

by Mark Charendoff

“You can get anything you want at Alice’s Restaurant
You can get anything you want at Alice’s Restaurant
Walk right in it’s around the back
Just a half a mile from the railroad track
You can get anything you want at Alice’s Restaurant”

As a young boy, a *very* young boy mind you, growing up in the sixties, *Alice’s Restaurant* held a very special place in my heart. It was clever and ironic and captured the spirit of those days. You may remember the red VW micro bus, the shovels rakes and implements of destruction, and the twenty seven eight by ten color glossy pictures with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one explaining what each one was to be used as evidence against us. You may even remember the people on the bench marked Group W. So if you remember the song you know that at the end Arlo Guthrie says that if someone would show up at the draft board, walk into the psychiatric exam and say “Shrink, You can get anything you want, at Alice’s restaurant’. And walk out. You know, if one person, just one person does it they may think he’s really sick and they won’t take him. And if three people do it, three, can you imagine, three people walking in singin’ a bar of Alice’s Restaurant and walking out. They may think it’s an organization. And can you, can you imagine fifty people walking in singin’ a bar of Alice’s restaurant and walking out. And friends, they may think it’s a movement. And that’s what it is.”

We’ll get back to Alice shortly.

There is nothing I can say about the challenges facing us that you don’t already know. Family foundations have lost about 30% of their assets and smaller foundations are expected to curb grants by 60% according to surveys. There are optimists and pessimists among us but I’ve met few funders who believe that 2010 will be a better year for not for profits than 2009 will be.

The question is what are we prepared to do about it? Whether you voted for him or not, President Obama captured the imagination of much of the country by convincing Americans that while we are living in a troubled time its also a time of historic opportunity, one we will not likely see again in our lifetimes - to effect change - to take on the tough issues - to reshape the way our society works. Every smart investor knows that troubled times are pregnant with opportunities. No where is that truer than the not for profit world. As Jewish funders, what are we going to do with the opportunity that has been thrust upon us? Our children and grandchildren will judge us based on how we respond to this challenge.

It’s a whole new ballgame out there - of that we can be sure. Peter Drucker once said that “the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.” We need a new logic model that will guide our actions. We are focused on our own foundations, our endowments, the not for profits we are committed to. And we should be. But we must also focus on the big picture. What kind of Jewish community do we want to emerge out of this crisis?

Professor Jonathan Sarna spoke to our staff a few weeks ago and he asked, How are we going to plan for a community whose resources have been reduced by 30%? It's the right question and it's the wrong question. We need to answer it. We can't pursue a strategy of just firing those staff that are easiest to dismiss. It's unethical and unwise. Instead we need to make strategic and painful decisions about what services and agencies our community no longer needs and can no longer afford.

We've just finished a 20 year period of easy money. There was more than enough to go around and if you had a good personality and a wide enough network you could often count on support. Those days are over. I'm not sure they are ever coming back - if they are it will be a long while till we see them again. In an age of scarcer resources we need to decide what our priorities are as a community and get behind them, whether they are our personal cause or not.

One of the wonderful things about what my friend Larry Moses calls Private Jewish Philanthropy is its independence and autonomy. Creativity is fostered and celebrated. I'm afraid that the time has come when that independence must be tempered with collective responsibility. When that autonomy must negotiate with a commitment to collaboration.

So, with apologies to Professor Sarna, the question is not just how can we plan for a community that has 30% fewer resources but how we can envision a community that is 70% more effective, more mission driven. That's a more inspiring vision than to have Jewish historians label this "the era of Jewish communal downsizing". I'm less interested in whether our past behavior was right and proper. Churchill warned us many years ago, "***Of this I am quite sure, that if we open a quarrel between the past and present, we shall find we have lost the future.***" Do we have the courage to embrace a different future?

I'd like to propose one possible vision of that future for your consideration. That future would have 3 foci:

1. a commitment to *universal Jewish literacy*. There are too many Jews today that don't know the beauty and magic of their heritage, that don't know the rhythms of Jewish life and the Jewish calendar, that don't know the mysteries of Torah and Midrash, that have never wrested with Hillel or Maimonides or Yehudah Amichai. While we need not all be scholars, we can't expect to raise a generation of committed Jews when that generation does not understand the Judaism they are committed to. So, we should each agree to put one third of our funding to support those not for profits that have exhibited a commitment to fostering Jewish literacy with a special emphasis on those ideas that have the capacity to be taken to scale. Now, that does not mean the particular not for profit you support has to take the idea to scale, but if our aim is universal Jewish literacy we need models that are replicable or that can realistically accommodate large numbers. It does not matter to me whether your preferred laboratory is a day school classroom, a bunk at camp or a bus on a birthright trip. Jewish values can be taught in congregational schools, in alternative Minyanim or in Teen Philanthropy programs. You can target teens, children or adults. You can direct your efforts in Toronto, Toledo or Tel Aviv. But we need to agree that ignorance of Jewish text and tradition is not an option we can live with and has no place in a Jewish future we are trying to re-imagine.

2. A commitment to *Jewish peoplehood* - if Judaism is a set of ideas it's also, ultimately, a family, a nation, a people. We need to feel, and act upon, a special responsibility to other Jews around the world. We need to reinforce that sense of peoplehood in our younger generation and give them opportunities to meet and develop relationships with other Jews. And we need to ensure the safety and well being of Jews everywhere - simply because they are Jews. That may include fighting a rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe, it may be investing in the 3rd sector in Israel and it might mean addressing anti Israel bias on campuses here in the United States & Canada. Each Jew needs to feel they have a place in the Jewish world - and that that place comes with rights and responsibilities. One third of our funding needs to address these issues.

