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Feeding Today While Nurturing Tomorrow

by Charles R. Bronfman
 Special To The Jewish Week

The past 18 months have presented an extraordinary set of challenges for nonprofit organizations across North America, including those in the Jewish community. Falling stock markets, diminished endowment portfolios and the Madoff scandal have conspired to exert enormous pressure on our community's resources and the organizations that support it.

The federation system is at the forefront of responding to this daunting state of affairs. Shrinking resources combined with growing lists of those in need, challenge Federations to meet the multiple demands with focus and resolve. When they don't, people suffer. It's that simple.

There's more. Federations also face the question of deciding between "bread and Torah," or put another way, basic human needs and Jewish education. Federations have the two-fold responsibility of caring for

the needs of today, while at the same time, building for the future. This dual burden comes into sharp focus at times like these.

John Ruskay, executive vice president and CEO of UJA Federation of New York, puts it succinctly, "We must both respond to the acute economic need and pain that confronts us and invest in the Jewish future and that is what we are doing with our support of Birthright Israel."

This is when federations are at their best. They realize they don't have a choice. They have to work for today and

tomorrow. It's this ability that is the foundation of the partnership with Birthright Israel. Now in its 10th year, Birthright Israel has received more than \$100 million from the federation system. It's a serious investment.

And that investment in the future has begun to pay dividends in the present. As of today, there are 216,000 Birthright Israel alumni worldwide; 162,000 are from North America. These are young Jewish adults who have had little connection to the Jewish community. Over the years, I've had the good fortune to meet hundreds of alumni. From this remarkably diverse group emerges an identical refrain: "This trip changed my life." It's clear that as a result of the community's investment, so many young Jews have realized the joys of both being Jewish and connected to Israel.

Despite our collective successes, we have to do more. For every young adult we send on Birthright Israel, we leave many behind. When registration opened in September for the winter trips, Birthright Israel received 20,000 applications for 8,400 places. That's 20,000 young adults who said, "I'm ready to get involved in Jewish life." At the same time, that's 11,600 young adults whose first interaction with the Jewish community was




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rejection. This pattern of disappointment is a loss to both Birthright Israel and the community.

Overcoming these enormous hurdles requires a new approach. A spirit of partnership and cooperation has begun to emerge over the last few years that is real, tangible, and measurable. More recently, there's been a surge in productive dialogue between United Jewish Communities, the federation umbrella group, and Birthright Israel about how to maximize the program's reach and impact. There are an increasing number of signs that a collaborative approach is the most effective one.

A few examples.

One of the cornerstones of Birthright Israel is the "mifgash," or encounter with Israeli soldiers. Soldiers (out of uniform) participate on every trip. It's an organic approach to building Israeli-diaspora relations. To date, 45,000 Israelis have participated. This component inspired an alumna from Washington to create a "reverse mifgash" and invite a group of Israelis to D.C. for a 10-day trip to explore life in the diaspora with their local counterparts.

Misha Galperin, executive vice president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, sees Birthright Israel's ability to connect with Jews from all over the world as "the very outcome our federation seeks to achieve. Its a model that we need to build upon, replicate, expand and celebrate."

This level of cooperation extends beyond the programmatic. The Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas co-sponsored an event where every federation officer made a gift, and they raised \$130,000. While the money will fund more participants, the broader message is about the future of the Dallas Jewish community.

In Chicago, Federation President and CEO Steven Nasatir is leading a joint venture to build an endowment campaign, a clear statement that Birthright Israel is an effective tool in building community.

Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies' (CJP) launched a campus-based initiative to engage alumni by funding full-time coordinators at six area campuses. Barry Shrage, CJP president, feels the campus initiative "is giving alumni ways to connect that are meaningful for them and that shapes tomorrow's leaders with a lifetime of commitment to Jewish life and Israel."

In Toronto, Ted Sokolsky, the federation president and CEO, says Birthright Israel represents "a seminal moment in the history of our federation, one that transformed the way we connect with young adults, how we partner with private philanthropists, how we could change our relationship with Israel and how we invest in Jewish identity."

If you look at the mission statements of Birthright Israel and each federation, there is much in common: stimulating an exploration of Jewish identity; creating a relationship with the Jewish people; and building a connection to Israel. Put more succinctly: building a healthy and vibrant future for the Jewish community.

When you think about it, this is a mission all of us involved in Jewish life strive to achieve. Based on the work taking place in federations and communities across North America, I can say with great confidence that together, we're addressing the needs of the present while building the foundation for the future. We're providing bread and Torah. We don't have a choice. This is something we should recognize, celebrate, and continue.

I invite you to join the conversation. Please write to me at CRB@acbp.net.
Charles R. Bronfman is chairman of The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies.

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