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Aaron Bisman And Rochelle Shoretz
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In late 2002, when our Joshua Venture Group (JVG) cohort was announced, the term “Jewish social entrepreneur” did not yet roll easily off the tongue. There was no “innovation ecosystem” to speak of, few incubators interested in helping us grow our ventures, and little confidence that Jewish life could or should blossom outside of existing institutional frameworks. JVG was founded to help emerging leaders change the Jewish world with their ideas. This was true of its first two cohorts, supported between 2000-2005, and it is true now, as its newly named 2010 fellows prepare to begin their fellowship term.

The headline of The Jewish Week article (“Joshua Venture Betting On Known Quantities” April 16) may suggest to some that JVG is playing it safe with its new cohort of fellows, some of whom have received prior funding or other support for their initiatives from incubators or Jewish philanthropies. The implication is that the fellowship is not identifying “innovation” merely because it has selected ventures that have already been otherwise supported or celebrated.

As leaders of independent, young (none of our organizations is more than 12 years old), and “innovative” organizations, we see a game of irrelevant semantics afoot. Innovation is not a synonym for “new” or “young” or “sexy.” Innovation is the thrust of a new idea into the landscape that enables change. There is no value in “Jewish innovation” itself, but rather in what innovation enables us to do — create meaning and relevance in the world and to meet the otherwise unmet needs of Jews in our communities. When we allow our focus to shift from innovation as tool to innovation as endpoint, we lose the true value of innovation altogether.

Innovation is not negated when more than one funder nourishes any given project. Wide financial support is actually a project’s only hope for long-term impact and success. Inherently, there should be overlap in support between JVG, other Jewish incubators and “venture philanthropy” initiatives. The combined support of JVG, Bikkurim, Natan, Slingshot and the Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund enabled JDub, for example, to grow to become a \$1.2 million dollar not-for-profit organization, influencing hundreds of thousands of young Jews each year through Jewish culture, content and community. Initial support from JVG, Bikkurim, Solelim and the Jewish Women’s Foundation of New York, as another example, helped provide the cushion that Sharsheret needed to launch

ten national programs supporting and educating thousands of Jewish women and families facing breast cancer with a current budget of nearly \$1 million.



Spearheading a new Jewish initiative is incredibly difficult at any time, and even more so in the current economic and political climate. The fact that we may already be familiar with the work of some of the newly named JVG fellows should be celebrated, not criticized. Even at such early stages of their organizational careers, and despite the challenging time during which these projects were launched, these emerging leaders have achieved initial programmatic success and learned to harness the power of media and their social networks.

JVG is a seed funder and it is imperative that we recognize that the “start-up” phase of an organization can be long. Typically, an organization is understood to have graduated from start-up status when it has reached a certain threshold of age (at least 5 years old), budget (\$1 million or more), structure (board of directors, strategic plan, 10 or more employees in place), measured impact and scale of mission. At the start of our cohort in early 2003, five of eight fellows were at the helm of projects more than two years old with combined budgets of close to \$1 million. Only three of us were awarded JVG fellowships with just the spark of an idea. Throughout our fellowship, which ran through early 2005, our cohort raised hundreds of thousands of dollars, brought new Jewish ideas to life, and made significant impact in the lives of our target constituents. There was never any doubt that we started — and finished — as a cohort of start-ups, only now, in 2010, truly blossoming into the “second stage” of our organizational growth.

It is irrelevant whether JVG is the first to “discover” a project or whether it supports leaders who have more than an idea. To imply that any of the newly selected ventures are beyond the start-up phase — or that JVG is anything but a start-up funder of innovation — is an incongruous co-opting of organizational semantics that could have serious ramifications on the availability of funding and support for young organizations that continue to need it beyond years one and two.

Playing it safe is a subjective concept when considering philanthropic investments in new ventures. We hope the Jewish community will consider more such investments “safe” as it begins to appreciate the ways in which many of these ventures are shaping the Jewish landscape. Until then, and until we recognize that new ideas often need more than a year or two of “start-up” funding, those of us in the awkwardly named “innovation ecosystem” will continue to find our sustainability questioned.

Aaron Bisman is president and CEO of JDub Records. Rochelle Shoretz is founder and executive director of Sharsheret. This piece is written with support from Yavilah McCoy (Ayecha Jewish Diversity Resources), Daron Joffe (Farmer D Organics), Idit Klein (Keshet), Mitch Braff (Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation), Amichai Lau-Lavie (Storahtelling).