# On the Value and Values of Jewish Social Entrepreneurship

*By Yonatan* ***Gordis***

Philanthropists play a key role in encouraging and supporting new developments that keep the Jewish community vibrant and relevant. Where they choose to focus their resources can make the difference between stasis and progress. Jewish communal debate in the past years has focused significantly on the role of Jewish philanthropists in funding new ideas and new organizations. To best understand the context in which this discussion is occurring, it is necessary to understand the unusual relationship of the Jewish community to the phenomena of innovation and social entrepreneurship.

Almost all communities rely on their capacity to reinvent aspects of themselves in an ongoing fashion to survive. In many cases, change occurs as a response to immediate needs around human welfare and other vital elements that make the difference between life and death on the individual and communal levels. However, social needs and trends also elicit innovation in a community. The younger generation often shapes its own communal identification through the act of changing the shape of the community itself.

## THE ADVENT OF JEWISH "SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP"

In early 21st-century nomenclature, the term "social entrepreneurship" is being used broadly to describe organizational ventures (nonprofit and for-profit) that bring about communal or societal change. The concept began to appear in the 1960s and 1970s to describe individuals using entrepreneurial skill sets and approaches to achieve a social mission. It grew in strength and clarity in the 1980s when visionaries like Bill Drayton, founder of Ashoka: Innovators for the Public, and others began to target resources (fiscal, training, and networking) at social entrepreneurs throughout the world.

It took nearly 20 years for the concept of social entrepreneurship to enter the vernacular of the Jewish community in North America, where it has been applied almost completely to nonprofit ventures, whereas in the general community usage is varied, with social entrepreneurs using a variety of economic models to achieve their mission.[1] In the early years of the 21st century, with the creation of nonprofit organizations such as Joshua Venture[2] and Bikkurim,[3] a

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[1]The literature on the field of social entrepreneurship is extensive. For a quick introduction to the field, visit the following Web sites: www.ashoka.org; www.acumenfund.org; www.skollfoundation.org; and www.pbs.org/opb/thenewheroes/whatis/.

[2]Joshua Venture, a fellowship for young Jewish social entrepreneurs, was created in 2002. Over the course of its two cohorts of fellows who participated in the two-year program, Joshua Venture incubated 16 fellows, the majority of whom created an excellent and well-tracked success record for the organization. See www.joshuaventure.org.

[3]As an incubator for New York-based Jewish organizations, Bikkurim has, since 2000, provided more than $500,000 in in-kind support to more than 20 new Jewish organizations. Participants receive office space and professional support while in residency in the incubator, a period that may last for up to 4 1/2 years. See www.bikkurim.org.

first generation of intentional efforts to support new organizations using new approaches to (often) new themes in the Jewish community began.

In the years that followed the inception of these organizations, mainstream Jewish conferences increasingly began to highlight these experimenters, giving them an opportunity to tell their tales from the entrepreneurial trenches to a larger Jewish audience. Although few of the mainstream communal organizations or funders invested in the field, the message that the conveners of these conferences hoped to convey was threefold: (1) There are young people who care about working in and for the Jewish community; (2) there are new ideas out there that can attract the "lost generations" of Jews in their twenties and thirties; and (3) the bleak forecasts of statisticians and other researchers might not be the only viable forecast for North American Jewry regarding the building of a vibrant Jewish community for new generations.

Nearly a decade since the first conversations about Jewish social entrepreneurship began, the Jewish communal landscape looks vastly different. Mainstream organizations including JESNA and the UJC are holding conferences and creating think tanks focused on Jewish social entrepreneurship. Databases of social entrepreneurs and their projects are being compiled. New locally and regionally based incubators and investment funds are appearing in Europe and Israel as well as in North America. Slingshot, a project of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, is entering its fifth year of profiling new and innovative organizations, many of which fit the definition of social entrepreneurship. By creating a fund to invest in some of these projects, Slingshot has used the approach of many funders in this field—mixing financial investment with another methodology (publicizing leading entrepreneurial organizations). Joshua Venture, after a hiatus, is being relaunched in early 2009 to run two additional cohorts of its fellowship over the next five years. Other funders offer capacity-building support, networking opportunities, and more. The reach of the myriad of organizations that did not exist more than six years ago is now in the hundreds of thousands of participants.

