MICHAEL STEINHARDT

by DANIEL TREIMAN

Michael Steinhardt, the mega-donor who spearheaded the revolutionary Birthright Israel program and a host of other ambitious projects aimed at revitalizing American Jewry, sits erect behind a giant, curving desk in his midtown Manhattan office. To his left, a computer screen provides up-to-date financial information, a reminder of his days as a pioneering hedge fund operator. He doesn't waste time getting down to business.

"Are you Jewish?" Steinhardt asks within little more than a minute of meeting a visitor. Receiving an affirmative reply, Steinhardt's questions come in quick succession: "How old are you?" "I've got some Jewish girl coming up in a while, who's thirty-one, lives in Los Angeles. Are you single?" "Are you looking for the woman of your dreams?" "Okay, we'll see if we can marry you off to this woman."

It is vintage Steinhardt. His philanthropy is focused on grand

projects to get young Jews to connect to and engage with their Jewish identities, and Steinhardt, ever the hands-on donor, has taken a very personal interest in getting young Jews to connect with, get engaged to – and, ideally, marry – one another. "Take phone numbers. Flirt, meet, breed, do whatever is necessary," he implored at a 2004 conference for young Jewish professionals.

"Two people – he'll run around introducing them, and they really have nothing in common, but he's all ready to fix them up," says Lynn Schusterman, a Tulsa-based philanthropist who works closely with Steinhardt on Birthright and other projects and considers him a close friend. As an added matrimonial incentive, Steinhardt occasionally offers the use of his house in Anguilla as a honeymoon spot for couples who meet on Birthright.

The philanthropist may play matchmaker with puckish enthusiasm, but there is also an underlying urgency to his Jewish-cupid routine. "It's very difficult to overcome the fact that the next generation of Jews, by almost every measure, has less Jewish intensity, less Jewish education, less Jewish commitment – and there are less Jews!" he laments. His philanthropy, accordingly, has ambitious aims: It's a bid to save the nation's Jews – or at least the ninety percent who aren't Orthodox – from assimilating amid the unprecedented opportunities of contemporary America.

Steinhardt is certainly one of the more colorful figures on the Jewish communal landscape. Bald, with a fringe of white hair, a bushy moustache, wire-rim glasses, a ruddy complexion, and a belly that testifies to his not-entirely-healthy appetite for fine foods, he bears a passing resemblance to the actor Wilford Brimley. An avowed atheist with a nevertheless active interest in religion, his broadsides against the Jewish establishment and jeremiads about American Jewry's future are legendary.

He also happens to be one of the Jewish world's most important figures. Steinhardt arguably has done as much as any one person to refocus the Jewish communal agenda around the issue of continuity. In addition to Birthright Israel – his best-known project, which, since 1999, has sent tens of thousands of young Diaspora

Jews on all-expenses-paid trips to Israel – Steinhardt is behind a slew of hugely influential initiatives.

Two years prior to Birthright Israel, he launched the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, an organization that has helped spur the rapid expansion of Jewish day schools nationwide. In 1999, he opened Makor, a popular Manhattan venue for music, film and learning where Jews in their twenties and thirties can meet, mingle, and maybe even find a mate. Through Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, he initiated the Steinhardt Jewish Campus Service Corps, which has put hundreds of recent college graduates to work doing campus outreach and developing Jewish programming for their peers.

"The common thread in my philanthropy is the effort to create a renaissance in the next generations of non-Orthodox Diaspora Jews," Steinhardt says. "The objective is to create a Judaism that will be far more appealing and accommodating and welcoming and exciting than the Judaism that exists for the non-Orthodox cohort in North America today."

All told, Steinhardt has given some $120 million to Jewish causes through his foundation, the Jewish Life Network, since its launch in 1994. But his contribution can't be measured in dollars alone. "There are a lot of people who are spending a lot more money than Michael on Jewish philanthropic causes," says Mark Charendoff, president of the Jewish Funders Network, "but they're having nowhere near his impact."

Back in his Wall Street days, Steinhardt was renowned for his temper. In his 2001 autobiography, *No Bull: My Life In and Out of Markets*, he readily admitted that his nine-to-five personality was not entirely pleasant: "I would be scowling and fuming, shouting over the intercom, storming in and out of the trading room."

