

# Inside Philanthropy

## Here Are the Top 13 Philanthropists Who Support the Jewish Community

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BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL HAS BEEN THE TOP RECIPIENT OF FUNDS FROM LEADING JEWISH DONORS, MOST NOTABLY SHELDON AND MIRIAM ADELSON.

Founded in 1819, the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society in Philadelphia is considered the oldest Jewish charitable organization in continuous existence in America. Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, meanwhile, was established as Jews' Hospital in the 1850s on West 28th Street, a then-rural part of town. Through the years, Jewish charity has not only touched the Jewish community, but also been felt in substantial ways throughout U.S. society.

“The American Jewish community’s network of charity organizations is a font of Jewish power, a source of communal pride and a huge mystery,” wrote *Forward* a few years ago, when it released a [study](#) that showed that the assets of these groups totaled around \$26 billion. Synagogues were exempt from that analysis, but the study considered the many moving parts of the Jewish giving apparatus, including federations, schools, community organizations and Israel aid groups.

Jews have long given on American soil, but the tradition of philanthropy in the Jewish community has a much longer history. Central to this tradition is the concept of “tzedakah,” a mainstay of Jewish life. It means charitable giving, but much more: Tzedakah is an obligation held by each member of the community. Indeed, a prevailing Jewish custom, based on traditional Jewish law, calls for giving 10 percent of one’s income to tzedakah, and even those who receive financial assistance are required to give back.

Inside Philanthropy has been examining the giving of leading individual donors in this space through our [Jewish Funding Guide](#) and [J Give](#) news vertical. Some of these donors, who’ve amassed a great deal of wealth on Wall Street, in tech, entertainment and other sectors, give substantially to other causes outside of the Jewish community. We’ve also examined some of the donors behind prominent Jewish organizations like Birthright Israel, which helps send Jewish youth to Israel, and Friends of Israel Defense Forces, which supports Israel's armed forces.

While most philanthropy is driven by personal passions, Jewish donors to Jewish causes tend to have especially deep commitments rooted in religious, cultural and political values that span generations—or even millennia. Bay Area giver [Tad Taube](#), for example, is dedicated to advancing Reform Judaism in Israel and beyond. Part of his giving involves supporting institutions of higher learning. Some of Taube’s other work, though, involves reviving Jewish life in his native Poland, from which he was forced to flee decades ago. Such a personal case is a reminder that earlier dark days are still very much on the minds of some donors—and, sadly, are more front of mind in recent years amid an uptick in antisemitic violence, as we recently [reported](#).

Other Jewish donors focus on Holocaust remembrance, Jewish day schools and youth groups, or human services and healthcare organizations. Then there’s a litany of American-based funders that direct money to support Israel and deepen its ties with the U.S. Jewish community.

Nailing down the exact scope of giving for Jewish causes and institutions isn't easy. For one thing, it can be hard to track the beneficiaries of donations conveyed by pass-through Jewish funding intermediaries, with some of that money going to non-Jewish causes. Also, one of the best data sources on philanthropic giving, The Foundation Center, doesn't cover all giving in this space or include certain recent information. Still, its figures for recent tax years show an impressive level of giving, with \$600 to \$700 million flowing annually from foundations to Jewish causes.

That these numbers don't tell the full or most up-to-date story is made clear by the latest figures from the [Jewish Communal Fund](#), which describes itself as "the leading collective of Jewish funders in the country." In fiscal year 2019, this organization alone recommended grants totaling \$456 million to over 9,500 nonprofits. Nearly \$200 million of those disbursements went to Jewish organizations.

While a great many donors support the Jewish community, a handful of leading philanthropists stand out for their outsized giving in this area—generosity that we spotlight and explore in more detail in this article.

According to Foundation Center data, the top 13 Jewish donors gave away at least \$1.3 billion to Jewish causes between 2003 and 2018 through their associated foundations. The top five recipients of these funds received \$458 million in total: Birthright Israel Foundation, Birthright Israel North America, Hadassah: the Women's Zionist Organization of America, Shalem Foundation and the Israeli American Council.

