

This week,

I want to revisit two stories that I think flew under the radar recently given all the other things happening in the world. Number one, the most important sponsor of Jewish disability inclusion is ending its funding for that cause. And number two, the push for pay and gender equity in the Jewish world is still ongoing.

I'm Lev Gringauz, and welcome to The Jews Are Tired, your podcast about Jewish news.

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So let's dive into this sad but fascinating example of the problem that is mega-donors controlling a lot of Jewish communal funding and agenda-setting. First, the background.

Morton Ruderman was a businessman who helped found Meditech, a software company focused on healthcare systems. And with the money he made, Morton got into Jewish philanthropy. So as part of that effort, in the early 2000s, he decided to make a donation to Boston-area Jewish day schools. But then he learned that Jewish kids with disabilities didn't have access to these day schools. And that sparked the creation of the Ruderman Family Foundation in 2002, which would focus on accessibility and inclusion in the Jewish world.

According to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the Ruderman foundation has spent around \$75 million over the past two decades on inclusion initiatives. That's meant creating jobs for disability advocates and disabled Jews in the Jewish community, providing inclusivity training and guidance to organizations, and working on disability housing and education issues.

Which is all fantastic! The Ruderman foundation has really built accessibility as a priority in the Jewish world. There's a lot to be grateful for.

But then comes the news, first by press release in September, and then via a February JTA story, linked in the podcast notes, that Ruderman will no longer be funding these initiatives. Ironically, February was Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance, and Inclusion month.

Jay Ruderman, Morton Ruderman's son and the president of the foundation, told JTA that

QUOTE

The announcement was to tell the community that we feel that we have reached a milestone and that we have achieved certain successes in the field.

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Now achieving certain successes is all well and good. But it's not like the work is done yet, and Ruderman didn't offer any kind of concrete reason for why the foundation was ending its funding of inclusion initiatives now. Doing so during a pandemic is not exactly phenomenal timing either.

So now Jewish disability causes are scrambling to figure out where they'll get the funding to keep doing the work that they do. There are lots of Jewish donors and potential donors, but so far no one has stepped into the space Ruderman has left.

And here's the thing. This is, on the face of it, a simple story. It's not like the Ruderman Family Foundation doesn't have the right to end funding when it feels like it and find another project to work on. They're independent, it's their money, they can obviously do whatever they want.

But that doesn't mean the rest of us, lower down the ladder of Jewish philanthropy, can't or shouldn't critique this decision. I think we should. It's indicative of a broader problem in the Jewish world, that many priorities and programs have fallen to the wayside because donors just backed out.

Take BimBam, a really cool media organization that was making colorful animated videos about Judaism for all ages. If you don't remember who they are, a link to their youtube channel is in the podcast notes. Over the course of something like 10 years, they got over 70 thousand subscribers on youtube and millions of views across 400 videos. I remember arguing with a prominent Minnesota non-profit leader about innovation in the Jewish world not being so great, and they instantly mentioned BimBam and how fantastic it was.

And then in 2019 BimBam shut down. Why? Well they couldn't get the funding. Seriously, if you have a moment, go check out their youtube channel and watch a few videos. BimBam was making Jewish history and ritual accessible. What they were doing should have checked all the boxes for getting more Jews engaged and knowledgeable. And instead funders went 'eh,' and decided that if BimBam wasn't making money from this, they shouldn't invest. And that was it.

So you kinda have to wonder how often donors are disconnected from the needs of the communities and programs and organizations they fund when making decisions like this. So let's bring that idea back, in a responsible way, to this Ruderman foundation decision.

To be clear, I'm not trying to get into hot take or slanderous or sensationalist territory here, I mean this as an honest question, about donors being disconnected. Something the JTA reporting didn't cover on this story is how much the Ruderman Family Foundation communicated and talked through their decision with the Jewish disability advocates they fund. What is it the Jewish disability community would have wanted from the Ruderman foundation given this situation? Obviously that's not something people are likely to talk about, so as to not stir the pot.

But let's just do some, admittedly dangerous, speculating. The foundation could have still decided to stop giving money. But what if Ruderman said 'hey, we will announce that we're not

funding this anymore, but we'll give it a year before we actually cut off funding. In that time, we'll help get other donors engaged on inclusion issues so that you, the advocates and Jewish organizations already struggling during the pandemic, have some help finding new sources of funding.'

The point is, maybe there is a better way to do this, one that keeps foundations accountable to the Jewish community after they've been engaged for so long. And that's the problem, here and with BimBam and countless other initiatives, is that at the end of the day, donors aren't accountable.