In contrast, Steinhardt remains calm as he discusses his new professional focus, the Jewish world. But while he speaks softly, what he says is withering: Contemporary Jewish life is "fraught with weakness, fraught, frankly, with failure." Non-Orthodox religious movements in America, such as Conservative and Reform Judaism, "are

finished, but they're going to take a long time to die." Jewish leaders "don't exist anymore."

Does Steinhardt consider himself a Jewish leader? "I don't know," Steinhardt sighs. "I don't aspire to be a Jewish leader if being a Jewish leader is relating to the broad constituency of Jews and persuading them that I should be their leader," he explains. "If a Jewish leader means having a vision and taking steps that are meaningfully different and perhaps meaningfully ahead of that which exists in the community, of taking real chances of failing, perhaps, at some of them, but of moving the community forward, whether it be recognized or not, if that's the definition, I think I'm a Jewish leader, and I'm proud of that."

If Steinhardt is a Jewish leader, it is because he has chosen to be one. Unlike his fellow mega-donors and frequent philanthropic partners, Charles and Edgar Bronfman, heirs to the Seagram liquor fortune, Steinhardt is no scion of Jewish nobility. Nothing about his life's path was preordained.

Born in 1940, Steinhardt grew up in Bensonhurst, a working-class neighborhood of Jews and Italians in southern Brooklyn. His parents' brief marriage ended in divorce before his first birthday. He was raised by his mother, a bookkeeper whom Steinhardt credits with providing him with a happy childhood. Steinhardt's father, a tough-guy jeweler and chronic gambler who was friendly with various high-profile underworld figures, flitted in and out of his son's life.

Though his mother was not particularly observant, Steinhardt grew up in a kosher home, and his family celebrated the major Jewish holidays. He attended Hebrew school at an Orthodox synagogue, which he remembers as joyless and largely irrelevant to modern American life. While he had more positive experiences attending a small, homey basement shul, by his teens he drifted toward atheism, an intellectual trajectory that was reinforced by his secular education. This is not to say that he became disconnected from the Jewish experience. Seeing tattooed and disfigured Holocaust survivors walking the streets of his youth, Steinhardt says, gave him an

"early sense…of the Jewish experience in the twentieth century and how terrible it was." And then, he adds, there was "the war related to the birth of the State of Israel and how exciting that was."

"I remember when we were first married, and it was the Six-Day War, he wanted to just pack up and enlist," recounts Steinhardt's wife, Judy, with whom he has three grown children and seven grandchildren. "I think that if he hadn't had a business already established, because those were the first years of his hedge fund, that he probably would have done that if he had been free. And so where did that come from? It must have come from growing up in Brooklyn surrounded by lower-middle-class Jews."

But even as a youth, Steinhardt also gazed outward, beyond Bensonhurst and beyond his boyhood Jewish milieu – in particular, across the East River toward Wall Street. Steinhardt had been fascinated with the stock market ever since his father gave him some shares as a bar mitzvah gift. Soon the Brooklyn teen was hanging out at brokerage houses after school. Upon graduating from the University of Pennsylvania at the age of twenty – a school he was able to attend thanks to his father's prodding and funding – Steinhardt returned to New York and landed an entry-level job with a mutual fund. Six years later, he started his own hedge fund with a pair of young partners.

Steinhardt was an aggressive trader, buying, selling, betting on the markets, often changing course dramatically, sometimes within the space of a few hours. He had tremendous confidence in his instincts, stressed the importance of good research and demanded results. His brash style paid off. Year after year, his fund beat the markets – usually by a wide margin. A dollar invested with Steinhardt in 1967 would have been worth $481 twenty-eight years later. One of his early clients noted that an initial investment with Steinhardt of $500,000 grew to more than $100 million.

But Steinhardt's personal investment in his work took a toll. Although he consistently enriched his clients, fluctuations in his fund's fortunes had the power to shake his very sense of self-worth. In 1994, Steinhardt overextended himself, investing heavily in exotic

markets with which he wasn't very familiar. Amid a global bond sell-off, the value of Steinhardt's fund plummeted, losing nearly a third of its value. He sank into despair.