## THE NATURE OF JEWISH SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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With the excitement and challenges that accompany the growth of this "movement," it is important to note several key phenomena that appear as the Jewish community, as a subset of the world adapts to the concept of social entrepreneurship. First, innovation, known in Hebrew as *hidush* or newness, has been a constantly present driver in sustaining Jewish identity—though rooted primarily in textual exegesis. In other words, innovation is not new to the Jews. Second, although social entrepreneurship may be a newly applied term in the Jewish world, it is far from being a new concept and is deeply rooted in Jewish history and culture. Third, this longstanding engagement with social entrepreneurship (using innovative forms to address new social challenges) offers a radical twist to the concept of the "triple bottom line" of socially responsible organizations and presents valuable lessons to the world

### Innovation (*Hidush*) as a Central Driver in Jewish Engagement With the World

While new forms and attitudes have charted a fascinating course for the Jewish people over millennia, much of the root of the Jewish communal relationship to

change lies in the deep and ongoing engagement with the primary Jewish texts. Even though Ecclesiastes 1:9 tells us that there is "nothing new under the sun," this meta-statement has not stopped generations of Jews, from scholars and rabbis to lay people, from seeking new understanding and interpretations of texts that range from the biblical and talmudic through to the midrashic and kabbalistic texts of the Middle Ages and the Hassidic texts of the 18th and 19th centuries. *Hidush*—finding new angles on the text—is a key driver for keeping Jews engaged in a relationship with the texts and thus with the Jewish tradition. As Reb Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810) stated, "As much as a person innovates (*mechadesh*) in the Torah, so is illumination drawn to him from the holiness of the Land of Israel" (*Sefer HaMidot* , "Hidushin d'Oreita"). In this religious perspective, *hidush* is clearly a vehicle to a very high end.[4]

This hunger for innovation in textual interpretation has, in some Jewish communities, become the sole area of life where newness and innovation can be found. However, as boundaries have shifted over times, this habit of innovating within the text has often seeped out of the textual realm into social and other realms. Hence, the period of the Enlightenment in Europe was led by individuals who had some mastery in textual innovation that they acquired in their Orthodox upbringings and who then chose to radically move out of those religious worlds while applying their tools of innovation to different spheres of life. This infused a world of Yiddish culture, the world of the Social Democrats, and the development of a myriad of sciences over the generations, including the field of psychoanalysis and others. Textual innovation, with its power and tradition of creating new spins off the core, is a time-old practice of the Jewish world, and it is important to understand that the supposedly new field of social entrepreneurship is not new to the Jewish community either.

**A Tradition of Social Entrepreneurship**

As a community and nation forced to contend, more than most, with shifting contexts of sovereignty, economy, and dispersion, the Jewish community has always needed to be nimble with its skills at self-reinvention. Isolationism has been nearly impossible, and as the Jewish community, for better and for worse, has interfaced intensely with the non-Jewish communities among whom its members resided, it has reinvented key components of its social infrastructure for its sustainability.

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Our earliest lessons about more and less successful ventures of Jewish social entrepreneurship appear in the Bible. Moses, who moved the Jewish people from a familial to a communal infrastructure, is the first Jewish social entrepreneur as he (with Yitro, his non-Jewish organizational consultant; see Exodus 18) created organizational structures with a social and ethical mission. Even in his generation, other entrepreneurs appeared, one of the least successful of whom was Korach (see Numbers 16), whose group's questioning of governance structures did not take root.

From that point onward, nearly every generation has witnessed some level of social entrepreneurship in the Jewish community, and examples are too many

[4]Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), Israel's first Chief Rabbi also viewed *hidush* as being at the core of Jewish nature. He stated, "May the old be renewed and may the new become holy" (*Igrot Raayah,* Volume I, p. 214).

to list here. They have touched on a myriad of social issues—poverty, immigration, culture, and more. Although many evolved out of an existing communal infrastructure, others were started by visionaries who needed either to reconfigure or reapply the expression of values or tradition in the community based on changing contexts. Jewish social entrepreneurship has ranged from the socially minded mystic (the Baal Shem Tov in the 17th century) to social economics of community migration (the *landsmanschaften* of the 19th and 20th centuries).

Social entrepreneurship takes different forms depending on the times. The rise of culturally oriented organizations indicates a time of general privilege and well-being in a community. Times of need give rise to more practical objectives and social or organizational forms.

One can easily define many of the organizations established after the formation of the state of Israel as social entrepreneurship organizations. They were rooted in young activists' assessments of the current provision of services or vision of existing organizations and their decision to offer complementary or alternative organizations that would reflect their own generation's values and methodologies. When it was formed, the kibbutz movement itself was a case of an ideological movement creating new communal structures in a socially entrepreneurial fashion. By folding social, ethical, and economic values into one massive endeavor (also led by young people), the kibbutz movement was a vast experiment testing a vision in real time.