To be clear, some individual donors give to Jewish causes independently of a foundation—funding that is far more difficult to track. Here, we rely strictly on data about giving through foundations, covering the period between 2003 and 2018. Keep in mind that these figures are likely incomplete, understating the extent of giving in some cases. We have written previously about most of the donors discussed below. Click on their names to learn more about their philanthropy.

## Top Jewish Donors to Jewish Causes, 2003 to 2018

### 1. Sheldon and Miriam Adelson - \$343.2 million

Not only is this casino mogul outspoken, he also has over \$37 billion to his name as of this writing. Adelson and his wife Miriam are among Trump's biggest benefactors, [reportedly](#) writing checks for \$20 million in the campaign and pitching in an additional \$5 million for the inaugural festivities. On the philanthropic front, the [Adelson Family Foundation](#) has given tens of millions to Birthright Israel. The Adelsons are also interested in shifting policy and attitudes around Israel and the Jewish people. As well, they founded the [Dr. Miriam and Sheldon G. Adelson Educational Campus](#) in Las Vegas, an independent pre-K through grade-12 private school based on Jewish values and identity.

### 2. Mem Bernstein—\$325.7 million

Mem Bernstein chairs the board of [AVI CHAI Foundation](#), which was founded by the late billionaire businessman Zalman Bernstein in 1984. Mem [says](#) she's more of a shepherd than the leader of the foundation her late husband launched. AVI CHAI has the mission of increasing Jewish commitments and fostering mutual understanding between Jews of different backgrounds. It's a leader in supporting Jewish day schools in the United States, as well as camps. In Israel, it has worked within the secular school system to provide content for Jewish education. AVI CHAI also works with communities around Israel in a collaborative way to bring more Jewish content to many aspects of city life. AVI CHAI is in the process of sunseting.

### 3. Leslie and Abigail Wexner—\$128.4 million

Octogenarian Leslie Wexner has been in the news for [his controversial ties](#) to the late Jeffrey Epstein and may soon be retiring from L Brands, a retail empire that includes Victoria's Secret and Bath & Body Works. He and his wife Abigail run the Wexner Foundation, which supports current and future Jewish leadership in America, underwriting rabbinical, cantorial and graduate studies for future Jewish educators and clergy. Through the Wexner Heritage Program, the foundation supports promising lay leaders with an intensive two-year commitment to studying the ideas and events that have informed the Jewish past and present.

#### **4. Bernie and Billi Marcus—\$84.8 million**

This couple makes Israel a top priority, tapping a Home Depot fortune. Bernie Marcus helped co-found the [Israel Democracy Institute](#), a so-called “think and do tank” in 1991. He and Billi also back Jewish camps, various community organizations, and are strong funders of FIDF and Birthright Israel. The foundation also gave a \$25 million gift to [American Friends of Magen David Adom](#) to build a new blood center called the Marcus National Blood Services Center.

#### **5. Lynn Schusterman—\$82.4 million**

The widow of Oklahoma wildcatter Charles Schusterman, billionaire and giving pledge signatory Lynn Schusterman gives through the [Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation](#), a robust philanthropic vehicle that strongly supports Jewish causes. The foundation is especially interested in “pluralistic organizations that directly engage large numbers of young Jews from teens to young adults,” as well as programs that foster leaders.

#### **6. Roger and Susan Hertog—\$54.5 million**

Roger Hertog chairs the board of the [Tikvah Fund](#), a “philanthropic foundation and ideas institution committed to supporting the intellectual, religious and political leaders of the Jewish people and the Jewish State.”

The Hertogs also move philanthropy through the Hertog Foundation, which supports Jewish education, human services, religious institutions and more.

### **7. Sidney and Judith Swartz—\$53.3 million**

One of the Swartz couple's most newsworthy donations created the Judy and Sidney Swartz Center for Emergency Medicine at Hadassah University Hospital-Ein Kerem Jerusalem. The family has also given significant funds to Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston.

### **8. Michael and Judy Steinhardt—\$49.9 million**

Tapping a hedge fund fortune, this couple gives through the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life (SFJL), whose aim is to foster the “emergence of a thriving, dynamic and creative Jewish community whose contributions to American culture are informed and inspired by distinctive Jewish values that are fully compatible with life in the open society.” Michael also co-founded Birthright Israel with Charles Bronfman. Since its inception in December 1999, the organization has sent over 650,000 Jewish young adults to Israel.