3. A dedication to *service* - while it would be unfair and inaccurate to describe the first two as a means to an end, it would also miss the point to build a community dedicated only to our own perpetuity. The prophets of old did not develop grand visions of Jewish continuity nor should we be satisfied with such uninspiring fare. The prophets dreamed of people dedicated to creating a world that was a little better than the one they were living in. Societies that were a little kinder to widows and orphans and the weakest among us. The mission of the Jew was to imagine what the world could look like if she were determined to leave her neighborhood a little bit better than how she found it. The mission of the Jewish people was to imagine what our communities could look like if a whole people were determined to make them just a little better and how improved the world could be if we could serve as an example of that dedication. What are we doing to address issues of inequality, poverty, racism, sexism, slavery and hunger? For Jews, young and old, to dedicate themselves to this would be ennobling. The messianic notion in Judaism was meant to give hope that the world could move in a certain direction. That tomorrow could be better than today. That we were not doomed to be powerless in a history that proceeded without paying us heed. But waiting for a messianic age can also have its peril and can lead us to abdicate our responsibilities. Let's invite our youth to dedicate themselves to making their neighborhoods, their communities, their world, just a little bit better. Let's dedicate ourselves as well. Let's put one third of our funding to this aim.

So, how do we get there? I think we need to change the way we work in 3 ways:

1. A new emphasis on *Operating Support* - at least 1/3 of our funding needs to go to general operating support. Foundations have stimulated a lot of new programming and experimentation by directing their funding to specific projects - many of them new or created to attract a funder's resources. We hoped that other funders could sustain those projects once our seed money was exhausted. My friends, the math no longer works. These are days that require us to consolidate efforts, not expand into new arenas. Not for profits need us to be good partners. You have every right to demand that they are pursuing their goals with efficiency. You have every right to demand evidence that they are effective. And they have every right to expect, that after demonstrating those two things, you will trust them to do the work. If they are to weather this storm, they will need your help with general operating support. If you want to serve on the board and help shape policy, that's terrific. If not, get out of the way and let them get on with the work.

2. Collaboration and cooperation - We need to cooperate in the way we do grantmaking by using common applications and making reports and program evaluations available to our peers. We need to be able to make hard decisions about what we will no longer fund and we need to be able

to give up on our own pet projects in order to dedicate our resources to those projects that multiple funders can get behind - projects that address the above core priority areas and have the ability to be taken to scale. This will involve sacrifice, but just looking at last years allocation and giving 70% of that across the board will not bring us closer to our goal. Collaboration will mean diluting our ideas with those of our fellow funders. It will mean compromise. It will mean making room for visions that are a little different than our own. It will also mean a better financed Jewish community with less replication, less waste and fewer bad ideas that have not met the scrutiny of our peers. It means saying no and saying yes in a very different way.

3. Reward good behavior - while we should not proscribe what not for profits *must* do, we *can* collectively work to help them to be more efficient in these days of scarce dollars. We need to develop mechanisms to help not for profits who are willing to share costs and resources. We need to provide expertise and capital to not for profits who want to investigate the possibility of merging all or part of their operations. We need to look for opportunities to create that rising tide that lifts all ships. If grantmaking will not be sufficient over the next several years we need to be smarter and more creative about the way we use money. This is not a new approach. The biblical imperative to give to the poor comes from the book of Devarim, where God says, "If there will be a poor person among you...do not harden your heart. Rather open your hand to him and *lend* him what he needs." The Bible, and later Maimonides, understood that cash gifts are not the only, or the best way, to be of help.

So, that's my vision. A community dedicated to Jewish literacy, peoplehood and service. Funders committed to increasing operating support, working collaboratively and rewarding good behavior.

And our role at JFN? We are here as the conveners and the enablers. We pledge to give you every support you need in order to succeed. Just as in those dark days after the Madoff scandal broke, we will be here to bring together a coalition of the willing, engage in thoughtful planning, and move the ball down the field. We can do it, but only if you let us know you are with us.

I'm not under the impression that the vision I have articulated is the only way to go. I welcome, no I urge debate. But "no" is not an option. "Business as usual with 30% less money" is not a plan.

I'm happy to explore alternatives but you'll need to put those alternatives on the table. You'll need to show up for the debate. Let's talk here at the conference, or afterwards by phone, in person or on line. But tell me what you are prepared to do, because this is a time that requires action. "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen", said Lincoln, "and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war." Our challenges are not the challenges that faced President Lincoln, thank God. But they are real, and they are in *your* hands to deal with.

While we can't overcome these challenges our selves, we can most certainly overcome them together.

I don't expect everyone to leave this room, rip up their funding plans for the next year and commit to the principles that I've outlined. That's ok. We don't need consensus and we certainly

don't need unanimity. As Arlo Guthrie would say, if I walk away alone, well, they may think I'm crazy. But if there are three of us committed to this, can you imagine, three of us committed to a common vision? They may think it's an organization. And can you imagine fifty funders, fifty people, committed to a common vision for the Jewish people and dedicated to putting their time and treasure behind it - well friends, they may think it's a movement.

Thank you.

Mark Charendoff is President of the Jewish Funders Network. This was his conference presentation at the just concluded annual event.