The Jewish social entrepreneurship of our age had its first roots in the waves of social change that began to affect almost every sector of American society in the 1960s and 1970s. Consider these two examples of grassroots organizations that rose and disappeared:

**1.** The North American Jewish Students Network (known as Network)[5] was founded in l970. It brought together independent Jewish student groups from left to right, progressive and centrist, Orthodox to secular every 18 months at a conference. Among its accomplishments was the organizing of the first National Conference of Jewish Women and the founding conference of CAJE—then the Coalition for Alternatives in Jewish Education (now changed to Advancement of Jewish Education). Network was an entrepreneurial hub of activity on many angles of Jewish student life with a strong relationship to Jewish activism, including the support of Soviet Jewry. Among those who participated in Network and are active in Jewish communal life today are Yossi Abramowitz, Shifra Bronznick, Malcolm Hoenlein, and others. Its activities continued throughout the 1970s despite a distinct shift in leadership and political perspective in 1976.

**2.** The Radius Institute,[6] located at the Center for Jewish Studies of the CUNY Graduate Center, was a think tank and capacity-building organization that entrepreneurially addressed a myriad of issues around Jewish identity in the late 1970s and 1980s. Radius offered capacity-building workshops and other services to nearly two dozen organizations, including CAJE, Dorot, Lilith Magazine, the National Havurah Movement, the New Israel Fund, and others. Noted figures involved in Radius include Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, John Ruskay, and Jonathan Woocher.

[5]From a written summary provided by Shifra Bronznick, a member of Network, November 6, 2008

[6]From a written summary provided by Rabbi Steve Shaw, the Radius Institute's founding director, November 7, 2008.

These organizations were grassroots hubs of young entrepreneurial types, individuals who were activist in either thought or methodology and who were truly dedicated to increasing the vibrancy and relevance of the Jewish community and its values. Social entrepreneurship is therefore not a new phenomenon in the Jewish community but rather one that lies at the heart of the vibrancy that is key to the evolution of the Jewish community on local, national, and global levels.

**Social Entrepreneurship, Social Responsibility and the Quadruple Bottom Line**

Several key themes are guiding the modern world of social entrepreneurship and the accompanying field of "social responsibility," which primarily involve a holistic approach to the corporate sector and encourage targeting not only fiscal gains but others as well. The concept of the "triple bottom line," coined by John Elkington in 1994, addresses the need for businesses to consider the social and environmental impacts of doing business along with the economic impacts. The triple bottom line has achieved a great deal of traction in the global business community and countless corporations, as local businesses to multinationals have incorporated this thinking into their mission and public relations efforts.

However, examination of the Jewish relationship to sustainability and innovation indicates that it may be worth expanding Elkington's idea of a triple bottom line to that of a "quadruple bottom line."[7] In this approach, the fourth component would be a values-based tradition or continuum. Very often, organizations embracing the triple bottom line lose steam in their efforts, particularly because, with so much innovation in their approach, there is not enough foundational grounding to rest on in difficult times. Numerous Jewish activists and innovators often say that knowing that their motivating values come from their tradition (regardless of where these individuals embrace the practices of the tradition) has kept them fueled and ultimately sustainable, where other innovators have found their relevance and energy dissipating over time.

The strength of this fourth leg of the quadruple bottom line is evident in secular social justice organizations, in faith-based organizations, and in other social change and social welfare organizations around the world, where the Jewish individuals in these organizations (who often have no formal or informal affiliation with the Jewish communal world) state, "We do this work because this is how we were raised by our Jewish parents. We are part of a lineage and continuum that has always done this." This motivating and sustaining factor in many secular social entrepreneurship organizations that have Jews at their helm is clearly a key component of Jewish organizations who self-define as part of the Jewish social entrepreneurship movement. Jews innovate based on social values because the tradition has always driven them to ensure the survival of their own communities, to strengthen their identification with the community through changing it, and to fix the world (whether the end-user be Jewish or non-Jewish). The quadruple bottom line of Jewish social entrepreneurship is a matter of mission (and commandment) rather than just preference.

[7]Numerous efforts have been made to conceive of a fourth bottom line. In 2002, French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac proposed that the fourth bottom line should be cultural. Others have suggested that the fourth bottom line should address areas of governance, spirituality, or ethics.

## PHILANTHROPIC PERSPECTIVES

By funding innovation, whether it is through vehicles that are defined as those of social entrepreneurship or not, philanthropists are part of a tradition in the Jewish community. This enables them to learn lessons from the past and, for better or worse, to understand that the funding of innovation is not necessarily an innovative undertaking in itself.

As the world economy shakes with a large degree of uncertainty, several key points are worthy of examination for philanthropists who seek to keep freshness and a sense of growth in the Jewish community.

### Internal and External Social Entrepreneurship

The responsibility for continuing to embrace a spirit of innovation and social entrepreneurship in the Jewish community lies not only with the communally marginalized younger generation and funders who support their initiatives. Innovation can and must be a mainstay of any existing organization that seeks to maintain its relevance to its product and its constituency. One of the greatest failings of the past decades in Jewish North America has been that mainstream and longstanding Jewish organizations have relegated responsibility for social entrepreneurship to younger generation innovators. This has created a divide in dynamism in the community between the generations. Now is a critical time if that chasm is to be narrowed.

