

Act Global to Think Local

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[This article is part of a series on the interactions between local and national funders ignited by the Jewish Funders Network (JFN). To read more about the series, see the introductory post [here](#).]

by Marcella Kanfer Rolnick

My family's foundation is relatively small. Most philanthropies our size focus their funding on their local communities. For that matter, larger foundations tend to fund within their cities or regions too. Maybe we come by it honestly; the Babylonian Talmud *Bava Metzia* 71A teaches that, in giving *zedakah*, the poor of one's own town come before those of other towns. So why has Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation evolved from supporting only Jewish institutions in our hometown of Akron, Ohio to also being recognized as an active national funder? How have we grappled with this Talmudic guidance and come out the other side with an interpretation that's less obvious yet still feels valid and important?

Let me back up and define "national funding." To us, it means funding organizations that (a) are not oriented towards servicing constituents in a particular (generally limited) geography, and (b) help build a field. (It is actually more apt to call it "systems funding" since the boundaries might not stop at the US border.) At Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, we have come to understand that, when national organizations are appropriately mandated, staffed and funded, their value derives from their ability to be: fact gatherers, analysts, and data sources; evaluators, bench markers, and standard setters; champions, thought leaders, framework creators, and disseminators; conveners, social connection points, and creators of coalitions of the willing; program incubators and guides for scaling; recognition providers; and fiduciaries.

Wow. That's quite a list of important contributions that local organizations generally are not established or equipped to undertake. All of this alone is enough to have shaped us into national funders alongside our deep commitment to Jewish Akron. We are comfortable extrapolating value that a field-building national organization generates even if it only *indirectly* benefits local ones. But for those who are still unconvinced, the remainder of this piece focuses on the direct value national organizations can provide to local communities.

While every locality thinks it is unique, access to others' models, experiences, and assessments result in much learning, especially vis-a-vis enhancing core processes that are more alike than different. It typically takes more than merely hearing about the ideas (say by reading columns or attending panel discussions). Professionals from national organizations are well situated to interpret, apply theory, predict challenges, support, and inspire through the use of examples from other locales. This value exchange is two-way: local organizations can be learning laboratories, innovating for themselves while generating insights for those in national organizations to mine.

By way of example, let me share three stories of how our local priorities have been advanced by national organizations, some of which we have funded, some of which, gratefully, others have funded.

The Lippman School is the only option for full-day Jewish education in Akron. Even with a very high participation rate amongst the available Jewish population, a number of years ago the school realized it needed a new model to be viable and vital with changing demographics. The school's leadership hired very capable local consultants to facilitate a strategic planning process and engaged JESNA to bring a big-picture perspective on the options the school might pursue. JESNA understood the challenges of local Jewish education and what was working (and failing) around the country. JESNA also extrapolated insights from the secular educational world. But perhaps most important, JESNA scanned its network and curated a number of thoughtful advisors with diverse experience, including professionals from RAVSAK, the national organization serving community day schools. In addition to bringing much-needed subject matter expertise, the advisors brought stature, both of which helped overcome local resistance to change and fear of the unknown. Today, the breakthrough model for The Lippman School – combining Jewish and global studies, broadening the appeal to Jewish and non-Jewish families wanting a values-based, 21st century pedagogy – is not only flourishing, but also has been widely reported on and circulated around the country, benefiting communities far beyond Akron.

A briefer example takes us from Jewish education to the synagogue. Akron's Beth El Congregation wanted to

complement their physical move to a new building with enlivening their programming. They engaged a national consultant, Rabbi Hayyim Herring, who served as executive director of STAR: Synagogue Transformation and Renewal, because it did not have the time or staff to scan the continent for models. Enriched by Rabbi Herring's learnings from having developed the Synaplex™ Initiative and other innovations to generate a wider array of options to diverse synagogue-goers, Beth El has made several bold moves to enhance its spiritual vitality and fiscal stability. Additionally, the congregation invited the national innovator Storahtelling to train its members so they could reanimate traditional Jewish rituals and stories with stagecraft and theater. (A whole different topic which my father Joe Kanfer and I will share our perspective on in a different column is the challenge of the lack of support for national organizations. To wit, JESNA and STAR are no longer operating and, as I write, Storahtelling is evolving into a new local model called Lab/Shul.)

A third and different kind of example of national/local funding as an opportunity for win-win is a grant we made last summer to Hebrew at the Center (HATC), a national organization, to pilot a Hebrew immersion summer camp. Running the pilot enabled HATC to clarify the preconditions needed to create a successful camp and to document learnings that would be shared and customized to other localities' needs. Hannah Senesh Community Day School in Brooklyn, NY, another new "hometown" community we invest in, was the pilot site. Working hand-in-hand with HATC, Senesh benefited from what proved to be both an educationally and fiscally successful Hebrew immersion camp program, so much so that Senesh ran the camp the following year with tremendous independence and gained capabilities to incorporate immersive Hebrew instruction into its regular day school curriculum.

We've all heard the mantra, "think global, act local." We agree with its elegant logic. But in order to think big-picture, it also takes know-how and resources derived across local experiences and aggregated for the benefit of many. And it takes financial and other support for systems-building organizations to do their invaluable work. For these reasons, our family foundation has come to the conclusion that it's just as crucial to "act globally" in order to "think locally."

Marcella Kanfer Rolnick is Chair of Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, which is committed to Jewish learning and engagement and repairing the world.