



To thrive, American Jewry must create an infrastructure — at Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, we call it the infrastructure of freedom — that can nurture American Jewish souls and win the commitment of the next generation.

# Philanthropists to Match My Mountains

by RABBI YITZ GREENBERG

In the 1950's, when I was studying to be an American historian, I read a book, *Men to Match My Mountains*, by Irving Stone. Stone's thesis was that the American character was shaped decisively by the fact that the United States was a nation with unprecedented opportunities and undeveloped land everywhere. The wide-open country crystallized a new personality type: the aggressive, searching high-achiever who would not allow himself to be held back by status-quo thinking or social stratification. When hemmed in by entrenched interest, or checked by the play-it-safe community, the American settler would move on in order to push forward. Over time, this nation attracted the adventurous immigrants and the restless pioneers who overcame the obstacles, climbed the mountains, cut the forests, fought the health and safety risks and created a dynamic, affluent and free society. Thus, America developed men to match its mountains. (Women also, but in the Fifties no one mentioned them.)

The American Jewish community faces unprecedented freedom and economic opportunity that dwarfs all past history, and a unique cultural environment of total openness and an exposure to every religion and alternative lifestyle. In the past, Jewish identity and values were sheltered by the fact that communities were isolated from one another, by the wall of anti-Semitism or discrimination, and by financial constraints which limited choices. The protective shelter operated, in somewhat different ways, for every community and religion. Today, all retaining walls are eroding under the challenge of choice, i.e., the access to every lifestyle, career and value system in the world. In their book *One Nation Under God*, Seymour P. Lachman and Barry Kosmin estimate that 25 to 30 percent of Americans switch their religious affiliation denominationally — an extraordinary ratio by any historical measure. Jews, as a minority, are doubly vulnerable to these trends. American Jews are disproportionately affluent, and this further increases their options. Ninety percent of Jewish youth enter higher education, which stimulates a desire for personal expression and intensifies alternative values. The result is an inexorable bleeding away of loyalty and identity. The same openness generates an environment for people to choose Jewishness as well as to bring Jewish identity and commitment into the highest realms of achievement (witness Joe Lieberman in American public life, Steven Spielberg in popular culture, Timberland's Jeff Swartz in business). The critical question is: which choice will individual Jews make?

Unfortunately, America's wide open society has not yet crystallized a new Jewish personality, or even a reconfiguration of the community to meet the challenge. Alarmed by rising intermarriage and assimilation, as documented in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, American Jewry has taken important steps toward a renewal of Jewish

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life, especially through increased education, both formal and informal. Individual philanthropists have given important contributions to strengthen institutions. The danger grows in that individual projects will flourish, but the dynamics of the new situation of American Jewry will be missed. The successes of individual institutions and experiences are often undone by the relentless impact of media and societal opportunities. To thrive, American Jewry must create an infrastructure — at Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation, we call it the infrastructure of freedom — that can nurture American Jewish souls and win the commitment of the next generation.

This infrastructure is the central mechanism needed to raise a whole generation of Jews to choose Judaism and Jewishness voluntarily. We must create an all-encompassing fabric of Jewish life in which individuals undergo a series of life experiences and learning as they grow up — so as to internalize Jewish values and memories and exercise them in all of their life's work and choices.

Building an infrastructure of freedom would assure that from childhood on, the individual would grow up in a framework of vital Jewish experiences and learning. The infrastructure must incorporate a total environment (so the Jewish messages come from every direction and at an optimum level); a vital community (so the individual feels part of something larger than him/herself); intense, preferably joyous experiences (which evoke loyalty and commitment); persuasive, credible learning; and powerful role models (so the individual identifies with Jews past, present and future, and learns how to apply Jewishness to all aspects of life). The institutions that communicate these experiences have repeatedly been identified. They are day schools (starting with preschool nursery), youth movements (especially for the teenage years of exploration), camps, Israel travel and learning (for the formative high school and college years), and adult intensive retreat/learning experiences. Ideally, synagogues should also serve as communities and total environments, a source of vital learning experiences. Unfortunately, too few do so now, but this outcome is the goal of projects like STAR and Synagogue 2000. In

the interim, most vital synagogues use retreats to generate such effects.

Individual institutions cannot create the needed effect alone. We must provide all these institutions in local communities together with a comprehensive funding/access program so that there can be universal participation. High tuition deters day school enrollment, so there must be community-wide funding to enable broader access. Small budgets and skimpy institutional support weaken youth movements. Camps need comprehensive help with capital building campaigns and counselor recruitment programs. Not until the entire network is in place will the next generation be so saturated with experiences and understanding that it will overwhelmingly choose to live a Jewish life, in and out of the community.

To create a national infrastructure of freedom, we need a cohort of leaders willing to think holistically — to expand each institution to be universally available, and to generate the funding to fill in the necessary pieces in each community's mosaic. We need a new generation of philanthropists willing to plan for the overall community's well-being. The key shift is for philanthropists to stop thinking narrowly by focusing only on specific projects. A leadership cohort must emerge that is willing to take responsibility for the outcome of this generation's response to the challenge of freedom and choice. Such a group would map the lacunae in the community's safety net, then put up its own resources and recruit others to fill the void. People say that we cannot afford a community cap on day school tuition, or a universal ticket to birthright israel, so we must content ourselves with individual outstanding institutions operating in a communal framework that is declining. But, in the long term, only a comprehensive community can compete successfully for loyalty in the open society. This is the wealthiest Jewish community of all time. The resources needed to fund the new infrastructures are here, but they must be aggressively solicited at a much higher level. The status quo spells a continual bleeding away of identity, in which successive generations give less and less to Jewish causes. This further weakens the community.

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tion has drawn much attention as a sponsor of successful new renaissance programs (Hillel and the Steinhardt Jewish Campus Service Corps, birthright israel), of educational enrichment (Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education) and of new forms of outreach (Makor). But JLN's true vision — and seriousness — has been widely missed. JLN is challenging the community to create an infrastructure of freedom. Mega-givers must push the community to stop preserving the status quo (in which Jewry is declining) and to prioritize the comprehensive institutional framework that can sustain Jewish life. Philanthropic leaders can move up the timetable and redirect priorities. In the end, after successes prove the point, the community must take over, out of recognition that the total infrastructure must become the standard in American Jewish life. When that time comes, the Federations will treat a program such as birthright israel as the breakthrough which it is, and will not consider it to be a "hassle" when such a program demands greater financial effort than the status quo has allowed.

Here is the call of the hour. We need philanthropists to match — and master — the mountains of freedom and assimilation, of acceptance and exposure to alternatives. Freedom and choice constitute the frontier on which the Jewish future will be won or lost. In a free society, private philanthropy supplies the oil which runs the system. Who will recognize that possessing unusual resources brings with it a responsibility for the entire community, and not just for individual good deeds? Which individuals are willing to subordinate the autonomy they earned by wealth, and join a collective team of leaders committed to transforming the Jewish community? Who is ready to step up giving levels sufficiently to enable Judaism to be a vital competitor in the marketplace of free ideas and faiths?

The tasks before us are daunting, expensive, creative, exhilarating and sometimes frustrating, but the reward will be inscription in the book of Jewish history as leaders of historic proportions. To paraphrase Pirkei Avot, theirs (yours) is not the obligation to complete this historic transformation, but you are not exempt from the mission of starting the redemption. Now. 🌸