

JFNNJ Emerging Philanthropist Program
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Remarks by Rabbi Adina Lewittes

Larry Moses (Senior Philanthropic advisor to the Wexner Foundation), in an article he published two years ago, makes an important distinction between tzedakah and philanthropy. Using the model of human rights research which distinguishes between a “cosmopolitan” framework and a “communitarian” one, whereby the former prioritizes responding to immediate needs and suffering and the latter focuses on systemic changes needed to eradicate and prevent such suffering, he suggests that tzedakah might mean the clearly defined obligation we have as Jews to tend to the basic needs of people around us, while Jewish philanthropy might mean the voluntary and discretionary investment of resources we make towards the improvement of humanity and life itself.

He offers the analogy of tzedakah as the ER where we go to stop the bleeding and philanthropy as the research lab where we go to cure the disease.

American Jewish giving today is marked by the presence of both centralized communal allocations in the form of Federations, and self-directed private philanthropic foundations. But most giving by American Jews today, in whichever domain, is made up of essentially private, voluntary acts.

I know you’ve touched on these themes before, but I want to take them a step deeper and pose a question for you – not one you’ll necessarily answer tonight, but one that has great importance for the work you’re doing together as a group and individually as families.

Robert Cover was a brilliant professor of law at Yale who tragically died in 1986 at the age of 42 having already made his mark as a scholar of law and who some speculated might have been tapped for the Supreme Court one day. One of his most influential pieces of writing is titled “Nomos and Narrative”, an article which asserts that no piece of legislation, whether a sacred ancient law in the Torah, an amendment to the U.S. constitution, or even a recent Supreme Court decision, can be understood or appreciated separate from the story in which it’s embedded, from the events or history which locate the law and give it meaning. Think of the Torah’s curious injunction not to eat the sciatic nerve, rooted in the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel (which makes kosher filet mignon hard to find, though not impossible). Or, to use a controversial example in our own country, consider how the right to bear arms is rooted in the story of the American Revolution, or how the dismantling of DOMA emerges from the Civil Rights narrative of our own lifetimes.

What is the narrative in which the mitzvah of giving tzedakah is rooted?

On the one hand, the ancient Rabbis interpret the Torah’s calling to us “to walk in God’s ways” as a call to emulate the actions of God described in the early stories of

Genesis: just as God fed and clothed Adam and Eve, so should we feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Just as God visited Abraham after his circumcision, so should we visit the sick.

But there is another core story in which the commandments to live generously and compassionately are rooted: the Exodus from Egypt. “Remember you were a slave in Egypt” is the most oft-repeated phrase in the Torah, reminding us that we’ve experienced suffering and deprivation and therefore we must use our experience to cultivate empathy and to diminish the suffering and deprivation of others. Take care of the widow, the stranger and the orphan – those most vulnerable -- the Torah always continues, for you know what it’s like to be without power and freedom.

While we have our examples from our particular religious tradition, it’s been noted that charitable giving is really a universal moral virtue. However, giving back to society by investing in positive change as an expression of thanks for the opportunities one’s been given in life – to attend good school, find good jobs, become successful -- is a classic American phenomenon.

If so, what is the narrative in which American Jewish philanthropy is rooted? Freedom (as opposed to slavery)? Opportunity? Professional success? Wealth? Civic responsibility?

My own work with respect to the larger story of Judaism in 21st century is rooted in these storylines:

- declining rabbinic authority (authority which ultimately comes from you) which I see as positive because it leads to people taking more responsibility for their own Jewish lives, seeking meaningful and abiding connections that feel genuine and authentic),
- diminishing connection to traditional, observant Jewish life, which on the flipside has led to a burst of ritual and spiritual creativity that is reinvigorating Jewish life all around us,
- the demand for and the assumption that there are different choices around how to engage with Judaism (Observance? Learning? Music? Art? Travel? Social action? Zionism? Food? Environmentalism? Philanthropy?),
- deep hunger for spirituality, for a sense of purpose to our lives and for our Jewish lives to be filled with meaning,
- the need for Jewish life to be affordable,
- the desire for the Jewish community to reflect the diversity that animates all the other areas of our lives.

But what of our personal Jewish stories?

Noam Zion of the Hartman Institute, a critical voice in the modern retelling of the Jewish story (some of you may know his hagaddah, [A Different Night](#)) talks about

giving as an expression of our Jewish identity, a story we tell about ourselves as Jews, our Jewish values and priorities. Whom it is we give to, how much we give, what financial instruments we give it with, whether we give as donors or investors, all of these decisions tell a Jewish story, tell our Jewish story. So my big question to you is this: ***What is the story in which your giving will be embedded, what is the narrative which will make sense of the choices you make?***

We're entering the season of the High Holy Days (this Shabbat is the 2nd of 7 special Shabbatot leading up to Rosh HaShanah). We talk about the Book of Life, and in the upcoming season of Awe we review the chapters we wrote last year and anticipate the ones we have yet to write.

Bowing the shofar is the only ritual mentioned in the Torah for that time of year. My colleague in the UK, Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, tells of his colleague there who would hold the shofar upside down to show it's really in the shape of a question mark, it's haunting notes piercing the silence of our sanctuaries, asking us: Who are you? What are you doing here? What is it you want to make of your life? What narrative do you want to write with the gift of your existence?

Before you answer any questions about to whom you will give, how much, how you'll give, must be able to answer this: Who are you? What story are your values telling your children, your family, your community, your people, your colleagues, your peers, your school, your neighborhood, the society all around you? How will your philanthropic choices add meaning and texture to the tale of your life? How will your decisions enrich the Jewish story with which your own story is inextricably bound?

Once you can begin to clarify the narrative you wish to create from your life, all the decisions you make will take root in a larger context of meaning and purpose so that you become a living text from whom others can learn and can draw inspiration.

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