



With Friends Like These: Supportive Communities Enable Creativity

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PresenTense Group

by Benjamin Greene

How can philanthropies most effectively invest in leaders? While investing in talented individuals has great potential to impact the community, investing in an interconnected cohort of leaders can be transformative. Over the last two decades, numerous Jewish foundations and philanthropies have sought to further their missions by supporting fellowship grants, which help the greater community by empowering select individuals to become communal agents of change. Alumni of these fellowships have played a major role in the renaissance of Jewish life and the emergence of an entire sector of innovative Jewish organizations.



At the same time, many of these fellowships have also demonstrated that the long-term impact of investing in individuals can be significantly increased when it involves the creation of peer communities. These communities afford their participants an environment to develop and grow as leaders and visionaries, providing them with valuable support during and beyond their fellowship experiences. Successful fellowship communities do not simply emerge naturally when a group of outstanding individuals is brought together. Rather, programs must incorporate strategic community-building into the fellowship process.

Yoni Gordis has experience in the foresight and planning required to develop such community-building fellowship experiences. As Executive Director of The Center for Leadership Initiatives, he currently oversees the Insight Fellowship, a two-year leadership training program that provides recent college graduates with the opportunity to work for a variety of nonprofit organizations. He notes that creating a successful fellowship cohort involves constructing a safe space for mutual support and growth, and that the most transformative moments of these

cohorts happen during face-to-face interaction among fellows. He views fellowship communities as part of a shared journey of uncovering the fellows' own voices and empowering them to translate their visions into actions.

One example of an individual who benefited in this way from a fellowship community of peers is Idit Klein, who received a Joshua Venture Fellowship in 2003. At the time, she was the only professional staff member of Keshet, an organization dedicated to creating full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life. Awarded to a cohort of eight emerging Jewish entrepreneurs, the now re-launching fellowship provided organizational funding, leadership training, and a stipend for professional development.

For Klein, the most decisive aspect of the fellowship was being a part of a cohort of young visionaries who supported and strongly believed in each other. Klein shares an important discussion she had with her peer fellows about whether, and how, to grow Keshet into a national organization: "People's questions and insights helped me realize that we needed to be asking ourselves a key question to drive the process, namely, 'What is it that we as Keshet do best? What is our greatest strength? What is the element most central to our success?' That helped me identify our community organizing methodology as the primary key to our success, and therefore as the focus of our expansion efforts."

Becky Voorwinde, Director of Alumni Engagement for the Bronfman Youth Fellowships in Israel, explains that the process of building a fellowship's alumni community is so crucial that in choosing fellows, applicants are selected not only for their potential to become future leaders, but also for their ability to become supportive members of the Bronfman Fellowship community. The initial program, a fully-funded, five-week summer program for rising high school seniors, supports fellows by creating an empowering community instilled with values of Jewish pluralism and intellectual engagement. The network of Bronfman Fellowship alumni then fosters a multigenerational community of skills and expertise that is able to provide valuable opportunities for fellows later on in their leadership development. Voorwinde recalls an occasion when members of the alumni board held a conference call with an alumna who was starting a new nonprofit organization, in order to give her fundraising advice and feedback on her pitch materials. Investing in people can be one of the greatest vehicles for Jewish renewal and vitality. Many in the philanthropic world argue that these investments must empower individuals to explore and define on their own terms what they view as success. However, this journey is often best accomplished not alone, but in the company of a supportive peer community. Creating these communities requires long-term commitment, professional support, and a cohort environment that empowers its members to develop and pursue their visions for Jewish life.

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image: Keshet's Training Institute for Jewish educators and youth professionals. Photo provided by Keshet.

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