

Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy
"Embracing Abundance" Conference
November 23, 2008

Remarks by Michael Steinhardt

Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me to speak. I've been told that the theme for this conference, "Embracing Abundance," was chosen prior to what we might generously call a "downturn" on Wall Street. Had the conference been planned more recently, a more appropriate theme might have been "Embracing An End to Abundance." Actually, despite the current downturn, it's a fitting program title. The concept of abundance – material, cultural and spiritual – is relevant to all of us seeking to revitalize Jewish life in North America.

In this country, like no other place, Jews have been freed from the restrictions that once hindered us elsewhere. As a result, the American Jewish community is probably the richest of any community in our history. But the price of material abundance has been steep. Although the reasons for the decline in our spiritual life are complex – and include an unwillingness of many within Judaism's leadership to adapt to changing times – it's clear that as our material abundance has gone up, our ties to Judaism have gone down.

Judaism is not alone in this regard. In America, all religions, and indeed all immigrant cultures, have been subsumed by the dominant culture of commerce. But I would argue that Judaism is not just any culture, and the costs for us are especially acute: Our civilization – a civilization of spiritual and cultural abundance born in exile and sustained through community cohesion for two thousand years – is at risk of dwindling to the point of near-irrelevance. Ultimately, it's fair to ask whether material abundance has helped or harmed our spiritual lives.

When I visit with Birthright Israel participants, my excitement over seeing the spark of Jewish joy in their eyes is tempered, somewhat, when I see how poor their Jewish educations have been. Indeed, one could argue that a crucial component in Birthright's success was the culture of shoddy Jewish education in North America. Compared to what they knew, or rather didn't know or feel, perhaps it wasn't a great miracle to create a Jewish spark.

On the other hand, Birthright offers some important lessons on the most powerful methods of Jewish education. Birthright Israel is experiential: participants take part in the tactile history and the rich land of the Jewish people. Birthright Israel is social: It brings together Jews in the Diaspora for a shared experience, and it mandates shared experiences between Diaspora Jews and Israelis in the form of *mifgashim*. Finally, Birthright Israel is spiritual. I don't mean spiritual in terms of organized prayer, although some trips do include this. By "spiritual" I mean that Birthright Israel connects young Jews, in many cases for the first time, to an experience of Judaism that is not connected to material life. I am thinking, for instance, of participants visiting the graves of twenty year olds and realizing that if not for a historical accident, those kids who died protecting

their country might have been them. They see the heroism and the sacrifice, they see lives lived for a purpose greater than themselves – and it sparks something in them. They realize that Judaism is special in a way that is almost impossible to articulate. They go to Masada, and they are connected in intangible ways to their ancestors 2,000 years ago who fought to keep their people alive. Many of these participants were living lives of material abundance in the Diaspora, and they never had occasion to experience the spiritual abundance of their own tradition. How can we replicate such experiences in other Jewish educational institutions so that Judaism is experienced as a living and breathing culture with the capacity to inspire?

Given the theme of this conference, there is another aspect of Birthright Israel trips that bears mentioning: The trips are free. This is the most revolutionary aspect of Birthright Israel, and it's an aspect that made the program controversial from the start. "Diaspora Jews are living in abundance," the critics cried. "Why should the community pay for them to go on a trip?" But it was the very gift of the Birthright experience that helped dislodge participants from their impressions of Judaism as lifeless and cold, as a religion that asked for donations but gave little in return. Naturally, it made no sense to give something for free to people, many of whom could afford to pay for the experience themselves. But it was this very *senselessness* that led to a spiritual breakthrough: participants were not only grateful, but they recognized that there must be something truly precious about Judaism if the community valued its young members so much that it would carry them across the world to experience their homeland. We should keep in mind that all great breakthroughs in Jewish history, including Herzl's vision of a Jewish state, were considered senseless when they first appeared.

The Harold Grinspoon Foundation's PJ Library also understands the value and potential of a free gift. Many new parents associate Judaism mostly with high costs and obligations. The PJ Library offers another route, thus instilling vital bonds at a critical stage in a child's – and a family's – development. By providing age-appropriate Jewish books to families with young children, the program reaches new parents at a crucial period when they are seeking ties to community and connections to their culture.

Jewish camping scholarships are another example of a gift the community gives to its families. We should approach camperships not only as a financial aid issue but as the great opportunity they represent. By offering opportunities for Jewish immersion experiences, we create a vigor in the next generation that carries the potential to instill lifelong devotion to Jewish joy and experience. Every one of these scholarships lights a spark in a Jewish soul that might otherwise have no interest in Jewish life.

Through so many endeavors, including the PJ Library and in his devotion to Jewish camping, Harold Grinspoon is one of the true *mensches* of our time. Maybe I didn't know Harold when he may have been a tough, competitive businessman, as I have been and perhaps continue to be. I've only known him for the past several years, but knowing him as I do now, there is no finer example of a human being than Harold Grinspoon. This is important, because Jewish philanthropy in its serious form is sadly becoming an anomaly. There are countless Jews involved in secular philanthropy, where they support

hospitals, museums and universities. But how many Jews are involved in a serious way in Jewish philanthropy? We can count maybe three or four or five names, the so-called “Mega Funders,” involved in major Jewish programs. It’s not enough. We have reached the point in America where Jews give the same percentage of their income philanthropically as does the average American. I hope we will see the emergence of a new generation of non-Orthodox philanthropists, a younger generation, committed to Jewish causes. But as yet, there is little reason to be confident. I wish I knew how to change the tide. But at least, for now, we have Harold and his generosity, his devotion and his vision. In many ways, Harold’s work and mine are parallel. Our paths often intersect: Harold is involved in Birthright and PEJE, and I contribute to his camping efforts and hope to contribute to PJ Library as well. Unlike me – a grumpy and miserable pessimist – Harold has a radiant spirit filled with good will, hope and humor. I cherish our philanthropic partnerships, and I truly value Harold Grinspoon as a colleague and as a friend.

But somehow, with all of our mutual efforts, I don’t think that we have *yet* hit a key element which I have come to consider the most important issue in contemporary Jewish philanthropy for the non-Orthodox: and that is one which will successfully answer the question, Why should we be Jewish in the 21st century? What is special about being Jewish? Why does it matter if we live Jewish lives, or if Judaism itself continues? This is a question that vexes me. I have not yet answered this question and I constantly revisit it. Unless or until we can do so, for ourselves and especially for the next generation, I think our efforts will remain incomplete.

I have mentioned a few aspects of Jewish philanthropy that accentuate the spiritual over the material. It is time to find other ways of tapping into and revitalizing the spiritual core of our people, and to answer the question of Why be Jewish in the 21st Century. It won’t be easy to do this in a material culture that often has little patience for expressions of spirituality. But now that we have attained a degree of security and prosperity, it’s a good time to focus on Judaism’s inner spirit. And who knows – perhaps a period of financial upheaval provides the best opportunity for such a project. People recognize that material life is fleeting; at a time of great transition, people are more likely to search for deeper meaning in life. They start to look within – within their homes, communities, and even their religion. In this crisis lies an opportunity. One thing is certain: we have to devise an entirely new approach to Jewish education if it is to have any meaning in the future lives of Jews. I welcome all of you to join me in finding new ways of helping young Jews embrace the spiritual, cultural and intellectual abundance of Jewish life.

Thank you.