



## Philanthropic Responsibility and Obligation

by Jeremy Burton

For three millennia, Jewish charitable giving has been both guided and defined by a series of basic principles and motivations. The philanthropist was guided by the biblical injunctions of tzedakah - the pursuit of justice or righteousness - and tikkun olam - the oft-cited mandate to repair the world. Jews were equally guided by the obligatory mitzvot of ma'aser ani and peah - the tithing and leaving for the poor from ones' farm yields and, by extension, income.

Throughout the ages, philanthropists - like all members of the Jewish community - were held accountable to the kehillah, the Jewish communal infrastructure. Even in the post-War American Jewish community, where large-scale assimilation occurred, there remained until relatively recently significant barriers to large-scale charitable giving outside the community. Now, because we give wherever we choose, we are rethinking our philanthropic priorities. Our recent focus on separateness and uniqueness is fading.

Jewish philanthropists - including the so-called "mega-donors" - are today engaging in personal dialogue about how they define the communities to which they belong and how they are obligated to these communities. They are asking themselves how to create personal philanthropic strategies that reflect their sense of obligation and community. These fundamental choices about community and obligation are debated not only by the philanthropist but also by Jewish communal leaders who critique how donors give away their money.

Philanthropists are asking themselves: How do I define my community? Does community include my family, neighborhood, or synagogue? The country where I live? World Jewry? Do I see myself as a global citizen?

Then they ask: What is my obligation to these communities? Is my obligation defined by traditional Jewish sources and guidance? Is it informed by contemporary western values and my understanding of the social contract that binds our nation and our political values? Do I have an obligation to those who are responsible for my wealth?

These major donors are also exploring how they might use their vast philanthropic dollars to shape and transform priorities and agendas in the communities they fund. Recognizing their power, they ask themselves: To what extent are we accountable to the communities we care about? How and when should we consider the opinions of others when we set personal philanthropic priorities?

The Jewish communal world has questions to ask as well: Do we have claim to a portion of the personal wealth of any self-identified Jew? How do we evaluate the expenditures of private philanthropists? Can we understand the desire of a mega-donor to leave a profound legacy that serves the greater interest of society? Do we respect the added value that donors bring to organizations through their intelligence and experience, their passions and choices? Will we respect these motivators and help them achieve realistic goals? Can we accept that they are seeking to work with us in the communal interest and not for their own benefit? Can we find ways to address the power dynamic that is created between funder and grantee in an honest and constructive way?

Our challenge is to put forward questions that explore how the philanthropist and community each define and establish identities that reflect a changing Jewish community. Do we have the maturity as a community to allow such a process to unwind? Will we engage in honest dialogue on complicated matters of self-examination? Will we respect the changing nature of individual affiliation and allow funders to ask these questions and find their answers in their own time and at their own pace?

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