Empowered Humility: Leveraging Your Limitations in Philanthropy

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Andrés Spokoiny's Annual Address to the 2016 JFN Conference

The rabbis of the Talmud read the story of the creation of the world and struggled to understand why humanity was created last in all creation. They explained it, as they often liked to do, with a paradox. Man's position in creation should keep him humble, they said, since even the most insignificant of insects was created before him. But the human being could also feel proud, they said, since "The whole world is like a table set for him to sit down and enjoy." The Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunim spoke of two pockets that every person should have. In one there should be a piece of paper saying, "For me the world was created," and in the other should be another paper that says, "I am dust and ashes."

These *midrashim* lead us to a basic paradox of Jewish philanthropy. Philanthropy is about feeling that one has the power to change the world, but philanthropy can only succeed when it's done from a place of true humility, from a keen understanding of the limitations to our power.

True humility is not easy. I am reminded of the story of the Jewish cab driver who takes two great rabbis as passengers. One rabbi says to the other: "Oh, you are such a learned scholar, such a great leader! Next to you, I'm nothing." The other says, "But no, Rabbi, you are the biggest master in Bible and

Talmud; next to you I'm nothing!" Hearing the conversation, the driver says: "Rabbis, you are both such great scholars. Next to each of you, I'm nothing." One rabbi turns to the other and says, "Look who thinks he's nothing."

So, indeed, true humility isn't easy. And it's not easy especially in philanthropy, because philanthropy is about being bold and daring, about having new ideas and plowing ahead with them, despite the opposition of many. And let's face it: humility is not easy because we in the philanthropic world are surrounded by people who constantly sing our praises. The moment you open your foundation is the last day people will tell you the truth; on that day you will lose weight, you'll be taller, and all your jokes will be funny.

It requires a lot of groundedness to be humble, because humility in philanthropy is not just about stopping yourself from becoming intoxicated with praise; it's about something more much profound.

The key to a successful and meaningful philanthropy is Empowered Humility.

Empowered Humility is the capacity to be bold and dream big while being keenly aware of the limitations you have as a funder. It's not just about being powerful despite your limitations; rather, it's about being powerful by leveraging your limitations. The paradoxical truth is that embracing humility makes you much more powerful.

Let me share a few ways in which Empowered Humility works.

First, when you approach philanthropy with Empowered Humility, you learn the importance of focusing your efforts. You have the power to change reality, but you can't do everything. I meet funders across the world, and I always tell them, "Don't tell me what you fund; tell me what problems you are trying to solve." The better you define your focus, the more realistic you will be, and the more power you'll have to make change. Have you ever lit a fire with a magnifying glass? The rays of the sun have enormous heat, but they only produce fire when you focus them on a single point.

Second, Empowered Humility means understanding that true change can happen only when we collaborate with others. Collaboration in philanthropy has come a long way. I remember that five years ago, in my first JFN Conference speech, I mentioned collaboration as being among the "new frontiers" of philanthropy. My friend Jeff Solomon said, "We like to cooperate – I co and you operate." Since then, a lot of partnerships have emerged, and the fact that there are so many of us here today seeking to collaborate is an indication that our community has moved forward. Yet a lot remains to be done. The problems we face – in the Diaspora, in Israel, all over the world – are too intractable, too big, too complex to deal with them alone. We will hear

later today from some signatories of the Giving Pledge, an initiative that reminds us: even Warren Buffet and Bill Gates have realized that they can't go it alone.

Collaboration is not just a matter of "You scratch my back, I your scratch yours." It's about wrestling together with issues and finding creative ways of solving them. And collaboration isn't easy. That's why JFN is trying to help collaboration to flourish by creating a series of handbooks to provide a roadmap to navigate the difficulties of philanthropic collaboration.

Nowhere is collaboration more important than in Israel. We have the power, and the opportunity, to effect change and dramatically improve Israeli society, from education and youth at risk to Arab-Israelis and other marginalized communities, but we need to be humble enough to recognize the importance of local expertise.

Collaboration needs to be global. We, the Jewish People, are the first global tribe, and yet we can be surprisingly parochial. JFN is trying to expand its network to create a truly global community of funders, and that's why we have conducted events in London and Paris, and collaborated with the Australian Jewish Funders to hold a series of conferences in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Shanghai.