### **9. Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein—\$46 million**

Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein are collectors of Judaica and strongly support the Israel Antiquities Authority. Another area of interest is education. Yeshiva University is the site of the [Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Honors Program](#), and in Jerusalem, the family helped create [Nishmat-The Jeanie Schottenstein Center for Advanced Torah Study for Women](#).

### **10. Audrey Irmes—\$32.5 million**

Prominent art collector Audrey Irmes, wife of the late attorney and investor Sydney Irmes, moves philanthropy through the Audrey Irmes Foundation

for Social Justice. Irmis is a strong backer of Wilshire Boulevard Temple, home to the Audrey and Sydney Irmis Campus in West Los Angeles. The foundation's grantmaking has recently supported other Jewish institutions in Los Angeles, including Jewish World Watch and Jewish Free Loan Association.

### **11. Steven Spielberg—\$32.4 million**

On the heels of Holocaust drama *Schindler's List*, Spielberg decided to donate his portion of the film's profits to create the [Righteous Persons Foundation](#). The foundation is committed to "Jewish identity and community in the United States and to preserving the memory and lessons of the Holocaust." It also has a particular interest in the development of Jewish arts, culture and media. Spielberg also established the [USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education](#) to videotape and preserve interviews with survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust.

### **12. Seth and Beth Klarman—\$28.1 million**

Seth and Beth Klarman move their philanthropy through the well-endowed [Klarman Family Foundation](#). One of its [focus areas](#) is supporting the global Jewish community and Israel. The foundation supports connections between Israeli and U.S. scientists. It also partners with other funders, including Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston and Co-Impact-The Partnership for a Breakthrough in Arab Employment, working to increase opportunities for higher education and successful careers for Israel's Arab citizens.

### **13. Ira and Ingeborg Rennert—\$25 million**

Rennert is known for funding Orthodox Jewish causes and rubbing shoulders with Israeli government officials, most notably Benjamin Netanyahu. His wife, Ingeborg Hanna Rennert, founded the Women's Institute for Torah. The billionaire couple helped pay for the restoration of

Jerusalem's Western Heritage Wall and contributed \$5 million to the creation and publication of a 20-volume encyclopedia of the Jewish commandments. They also supported the Elie Wiesel Center for Jewish Studies at Boston University.

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There are other Jewish givers we might have included, including Charles Bronfman, the other co-founder of Birthright Israel. He's been a stalwart backer of Jewish causes for years through the [Andrea and Charles Bronfman Foundation](#), which sunset a few years ago. Others, like [David and Ruth Gottesman](#) and [Leon and Toby Cooperman](#), also give at a high level to the Jewish community through their foundations. We did not include in our rundown two low-profile charities associated with the billionaire Karfunkel family—the Hod Foundation and the Teferes Foundation. [According to 2015 tax records](#), Teferes Foundation directed a nine-figure sum to an opaque organization called Gevura, but we believe this philanthropy needs further investigation. We also did not include low-profile donor Ken Grossman and his Chaim Yehoshua Yosef Charitable Foundation or Goldman Sachs veteran [David Slager's](#) Regals Foundation. Annual grantmaking through these vehicles has waned in recent years.

There are also big Jewish donors who've made significant gifts independently of a foundation. Not too long ago, [Nancy and Stephen Grand](#) made a \$50 million donation to the American Committee for the Weizmann Institute of Science. We will explore more of these givers in a future post.

Finally, I'll close by mentioning the substantial funding to Jewish causes made through donor-advised funds. Some of these funds are housed within Jewish charities. The Jewish Communal Fund in New York, mentioned earlier, manages \$2 billion in charitable assets for some 4,000 funds. Another significant vehicle, P.E.F. Israel Endowment Funds, established in 1922, has made grants totaling over \$1 billion impacting Israeli life.



Jewish philanthropy also flows through commercial donor-advised funds and large community foundations, so it is impossible to identify all the major donors in this space or track the exact giving of known Jewish philanthropy. According to aggregate data from the Foundation Center, Fidelity Charitable and Vanguard Charitable made approximately \$282 million in grants to Jewish causes combined between 2003 and 2017.

We will continue to drill deeper into this robust giving sector in coming years.