

‘People Should Know You’re Anonymous’

Even in the Jewish community, where plaques and named buildings abound, discreet philanthropy is making inroads — sort of.

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Editor’s Note: This is the first of two articles looking at named vs. anonymous Jewish giving.

There’s a great scene in the classic 1964 Israeli film “Sallah Shabati” where a Jewish National Fund employee is waiting in a nearly empty field for visiting Americans to come see the trees they’ve donated. He plunges into the earth a sign saying something like “Cohen Forest.” The Cohens come, see it and as they drive away, the worker pulls the sign out of the ground and, as another car of tourists pulls up, puts up another, saying “Schwartz Forest.”

Sometimes, in Jewish organizations’ buildings, where naming plaques seem to adorn every possible surface, hunger for recognition appears undiminished.

But the cultural politics around naming donations have become more complex, as a recent episode of “Curb Your Enthusiasm” reflects.

Larry David donates money to an environmental group, which names a wing of its building for him and puts his name on the wall. Someone else also gave enough for a wing dedication, upstaging Larry’s largesse by doing it anonymously. When Larry learns he’s been outclassed by friendly rival Ted Danson, he flies into a characteristic pique, condemning Danson’s “faux anonymity” as “fake philanthropy.”

By the end of the episode, Larry has gotten his name off the wall and replaced it with “anonymous.” He runs into a friend on the street, who commends him and says she’s been sharing the news. “People should know you’re anonymous,” she says.

That’s the new direction of much philanthropy today. Anonymous giving — sort of. There were more truly anonymous major gifts to American philanthropies last year than ever, according to The Chronicle of Philanthropy. Unnamed American donors gave at least 87 gifts of \$1 million or more, and 23 were over \$10 million.

The shift is being felt throughout American philanthropy as well as at its highest reaches, according to the article.

Is it true also in the Jewish community?

“I don’t know if Jews are more recognition hungry,” says Jeffrey Solomon, president of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, which in addition to giving about \$17 million to Jewish and Canadian causes this year also advises other donors, but “it certainly seems that way.” While no one has done a formal study, observers of Jewish philanthropy say that things are moving toward more anonymity.

“The style in the previous generation of putting your name on things still exists to a certain extent, but we’re seeing a trend in the other direction,” says Mark Charendoff, president of the Jewish Funders Network, an association of family foundation board members and executives. “Some people feel that putting their name on something is gauche. There are mixed motivations,

but we're definitely seeing anonymous giving more often than not, and in the past five years it's become much more pronounced."

"Now there are people giving away as much as the Bronfmans and the Steinhardts to Jewish identity causes, but no one has heard their name, and no one probably will," says Charendoff. Part of the change seems generational. Younger American Jewish donors seem inclined to give anonymously.

"It's the larger trend to give anonymously among younger donors," says Jos Thalheimer, who is descended from Amoco's founder. Thalheimer, 25, is a graduate student at New York University. "For me, it's an idea that you come to philanthropy and to giving from a place of humility. To me, putting my name on it makes it more about me than it otherwise has to," he says. "I see a range among my peers, but most people do prefer to give anonymously or quietly. I don't know of a lot of my peers who would want to go out and name something."

At the Bronfman Philanthropies, which has a network for young Jewish donors called Grand Street, values clarification exercises use a deck of 30 cards that participants rank in order of priority.

"Inevitably, especially with younger people, the card for recognition winds up in the bottom three choices," Solomon says. "They say that museums and the hospitals and universities have it all wrong, because they build so much of their fundraising strategy on recognition." But the unknown is what will happen as these young philanthropists get older. Will they re-order their priorities? Will recognition become more valuable to them?

"As they think about their legacy, will the 'edifice complex' kick in?" wonders Solomon. He has seen it happen.

"For many people as they get older and think about their legacy, some want to donate a library," for example. An older donor will say "This way, my children and grandchildren can see I didn't just use my money for personal needs but did something important with it."

Connecting their names to their giving remains important for many philanthropists, however, even young ones.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart is from a philanthropically established family; Her father, Joe Kanfer, is chair of United Jewish Communities' board of trustees. Kanfer Stewart, 26, works as an executive for the Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, which is based in Akron, Ohio and was established by her grandfather.

"I love to put my name on things," she says. "I don't make huge gifts, just \$500 or \$1,000, but I like to have my name listed on the program, so that others can see that I'm giving. It's also a way I can put myself out there separate from my family," says Kanfer Stewart. "I do like to have my name out there in the world so people understand I have interests out there and I want to be a player."

Those increasingly inclined to give anonymously do so in a variety of ways.

Solomon has noticed a significant increase in the number of private foundations with names that don't relate directly to their funding family's name, so that gifts aren't easily traced.

He calls this "un-branded, quasi-anonymous" giving. Insiders might know who's behind the funding — the way the donors, like Larry David, want it — but others don't.

The reasons funders take this approach vary.

In some cases, it's because they don't want to be inundated with requests.

One family that works with the Jewish Funders Network makes significant gifts in Israel, but when they travel there "they don't want to be fending off prospective recipients," says Charendoff. "They want the relationships they want to have without the complications of being major donors." Others do this anonymous and quasi-anonymous giving out of a sense of modesty. "They feel ethically or personally that recognition is not a great value of theirs and choose not to have it," says Solomon of Bronfman Philanthropies.

In other cases still, these "un-branded" foundations are established because the funders have decided not to pass their wealth to their children, and want "to avoid the potential conflicts that that creates," says Solomon, by keeping information about their philanthropic choices out of adult children's view.

"They don't want other family members to know, including their children, how much they're giving away."

Ethical considerations, when it comes to anonymous versus named giving, are also complex. The great rabbi Maimonides ranked eight levels of Jewish giving. Hiding the donor's identity from the recipient is regarded as more virtuous than not. There are times, however, when using a donor's name inspires others to contribute.

The purity of the donor's intentions and the dignity of the recipient have to be weighed, says Reuven Kimelman, a professor of classical Judaica at Brandeis University, and author of the book "Tzedakah and Us."

"Is someone giving anonymously to hide their potential for giving? It can be negative if it prevents active modeling," says Kimelman.

"Tzedakah in American is not just tzedakah. It's part of the exercise of Jewish leadership. It's to model for others and open up new realms of possibilities."

Increasingly, that modeling is being done quietly. Or sort of.