



Being the Next Generation

by Sharna Goldseker

In 1974, the Morris Goldseker Foundation of Maryland was founded. The year before, my great-uncle, Morris, died and designated in his will that a foundation be established in his name. Without a wife or children of his own, my uncle, a Polish immigrant cum Baltimore row house owner, instructed my father, then his nephew and employee, to set up a grantmaking institution and redistribute the annual pay out to the underprivileged residents of Baltimore. I was born the same year as that foundation. Rather than growing up the daughter of a row house owner, I grew up the daughter of a foundation chairman, and the great-niece of a philanthropist.

I am what many have termed "the next generation." I will potentially inherit the proverbial "transfer of wealth" and am considered a prospect to head my family's foundation. So, who am I? And who are we, the "next generation"?

We are the twenty- and thirty-somethings who inherited money from our parents and grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles. We did not earn the wealth we currently possess. Yet, unlike most trust-fund kids who inherited money from their parents, we also inherited philanthropic values, a commitment to helping people beyond ourselves, and in many cases, a strong work ethic and sense of fiduciary responsibility. Instead of taking our positions for granted, we are working hard to earn in our own right that inheritance.

As we jump from one life experience to the next, we may appear fickle. To our parents we may be tsuris. But I would contest that we are training for our philanthropic responsibilities. We are volunteering in Guatemala, teaching in inner-city America, and returning to graduate school ten years post-college. Some of us even desert our vocations as investment bankers and lawyers in search of avocations that are more fulfilling. Our search for meaning is not just because we as the progeny of wealthy families can afford the search. We search because we are eager to earn the right to be stewards of our inheritance, to redistribute it in an equitable way to people who did not win such a lottery at birth, and to honor the meaning with which our parents and grandparents worked to accumulate the wealth.

Our American experiences of abundance and prosperity contrast with our parents' and grandparents' struggles with poverty and anti-Semitism. Our grandparents - who earned the wealth and established these foundations - gave to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the Jewish National Fund, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the Zionist Organization of America. Our parents gave to the federation's annual campaign; our mothers joined the Women's Division, and the politically progressive among them fought for civil rights and protested against the Vietnam War. But my peers grew up with friends of every color, always had Roe and never knew the draft. The Wall for us was not just in Jerusalem but also what fell in Germany in 1989.

Our grandparents and parents were motivated to make money and to give it away by the circumstances of their personal histories. The organized Jewish community cannot assume, however, that my generation will affirm those same commitments. My peers have had an American upbringing infused with Judaism, not a Jewish upbringing situated in America. Why would we, then, support all the same institutions that our parents and grandparents once funded?

I personally feel a sense of obligation to the Jewish values and priorities that my parents and grandparents taught me, but I do not necessarily feel an obligation to all the institutions that were the hallmarks of their communities. While the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the federations, and synagogues once served all the needs of the Jewish community, these institutions no longer represent all the needs of an assimilated and diverse next generation.

For many of my peers, we look at the organized Jewish community and do not see reflections of ourselves. There are few women in leadership capacities, fewer young adults participating in meaningful ways, and priorities are defined by whomever has the greatest financial capacity to set the agenda. For many of my peers, secular nonprofit organizations offer more appropriate role models for leadership, demonstrate interest in our skills and not just our money, and recognize that they must listen to their stakeholders rather than dictate what their constituents need. Often, our vision of Jewish philanthropy includes funding projects that utilize Jewish values to serve a community broader than Jews only.

As the Goldseker Foundation and I both turn 26, we are each achieving new levels of maturity. I am holding onto the values I learned from my parents and the vision of philanthropy that my family bequeathed to me. But I am also exploring which values inspire my own sense of philanthropy and about which issues I feel passionate.

A few years ago I started working on a personal giving plan. I decided that if I were to earn the distinction of my name and of my privilege, I had to be responsible for allocating funds in a meaningful way. The lists of contributions that my father and I swap annually during tax season no longer look quite so similar. While I try to implement my parents' values of tzedakah, I have earned their trust and respect to make funding decisions based on my own interpretation of societal need. I look to find Jewish organizations that reflect the values of my generation. I ask who leads these organizations - on both the staff and board levels - and I ask myself whether or not the services they provide are relevant to either my Jewish or secular world. Although my contributions - both in terms of time and money - may not always appear Jewish, they are informed by the Jewish values that my family has always held.

My parents and I certainly debate how we invest and give away money, yet I have undergone a philanthropic training of my own to reach this point. While I continue to learn how to be a responsible inheritor and philanthropist, I have earned the right to be the "next generation."

Sharna Goldseker currently sits on several nonprofit boards: The Jewish Funders Network, where she is Co-Chair of the Younger Funders' Working Group and the 2002 National Conference; Joshua Venture, a fellowship program for Jewish social entrepreneurs; and The Park School of Baltimore, Maryland.

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