

'Jewish philanthropy must adapt to changes'

By GIL SHEFLER
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Solomon: Today's assimilation comes from unprecedented freedom and choice, high education levels, self-confidence; things we should embrace.

The Jewish Federations system has to adapt to the changing patterns in Jewish generosity or risk becoming increasingly irrelevant, according to Jeffrey R. Solomon, an expert on Jewish giving and the president of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies.

In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post* ahead of the Jewish Federations of North America's General Assembly, the year's largest Jewish philanthropic gathering, set to take place in New Orleans starting November 7, Solomon said on Tuesday that Jewish-American donors in the early 21st century are pickier, less generous and fewer in number than in the past.

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"Umbrella-giving and collective responsibility were more societally embraced in previous generations," he explained in an e-mail. "Just as department stores have reinvented themselves into a group of boutiques, so can Federations.

"There is both research (see Paul Shervish, Boston College) and experience (see Toronto Federation's recent history) that suggests there are still reforms that can make the Federation system more robust. However, I don't see returning to the 1948 New York experience, where one of every two Jewish households gave to the campaign. (Today it is closer to one in 20.)" Few people know the inside of Jewish-American philanthropy the way Solomon does.

During his long and distinguished career, the former New York Federations executive has been involved in some of the billion-dollar field's biggest operations.

Perhaps his most important contribution came in 1999, when he played a key role in orchestrating the merger of several major Jewish groups into the United Jewish Communities, which was rebranded last year as the Jewish Federations of North America.

He has written numerous articles, taught at New York University and co-written a book with Charles Bronfman called *The Art of Giving: Where the Soul Meets a Business Plan*.



Solomon's experience puts him in a good position to try and look into the future. Asked what he believed would top the agenda at this year's General Assembly, he said he was filled with a sense of *déjà vu*.

"The conversion bill [pending in the Knesset] was last on the GA agenda in 1989, so 21 years later I think that clearly will be the most major issue," he said.

"Other issues I think will be around will be the generational changes taking place in American society. The Peter Beinart article has generated a great deal of interest and debate," he continued, referring to Beinart's recent New York Book of Reviews piece, which argued that Zionism and liberalism were drifting apart.

Other topics high on the agenda at previous GAs have been sidelined in recent years.

In 1999, Solomon wrote an essay titled "The Crisis of Normality" in which he argued that the main crisis facing Jewish organizations in the US was that there was none. However, he said the Jewish world has changed quite a bit since he penned the

article.

“The trends since then have been negative,” he said. “I don’t believe assimilation is the kind of threat that Iran or virulent anti-Semitism are. Today’s Western assimilation emerges from unprecedented freedom and choice, combined with high educational levels and supreme self-confidence; things we should embrace. A self-confident Judaism thrives in this environment.

“Yesterday’s Jewish institutions, especially in the West, may not be effectively adapting to these changing conditions. Bottom line: It is a mixed picture.”

Over the past decade, the Jewish world has seen many positive changes, too.

“Birthright is amazing,” he said, referring to the organization that offers free 10-day trips to Israel to Jews aged 18-26 from around the world. “It has an impact on 90 percent of participants, including behavioral changes,” he said, quoting research conducted by Brandeis University.

Despite Taglit-Birthright Israel and other positive trends, those following the Jewish world might easily conclude that we live in dire times for the Jews, with reports of anti-Semitism on the rise and Israel under constant existential threat from its neighbors. But Solomon said that those who offer a pessimistic view of the state of the Jews may be out of touch with reality.

“Some argue that when things are good for Jews, it’s bad for Judaism,” he said. “I believe that the sense of crisis is related more to changing conditions and institutional needs than to facts on the ground.”



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