If more established organizations want to remain relevant, they must themselves dedicate financial, human, and programmatic resources to innovation *within* their organizations for promoting internal social entrepreneurship. Accomplishing this change in mindset necessitates a number of complementary tactics. Current leaders need to brand internal innovation as an organic part of their organizations' planning and thought processes. New ideas should be shared, highlighted, and analyzed, even if they are ultimately not pursued. Older and younger staff members should be invited to share thoughts, meet over lunch, and brainstorm together. These sessions will increase organizational verve, optimism, and creativity. In addition, organizational managers need to elicit support for such an approach from all stakeholders in the organization so that innovation can be supported rather than seen as an "imported" approach. Board members must know that the executive director is promoting this thinking; program participants should know that new ideas are being explored; and candidates for positions on staff should know that the environment they are considering entering is one that is designed to encourage their best innovative thought internally, rather than feeling that they must leave it at the door when they enter an established entity.

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If they fail to do this, existing organizations will become like the quaint horse-drawn carriages that sit in front yards in rural American communities. Anyone with dynamism in their spirit or approach will not venture near them, and the pace of ossification will only be intensified. Our vehicles must remain relevant to our times. If standing organizations realize that risk is part of growth and allow the entrepreneurial spirit to exist internally, alongside existing programs and attitudes, they will be doing a great service to the community, which is ultimately the purpose for which they were created and are supported with communal dollars.

Over the course of time, the younger of the "new" socially entrepreneurial organizations themselves will grow older and grayer and will need to avoid the

mindset pitfalls that others have encountered before them. Social entrepreneurship must ultimately describe a style of innovation rather than merely a type of organization. Philanthropists, including those who support older, more established organizations as well as those who support newer organizations, can play a central role in making certain that internal *and* external innovation have backing.

**In Praise of Experimentation**

Not every project or organization needs to exist *ad infinitum*. Organizations and entrepreneurs must have the ability to take risks, attempt new approaches, and then move on, even if the return on the investment was not as high as they hoped. The Jewish community has a tendency to label anything that stops as a failure. Another option, however, would be to praise innovators, even if their projects were of limited duration, and to see them as key players in how the Jewish community learns. The risk takers are our frontline action researchers, helping the community learn in real time. They deserve respect and attention. Rather than be put on a shelf labeled "did not work," the Jewish community should be placing social entrepreneurs and others on panels and offering some of them *more* money to try again based on lessons learned. When abandoning an entrepreneur whose project has not worked, the community is throwing away the funds it just invested in his or her education. It would be best if this investment was redirected to growing the vibrancy of the Jewish community rather than have it turn outward because of the community's blanket rejection of an under-successful venture of social entrepreneurship.

**The Town Square**

Though geographic dispersion is part of Jewish peoplehood, experience has shown that innovators (as well as other leaders) need time together in the same room. This is not a "perk," but rather a vital element in communal exploration and growth. Funders who invest in face-to-face meetings of entrepreneurs are investing in the future core of the community and not in the margins. Philanthropists can, at relatively low cost, gather the innovators together so that they can cross-fertilize, network, share resources, learn from each other, and reduce their feelings of isolation. It can refresh their relationship to the quadruple bottom line. Such gatherings ultimately create more effective use of funds than if they had not happened.

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**Learn From Outside the Jewish Community**

To date, the interface between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds of social entrepreneurship has been limited and driven by a few individual entrepreneurs who reside in both communities. The two worlds should meet on several levels for greater shared learning and synergy. For the Jewish world to share its wisdom and insight and to gain from others' work, there is a need for intentional efforts to link the two communities of social entrepreneurs.

## CONCLUSION

Building on a dynamic engagement with social entrepreneurship that is already millennia long, the Jewish community needs only to reach into its history of change to maintain its relevance and vibrancy. As in the for-profit world, new

ideas and approaches necessitate fiscal investment and risk taking to create a return on investment. However, responsibility for this process cannot lie in the hands of one group of stakeholders or another. It is not only up to younger generation Jews to guarantee the community's future through innovation. It is not only in the hands of philanthropists to offer a broad verdict on the viability and relevance of social entrepreneurship. It must be a diversified communal effort. Innovation, a key cog in the wheels of communal and organizational sustainability, is actually one of the skeletal components of Jewish communal responsibility. In the best of occasions, it offers new directions and vehicles, and in other circumstances it offers more material for our learning culture to grow and reflect. This will allow the Jewish community to focus the strengths of its tradition and its skills in promoting innovation—not as a response to a staid communal world but as a part of a dynamic and exciting process that embraces change and growth.

## REFERENCE

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