

Op-Ed: Don't cut support to innovative nonprofits

November 13, 2008

LOS ANGELES (JTA)—From New York to Los Angeles to San Francisco, the impact of the global financial crisis feels like an eerie parallel to the days after 9/11. No one knows whether the acute phase is over or whether there will be further shocks. For some little has changed; for others life will never be the same. Everyone knows someone who has been directly affected.

Our major institutions are struggling to adjust, react, prepare but most of all to respond to those most harmed. News outlets strive to explain and advise; houses of worship have added services; social service agencies brace for increased demand even as they anticipate reduced charitable and government support. Each organization is focused on what it can do to minimize and mitigate the effects of the crisis on our city, our country and our world.

Amid this outpouring of effort, we have been dismayed by intimations, in the Jewish media and elsewhere, that smaller, newer nonprofit organizations will and perhaps ought to lose funding support in order to allocate more to immediate concerns: a warm meal, a place to stay, income stabilization. While we agree that protecting the most fragile is key, we disagree with this last-hired, first-fired funding mentality.

The argument against the new nonprofits is both simple and disingenuous. The simple argument is that they are risky investments, ephemeral champions of the latest passing fads. The disingenuous argument is that these innovators are self-indulgent narcissists, insubstantial and erosive of the communal fabric. These arguments are not only wrong, they are counter-productive.

Far from risky ventures, new start-ups like Darkhei Noam, Hadar, Jewish Milestones, IKAR and the Progressive Jewish Alliance actually are fulfilling the promise of engaging a new generation of Jews in their own idiom and on their own terms. It is this generation's connection to Judaism that ultimately will determine the future of Jewish life and of its larger institutions. They build innovative new minyanim and educate young leaders who in turn will strengthen their communities. They develop, test and promote new models of community involvement that will be the foundation for generations to come.

From Hazon to Jewish Mosaic to Matan to Sharsheret, they use new tools and methods to promote environmental responsibility, ensure our community welcomes Jews of all backgrounds, widen the reach of special education and put resources into the hands of those afflicted with deadly diseases—all missions at heightened risk in the period of social and economic turmoil we are entering.

While the big boys debate scalpels and hatchets, these new start-ups quietly perform laparoscopies without cutting open the patient. Bootstrapped together with all the advantages of today's cost-saving technologies that many established Jewish organizations have yet to discover, these start-ups are models of industry and investment that will help America emerge from recession. They can feed for a year on what their larger brethren consume in an hour. They are lean, staffed more austere than their older, bigger peers, and subsist by sweat equity donated by those for whom they mean a great deal.

Putting the attention on new start-ups distracts us from asking the tough questions of our most venerable institutions, many of which have lost sight of their original missions in the struggle for institutional survival.

But these start-ups are also fragile, without reserves to fall back on, and do not yet possess long-term funding relationships to be called upon in times of crisis. They lack the confidence and reputation—and the sheer seniority—

conferred on larger nonprofits by decades of service. Questioning the viability, merit or necessity of nascent nonprofit organizations risks becoming self-fulfilling. Moreover, it's unfair to do so without also challenging the unquestioned assumptions governing larger nonprofits.

New ventures are essential to our recovery and are ideal places for funders to invest to stabilize the community. Individual or institutional funders seeking ways to make fewer dollars go further should take a closer look at the group of emerging nonprofit organizations ready to rise to the occasion if given a chance. These new groups do far more than put on hip-hop concerts and publish risqué magazines. From a communal investment perspective, these organizations provide tremendous value.

Just as after 9/11, the priority is on rebuilding—not only our portfolios but also our souls. We must succor those re-examining their values and goals, and support those for whom economic distress leads to personal distress. Financial crisis is often the mother of religious crisis, during which the quest for meaning becomes not only more potent but more critical. It is precisely in trying times that we must focus on efforts which can best distill and transmit the essence of Jewish values in today's complex and decentralized world.

The age of an organization doesn't correlate to the significance of its mission. In 1798, when our new nation faced a grave economic and political threat from France, John Adams summoned leaders of each of the nation's diverse faiths to organize "a day of solemn humiliation, fasting and prayer," during which citizens were asked to pray "that our country may be protected from all the dangers which threaten it." The message was clear—strengthening committed communities strengthens our nation.

The new groups formed by our most gifted social entrepreneurs are just such committed communities—some religious and others not—and now is the hour when they can do their finest work.

(Shawn Landres is the CEO of Jumpstart, a thinkubator for sustainable Jewish innovation in Los Angeles. Toby E. Rubin is the founder/CEO of UpStart Bay Area, igniting Jewish ideas and supporting Jewish start-ups in the San Francisco Bay Area. Martin Kaminer is the New York-based chair of the board of Bikkurim: An Incubator for New Jewish Ideas.)