



The role of American Jewish philanthropy in Israel today

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Since even before the founding of the State of Israel, there has been a rigorous debate regarding what, if any, control Diaspora Jews ought to have over the funds they raise for Israel.

In the early days of the state, Zionist leader Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver advocated for American Jews to retain control over the philanthropic funds they raised and sent to the nascent state. Israeli leaders, unsurprisingly, believed only they knew best how to allocate the money raised on behalf of Israel. They were far from alone in this.

“What we fear is that certain Jews in the U.S. will dictate to you what you should do with their money,” Henry Morgenthau, then-chair of the United Jewish Appeal and former U.S. Treasury Secretary, wrote in a letter to then-Israeli Finance Minister Eliezer Kaplan. “I have confidence in the Jews of Israel, I have no confidence in the Jews of the U.S. who have control over their money.”¹

As Eric Fleisch demonstrates in *Checkbook Zionism*, in the more than 75 years since Morgenthau sent that letter, not much has changed: “Nearly all Israelis interviewed in this case — whether from pro or anti-settlement groups, Israeli-born or born in the Diaspora — did not believe that Americans were properly equipped to be meaningful contributors in discussions about allocations.”²

The Oct. 7 terror attacks and the Israeli government’s inept response to them demand a reconsideration of this dynamic. No more can the Jewish People assume that Israelis inherently know better than their counterparts abroad. Living in Israel and living with

¹ Eric Fleisch, *Checkbook Zionism: Philanthropy and Power in the Israel-Diaspora Relationship* (Rutgers University Press, 2024), 44.

² Ibid. 117

the country's decisions are indeed powerful forces, but a degree of distance from the petty politics of the day are also critical when considering the long-term health of the state.

In the Blaustein-Ben-Gurion agreement, the Israeli statesman rightly lauded American Jews for their "technical knowledge, their unrivalled experience, their spirit of enterprise, their bold vision, their 'know-how.'" American Jewry and particularly its donor class is among the most innovative, motivated and successful groups on the planet. Ben-Gurion hoped U.S. Jews would bring those skills to Israel through *aliyah*, something that has never happened on a large scale. But they can still offer them to the state, which needs them now as much as it did then.

Three admittedly difficult steps must occur to change this situation:

1. Diaspora Jews must begin to think critically about Israel — the real Israel, with all its problems and frustrations. They have too often imagined an Israel whose people and institutions are treated as mascots or actors in a morality play. Philanthropic missions are so carefully curated that attendees leave with an impression of the country that reflects the organizers' dreams for what Israel should be rather than what it actually is.

To effectively address the country's needs, philanthropists must first understand those needs and the country's political realities, rather than just ignoring the confounding and troubling parts of Israeli society.

2. Jewish philanthropists need to collaborate, not their professional staffs, but the individual philanthropists themselves. This has happened in the past and to great effect, but it has grown rare. All too often, philanthropists hand the reins to their advisors, whose goals are not necessarily the revolutionary action that the moment calls for. (This is not, heaven forbid, criticism of those exceedingly capable, desperately needed professionals.)

The "Study Group" of the 1990s, which saved the Hillel system and led to Birthright Israel — one of the most successful, influential Jewish programs ever — is a shining example of what can happen when donors directly engage with one another and make collective decisions.³ Its successors — such as the Tarrytown Group — have yet to result in the type of cooperation needed to have a serious impact on the direction of Israel.

³ Lisa Miller, "Titans of Industry Join Forces to Work for Jewish Philanthropy," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 1998, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB894240270899870000>.

3. Jewish philanthropists must get involved, far more deeply than they do today, in advocacy, cultivating grassroots movements and Israeli thought leadership. While Diaspora Jewish charitable donations are considerable, they amount to a small fraction of Israeli state funds and thus their direct influence are limited.

Both a success story and cautionary tale for the type of effective advocacy that philanthropy can achieve is seen in the Kohelet Forum's judicial overhaul plan. Through years of operation, the think tank built a network of allies in government, civil service and civil society, allowing it to push forward its plans to reshape the Israel's balance of power. Though successful in its aim, Kohelet's overhaul tore the country apart. Future advocacy efforts should learn from this effort how to advance their ideas through the halls of government, while also learning that such initiatives include the kind of robust consensus-building that was so, so tragically lacking here.

I will conclude this essay by quoting my former professor, University of Haifa President Gur Alroey: "The State of Israel is a joint venture between those who made *aliyah* and settled here, and the Jews of the Diaspora, particularly American Jewry. This is a formula that has proven itself time and again. The connection between us — the people of Israel — and American Jewry is an inseparable part of Israeli national security, and we must continue to nurture and strengthen it."

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