significance. b), that it offers several material benefits to American Jewry. It can help move inter-group relations, including Black-Jewish relations, onto a new ground of partnership, off the flypaper of mutual grievance and beyond the limits of legislative activism.

It can help improve metropolitan areas that are still the socio-economic centers of Jewish life. Community-based housing development for low-income seniors across the country, for example, has benefited our aging Jewish population immensely.

In Boston, the area's only microenterprise loan fund F1 which make loans of \$250–5,000 to help create or sustain tiny businesses with only one or two employees F1 has successfully created jobs for Ethiopian and Russian Jews along with other immigrants and minorities. In northern New Jersey, the Jewish Family and Children's Service of the MetroWest Jewish Federation network borrowed from the New Jersey Community Loan Fund for a \$250,000 capital project to enlarge its space and provide expanded services. Community development improves the metropolitan areas that remain the centers of Jewish life and offers opportunities for Jewish-owned businesses to reinvest in neighborhoods stabilized by community development activity. And with federal cutbacks dramatically affecting Jewish Federations and service providers, the mutual benefits of partnership between Jewish institutions and community development financial institutions are increasingly clear.

In short, the community development movement represents an opportunity for the Jewish community to rediscover its own religious values, and to merge the identities of "agitator" and "capitalist" into a single realm of social progress. Those synagogues I know that are investing, through Tzedec, in community development are not merely transferring their funds, say, from the Chase Manhattan Bank to the South Shore Bank of Chicago or to the Community Bank of the Bay in Oakland – rather, they are examining Jewish economic philosophy, what I call the "Torah of Money," in a contemporary, interpretive fashion, and they are becoming aware of the financial dynamics, the power dynamics, the strengths and weaknesses, of their own communal cultures. This is a new form of social action – social action that is centered not in the social action committee but in the finance committee – and it is positively transformative to the communities that are engaging with it.

Now, discussing self-interest this way is not opportunistic, not based on some cynical notion of "How do we get people to do the right thing?" Rather, it's associated with the dictum of Hillel: "If I am not for myself then who will be for me, and if I am only for myself then what am I, and if not now, when?" The discussion of self-interest is an acknowledgment that each one of us is legitimately and truly a vessel in which the spark of divinity resides. As a result of that truth, we have a legitimate right to maintain our own selves and our own families and our own peoplehood. One of the Biblical names of God is Makom, Place – the place, the actual spot where you, your family and your community are. The Baal Shem Tov used to say, "B'makom sh'machshavotecha sham ata" – In the place where your thoughts reside, there you are." By being fully in your place, you are in the presence of the Place. That, to me, is the spiritual meaning of grassroots organizing.

So what is this place that we call the Jewish community? It is a place in which tzedakah is arguably as binding an expression of communal identity and idealism as

the Holocaust, Zionism, or religious observance. A community of fewer than six million, we annually respond to UJA/Federation appeals with three quarters of a billion dollars and give grants from some 6,000 Jewish family foundations. Major American cultural organizations, universities, medical centers, the Democratic Party, and the State of Israel are all beholden to the money-organizing networks of American Jews. We are rich in assets – Jews now control between 8 and 10% of the GNP in America – and we are rich in generosity.

To a distressing extent, however, this dynamic money culture of American Jewish life is little informed by Judaism itself. Traditional teachings about the Torah of Money – about stewardship, as opposed to ownership, of wealth; about property rights being freighted with communal obligations; about social investment as the highest form of tzedakah; about the dignity of both rich and poor – these are not much discussed in tandem with Jewish money organizing. The result of this omission is alienation: of women, of young Jews of immigrant Jews, of people with limited resources, of many others.

“The poor person does more for the householder than the householder does for the poor person,” teaches Rabbi Yehoshua in the Midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 34:8). It is my prayer that this Jewish perspective on the true meaning of profit – the reality of spiritual profit – will be rediscovered throughout the American Jewish community through participation in Tzedec. More than most other projects in the U.S., the community development movement offers an opportunity for Jews as Jews to make a difference – to draw upon our historical memory, our religious values, and our material abundance, in order to help the poor help themselves. In so doing, we can discover a deeper connection to our own Judaism, to the role that Jewish values can play in everyday life. This would be a true path of tikkun olam: to increase justice while increasing the wholeness of our own communities.

It is our path in partnership, and I am extremely proud to be walking it together. Thank you.

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