Steinhardt managed to recoup his fund's losses the following year, but by then he had had enough. He decided to kick his trading addiction. In 1995, he closed his firm.

Steinhardt certainly had no shortage of enthusiasms to take the place of work: horticulture (he has created extensive orchards and gardens on his Westchester estate), zoology (he maintains a private menagerie stocked with zebras, kangaroos and other exotic creatures), art (he is an avid collector of Judaica and ancient art), media (he once owned a fifty percent stake in the English-language *Forward* newspaper, was for a time a major investor in the neo-liberal *New Republic*, and was a key backer of the now defunct, neo-conservative *New York Sun*), Hollywood (he has helped finance several motion pictures, including *The Addams Family* and *Hotel Terminus*, an Academy Award-winning documentary about Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie), and politics (he is a former chairman of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council and talked up the presidential prospects of fellow tycoon, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg).

Jewish philanthropy, though, is his new vocation, and he has brought to it the habits of his old one. "He's not the committee, process-it-to-death type. He's very much, 'Let's get this done.' He sees things quickly; he jumps, in a brilliant way. He'll see things whole in the first thirty seconds, and he's ready to start carrying it out," says Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, the renowned and unorthodox Orthodox theologian who headed Steinhardt's foundation from 1995–2007. "I often joke, it's like his investing style: he would concentrate, make quick bets. He was always looking for the out-of-the-box advantage. He was ready to make a quick decision. He was ready to make a quick reverse decision."

The concluding chapter of Steinhardt's autobiography is titled "Two Rivers," a reference to the two currents he describes as having powerfully shaped his life and values: "the age-old river of Judaism, the people and the tradition, and the river of secularized

America." While Steinhardt navigated these two rivers successfully, this has proven more difficult, he noted, for many younger Jews, as the currents of contemporary American life have pulled them far from their Jewish moorings.

Steinhardt devoted much of the chapter to his experience launching Birthright Israel, the program that set out to make a free, ten-day trip to Israel the "birthright" of every young Diaspora Jew, from the age of eighteen to twenty-six. Birthright sent its first participants, six thousand of them, to Israel in December 1999. The trip represented the fruition of two years of dogged work by Steinhardt and Birthright co-founder Charles Bronfman to mobilize the Jewish world behind this revolutionary and unprecedented undertaking, which, in its first five years alone, involved a commitment of $210 million from individual philanthropists, the Israeli government and local Jewish communities.

At the conclusion of that historic first trip, thousands of Birthright participants assembled in a Jerusalem auditorium for a pep rally of sorts. Steinhardt delivered a speech not-so-loosely based upon Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: "We here must firmly resolve that all those who lived and died for Jewry shall not have lived and died in vain. We must promise that this people, in partnership with the living and the dead, with God and humanity, shall have a new birth of freedom. We must live our lives as witnesses, as teachers, as builders, so the Torah of the Jewish people, the teaching by the Jewish people, the concern for the Jewish people, shall flourish again on this earth."

He received a standing ovation, after which participants came up to Steinhardt to thank him. Steinhardt recounted how one young man, tears streaming down his face, approached him and said, "I feel a connection to the Jews who have come before me that I didn't even know existed."

"I will take the image of that young man's face, streaked with tears, with me for the rest of my life," Steinhardt wrote to close his book. "I believe those tears represented the strong reunion of the two rivers of my life: a reinvigorated American Judaism."

In 2006, Birthright sent its 100,000th participant to Israel. Critics, who initially saw the program as a waste of money or questioned its worth, now call it one of the Jewish community's great success stories.

Yet the Steinhardt of today sounds far less optimistic than the one who saw in that young man's tears American Jewry's rebirth. It's not that Steinhardt doesn't think Birthright has been a success – indeed, he calls it "the shining light in an otherwise miserable Jewish institutional world." Rather, sparking a Jewish renaissance has proven even more difficult than he – no Pollyanna to begin with – had imagined.