Third, Empowered Humility leads us toward deeply ethical approaches to philanthropy. There are many adjectives commonly applied to philanthropy: strategic philanthropy, emergent philanthropy, impactful philanthropy. I want to introduce a new one today: *mentshlech* philanthropy. How do you do philanthropy while being a true *mentsh*? How do you develop sensitivity to, and awareness of, the ethical limits of your power as a funder? Yes, with the power of the purse you can impose your will on grantees. But is that *mentshlech*? Does that contribute to a relationship of trusted partnership with your grantees?

Mentshlech philanthropy means respecting the expertise of professionals and grantees. They do their jobs every day, and while we need to be assertive about our values and goals, we also need to respect their professional judgement.

Mentshlech philanthropy means being aware of the needs of the entire community, and being aware of the impact that your decisions have in the broader communal system.

Mentshlech philanthropy means being a trustworthy partner, of your fellow funders and of your grantees. It plays out in the small and in the large things: it means, for example, not making your grantees go through complicated

processes and fill out endless forms to apply for a grant. It means being transparent with grantees and remaining open to receiving their feedback.

Integrity in giving as a *mentshlech* philanthropist means holding yourself accountable and responsible to the entire community. It means seeing yourself not as lone ranger, but as part of a covenant of Jewish solidarity and mutual responsibility. It means understanding that sometimes you have to limit your own power to leave space for others to strive. The *Kabbalah* brought us the notion of *Tzimtzum*, the idea that God created the world by contracting Himself. The message is clear: creation can only happen when we leave space for others to be themselves.

Mentshlech philanthropy is the opposite of whimsical philanthropy. It's not arbitrary; it's predictable and trustworthy.

If funders behave like mentshes, the entire community will follow. And remember: the best vitamin for a *mentsh* is B1 (be one).

Fourth: Empowered Humility demands that we learn constantly. You see, the natural state of philanthropy is underperformance, because philanthropy lacks built-in feedback mechanism. In a business it's easy to know how you are performing; if you don't perform well, you go bust. But if you give bad grants, what happens? You get a gala in your honor. In philanthropy excellence is self-imposed, but we owe it to the community – and, mainly, to ourselves – to strive towards excellence. Philanthropy is too important – too important a part of our legacy – to do it with mediocrity. But nobody is going to force us to be excellent – not the grantees, not the IRS, nobody.

Many of us grew up with a mental model called "Learn, Earn, Serve": in the first part of your life you learn, then you make money, and then, when you retire, you serve. But that model is wrong; we serve all our lives, and we should also learn all our lives, especially in times that are complex and unpredictable. I know literally thousands of funders, and what differentiates the excellent ones is that they are relentless questioners. They are never complacent, they ask questions all the time, they are seekers, and they have no fear of being self-critical.

To really learn – and to really be excellent – you need to have cognitive diversity around you. A group in which everybody thinks the same can't be creative. Diversity brings creativity. And cognitive diversity in complex, unpredictable times is not a "nice thing to have;" it's critical. When you confront new challenges, you need to have people that think about them from very different perspectives. That's how you come up with solutions. If you

surround yourself only with people that think like you, your work – and your life – will be poorer and less effective. And don't worry: being open minded doesn't mean that your brain will fall off!

Fifth: Empowered humility means looking for "the adjacent possible." Every day some funder comes to my office wanting to create "the new Birthright." Everybody wants to come up with the next big idea. To that I always say, "Let's declare a moratorium on big ideas." Let's fully develop the successful ideas that are out there. Let's do it not by trying to be the geniuses that come up with the new silver bullet, but by looking for "adjacent possibilities" to the existing successes.

What can we build on top of the existing platforms? What adjacent possibilities does Birthright offer; what can be built using PJ library as a platform; what possibilities are open thanks to the expansion of Moishe House? The biggest problem we face is not one of ideas, but of scale. Our creativity is misplaced. Transformational philanthropy isn't about coming up with new ideas; it's about discovering the potentialities that the successful ideas have opened. It's about capitalizing on the enormous creativity that is already there.

