

Keeping Innovation Alive In These Dark Times

by Charles R. Bronfman
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We are in a “New World” — no, not the one that Christopher Columbus founded, but the one in which we find ourselves today. However, like Columbus, we find ourselves both in uncharted territories and threatening ones as well. Yet, from that perilous situation came North America as we know it today, the most highly developed society ever.

We in the philanthropic world can imitate the Genoese adventurer by creatively reinventing our philanthropic society. There is no doubt that once again it can become a beacon for the entire world, shining a bright light of good citizenship through innovation and creativity.

The Jumpstart report funded by Natan and the Samuel Bronfman Foundation, led by my brother Edgar, indicates that since 1998, over 300 innovative, start-up organizations with budgets of under \$2 million have been established, and they are engaging close to 400,000 Jews a year, and have raised over \$500 million in the last decade. In the unhappy “New World” in which we find ourselves, these pioneering organizations are under siege. Many have delayed new projects and even reduced the scope of their existing efforts including staff layoffs.

Here’s how the cycle works. The less money we feel we have collectively, the less people are willing to risk. Funders channel their dollars to known quantities, and grantees scale back on anything that smells of “innovation.” Their reaction is perfectly understandable, but it can also be very harmful. It’s a negative feedback loop that realistically trades short-term gain for long-term pain, and threatens to undo the last decade of progress in the Jewish world.

Thus the question is, what can we do to keep Jewish innovation alive in these dark times? Today’s financial situation is the worst most of us have experienced in our lifetimes. We must be pragmatic about how to use smaller pools of funding.

Any business that does not value research and development dies. And so, we have two futures from which to choose. One, in which we support the work of young, innovative, risk-taking Jewish philanthropic entrepreneurs and ensure meaning for the next generation of Jews in a myriad of creative ways — the type of projects identified by pathfinders like the Slingshot Fund, the Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund of Los Angeles and the Natan Fund. Yes, we must give to traditional causes because many in our society are suffering. However we must not take innovation off the table for if we do, there is no doubt that in the medium term, we risk losing a generation.

Creativity is what makes the world go round. In the philanthropic realm, it is called innovation. Its vibrant meaning is of crucial significance. I say, let’s go all out to explore this “New World” of innovation and become the pioneers of the first part of the 21st century.

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