"When I started, I was more optimistic about bringing the unaffiliated world closer to the affiliated world, and that that would solve our problem," he says. Since then, he confesses, he has "become disaffected with that view." Now he believes that American Jewry's problems go much deeper, that existing expressions of Jewish religion and community are out of date and have lost their ability to speak to young Jews.

It is a situation that calls for more radical remedies than simply trying to get more Jews enrolling in day schools or participating in Hillel activities, he believes. "I think what we need is a new Jewish spirituality that will be far more compelling than anything that exists today," he says. "And I call that 'common Judaism.'"

Steinhardt's "common Judaism" remains a work in progress. The term is, as much as anything, a rebuke of what he sees as the stale and stultifying denominationalism that defines American Jewish life. As a small example of the need for a new direction, Steinhardt notes that on an average Friday night only two to five percent of non-Orthodox Jewish college students show up at their campus Hillel. To remedy this, he has convened meetings of rabbis, Jewish campus professionals and musicians "with the idea of creating a new Sabbath service that will be resonant, exciting, that will have music and dance, that will be fulfilling in a way that present services are not fulfilling."

In his effort to build a better campus Sabbath service, there

are echoes of Steinhardt's own search for Jewish contexts that he finds appealing. Steinhardt has tried a number of different synagogues, but he has yet to find the perfect fit. He raves about the Upper West Side's nondenominational Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, famed for its instrumental music and dancing, calling its Friday-night service "magical" – "It really did something for me, like nothing else!" – but he then goes on to complain that it's "a mile wide and an inch deep," citing the poor quality of the rabbis' sermons. For an atheist, Steinhardt is quite the seeker.

"I work very hard on thinking about what it is that makes me care so much about my Judaism," he says. "Most people who care a lot about their Judaism at least ostensibly or overtly are believers in God, and I'm not. But I feel very comfortable now, having been very uncomfortable for much of my Jewish life in being an atheist."

He attributes this newfound comfort to an intellectual epiphany about the nature of Jewish identity. "It's not our being a chosen people, it's not social Darwinism, it's not DNA," he says. "It's only because of our values, which have endured for three or four or five thousand years and have evolved to some degree during that period, and which make us a special people."

But Steinhardt, no fan of vague, feel-good rhetoric, says that these values need to be "carefully and thoughtfully sifted out and articulated." Indeed, he has identified precisely four Jewish values, which he eagerly and authoritatively lists: "Education – Jews put more time, energy, money into education than any other people." "*Tzedakah* – We feel a responsibility for helping those in need." "Meritocracy – Jews only do well in those societies that are meritocratic." "Fourth Jewish value – and I'm having a hard time articulating this clearly – is being the outsider. Jews have been the outsider in so many different places. And we function very, very well as an outsider and maybe not so well as an insider."

But couldn't Jews hold onto these values while leaving Jewish identity itself by the wayside? "Well, Jewish identity is an issue: Can you have Jewish values without Jewish identity? Maybe you can," he says, sounding resigned to a possibility that he does not entirely like.

"I've said that the best of American values and Jewish values have really begun to merge. Don't you sense that? Social net, great emphasis on education…" He trails off.

Steinhardt is fond of boasting of what he sees as his keen grasp of the contemporary American Jewish situation. Yet when asked why being Jewish means so much to him, he confesses: "I'm not sure I've ever totally grasped it." But these two things are not necessarily inconsistent.

"Michael has increasingly felt that he's the only one who was sort of feeling the full intensity of the people who are drifting away," Greenberg says. If Steinhardt understands them, perhaps it is because he in some ways identifies with them.

Modern-day America has given Jews unprecedented opportunities. But it also has shaken old certainties and given us in their place new questions: How does our ancient faith fit into our modern American lives? Can we reconcile Judaism and disbelief? What is the right balance between spirituality and reason? What is it that makes the Jewish people so special, and so worth preserving? At a most basic level, what does it mean to be Jewish?

Steinhardt viscerally grasps the importance of these questions, because he has wrestled with them himself his entire life. And for the past dozen years, he has been wrestling with them for the rest of us as well. "I feel I understand the contemporary Jewish world as well and perhaps better than any other lay person alive," Steinhardt says. "I know that's a presumptuous statement, but I believe that."