Sixth: to operate with Empowered Humility you need to build capacity. Since you can't do everything, your impact will be larger if you can rely on efficient and effective nonprofits to do the actual work. Yet often we regard investment in capacity as "waste." We call it "overhead" and we think we are being really smart if we don't fund it. And what's funny is that we apply that overhead obsession only to nonprofits. Do you go to a coffee shop and say, "Please, discount 20 cents because I don't want to pay for your rent"? Do you tell the airline that you don't want to pay for pilot training?
Nonprofits need infrastructure to do the work we need them to do. And the better the capacity they have, the more effective they can be. Fortunately, we seem to be witnessing a realization of this fact in the Jewish community, and serious collective investment in capacity is emerging. For example, Leading Edge is a coalition of funders that is working to tackle the problem of professional leadership in the community; Avi Chai has spearheaded an effort to bring together all the day school umbrellas to create an infrastructure that is both lean and effective; and I could name many other examples.
But we need to do more; we need to support the infrastructure that the community has – not blindly, because it's there, but because we understand that, for example, if Jewish Federations didn't exist, we'd need to create them. Independent philanthropy and communal philanthropy are two sides of the same coin, and we need both to give our communities the capacity to work.

Seventh: Empowered Humility means recognizing the limitations of philanthropy itself. The truth is that philanthropy alone cannot solve the

problems of society. It can help, but philanthropy can't solve poverty, for example, or global warming, or antisemitism. But, luckily, there are new ways today in which philanthropy can work with both the government and the business sector. JFN has worked for years bringing attention to the burgeoning field of Impact Investment. There are many great tools that can help funders maximize their philanthropy by linking it to social enterprise and revenue-generating activities. (For those who want to learn more, JFN will soon be publishing a guide about PRIs, Program Related Investments, a type of impact investing,).

We also need to learn how to better collaborate with government. Israeli philanthropists are pioneers in this field, using government funding to leverage their own funding. This growing practice of working across sectors – philanthropy, business, and government together – gives us more power to effect change and fulfill our missions.

Dear friends, approaching philanthropy with the two pockets of Rabbi Simcha Bunim – the humility and the power – is what makes us daring and bold while being *mentshlech* and ethical. It's what allows us to realize our full potential as philanthropists.

This crazy new world in which we live offers us great opportunities. But in order to realize them, we need to look at our work in a different light. We live in a constant state of crisis and we don't take the time to reflect on the enormous promise of the world around us. We are like the patient that is so worried about his cholesterol and blood pressure that he forgets to go to the optometrist, and therefore hasn't changed his glasses in 20 years. When we only care about the big threats, we can become nearsighted, and miss big opportunities that are right there if only we could see them.

Let me finish with a story.

A small apple tree is planted among tall pine trees. He likes the apples he produces, but he's terribly jealous of the pine trees. Why? Because every night, he looks up and sees the stars between the branches of the pines, and he thinks that the stars are the fruits of the pine trees. And what's a modest apple in comparison to a star? So he complains bitterly to God: "Why are those pine trees tall and have stars for fruit, while I'm short and have only apples for fruit?" In response, God sends a strong wind that knocks a few apples to the ground.

A small child walks by and picks up an apple. He cuts it – horizontally, rather than vertically. And what does he find?

When we look differently, we can find things that we always had, but didn't know existed.

When we dare to look in new ways – like the boy who cut the apple horizontally – we discover that there's much more to reality than we had thought.

When we look with fresh eyes, we can realize the full potential that we have inside; the hidden stars that we all have, that unique contribution to the world that only we can make.

Philanthropy is about those stars. It is about finding that unique thing that you are, and only you can give the world. It's about finding the legacy that will define you. It's about determining how the world will be different because of your actions. It's about your boldness and your humility, about breaking the status quo while respecting tradition, about leadership and inspiration and about listening and learning.

We need the naiveté of the child who thought that everything could be possible, even finding stars inside of apples. Because, after all, philanthropy is about achieving impossible things. This room is full of people who saw the invisible and did the impossible. We are the stubborn and stiff-necked people that is annoying, ungovernable and restless, but that never, ever gives up. We are those that never get discouraged by the enormity of the task. After all my friends, we are the people for whom only the impossible is worth doing.

Thank you.

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