And normally I hate bringing up issues without offering some kind of solution. But unfortunately in this case there really isn't one. It's not like Jewish organizations can form a union to negotiate better severance from donors. Donors can just choose to fund someone or something that won't demand that much of them. The rest of us have very little leverage, except for maybe bad PR.

But bad PR isn't something many of us want to go for. So many great programs do exist because donors cared enough to be involved and to fund those initiatives. Ruderman singlehandedly brought the inclusion conversation to the Jewish world. That's huge!

But now many advocates and organizations are left wondering what comes next. Who will step in after Ruderman. Maybe someone will. Obviously this is a very important funding need in the community. But how long will that someone fund initiatives before they also back out. There's a case to be made that Ruderman cutting off funding is good, because it allows more funders to get into the space, which means more stability if any one donor moves on to another project.

But again, Ruderman could have helped make that a stable reality. They could have engaged with the people they've been funding and ask how best to do this transition. Instead they just seemingly dropped Jewish disability funding. So as we all start shifting out of the pandemic, and back into some semblance of normal ish Jewish life, this'll be a story with long lasting effects. And that's something we have to keep an eye out for.

The second story I want to talk about on this episode is less of a right now-piece of news, and more of a long-term thing: The push for pay and gender equity in Jewish nonprofits.

Here are some quick facts from 2018, brought to you by Leading Edge, which serves as a think tank and consultant for Jewish organizations: Women make up about 70% of Jewish nonprofit employees, but are only about 30% of the C-Suite, or executive level positions. Women also see less opportunity for career advancement, and face bias in the workplace like added pressure to prove their worth when they are in leadership positions.

All of these problems exist in society more broadly, but of course, that doesn't mean the Jewish community shouldn't be working specifically on itself when it comes to this.

One of the prominent organizations working on this issue is the Gender Equity in Hiring Project, which was started by Sara Shapiro-Plevan and Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu (SIR-beau). A large part of their focus has been on the pay gap, where men are usually paid more than women. And that itself starts with a basic problem in the Jewish world: The lack of transparency around pay. So if you don't know how much other people are making in the kind of job you do, you have a much tougher time negotiating for better pay. And organizations, by hiding what they're paying for a given job, can use that to hide that they pay men more than women.

So to address this, Shapiro-Plevan and Sirbu did an interesting thing back in late-2019. They released a spreadsheet, just a google sheets thing, for people to anonymously write their job position, their gender, how long they've worked in the Jewish world, how long they've worked where they work now, their location, and their salary and benefits. And I remember this being a big deal, all of a sudden all the professional Jews I know on facebook and twitter were sharing this spreadsheet, with the idea being, lets get as many people as possible in this, to create that pay transparency we don't otherwise really have.

It was a very cool initiative, and I know there was going to be a release of the data in a more searchable and digestible form than a google spreadsheet. And Shapiro-Plevan and Sirbu were going to do a whole presentation on what they found in the data.

And then, between school, the pandemic, and everything else going on, this totally slipped off my radar, though I kept wondering, what happened to all that data. Well, just in case I'm not the only one to have unfortunately forgotten about this, here's the update.

It's not so crazy that there wasn't much news on the spreadsheet because it has taken until this year to process and be released. Partly that's because Shapiro-Plevan and Sirbu didn't think it would make sense to release this data when the pandemic hit. But they're releasing it now. The data is up on the Gender Equity in Hiring Project website in a searchable form, and a link to that is in the podcast notes.

And the GEHP is rolling out the analysis part as well. In February they had a recorded Zoom seminar to talk through what they had found, and a link to that is also available in the podcast notes. Unfortunately, in total honesty, I have not watched it yet myself, it's been kind of a rough week as a student at the University of Minnesota, but I highly recommend giving that seminar a watch and again, I'm sorry that I can't provide any details on the findings at the moment. Do also check out the searchable data, and don't forget to tell your friends in the Jewish nonprofit world about all this good work by the GEHP if they haven't heard about it already.

Also also, Sara Bogomolny, the host of Jewfolk's LeaderFolk podcast, actually interviewed Sara Shapiro-Plevan last year in May. So check out episode 7 of Leaderfolk for a great listen on this topic. A link is in the podcast notes.

The larger point is, the work continues, and I think it's good to take a step back every once in a while and give some airtime to important initiatives like this one. Particularly given that women

have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, the Jewish world needs to stay attentive to the issue of pay and gender equity.

Now, on a final note, squeezing in sort of one last story for this episode, Israel will be having its fourth national election in under two years later this month on March 23rd.

There will be an in-depth podcast about that after it happens, but for anyone who wants to revisit what has brought around this level of dysfunction, go back and listen to episode 48 of this podcast. The sparknotes are best summed up by a poll that shows just 29% of Israelis think the next election will fix the current political gridlock. So, I say to you with a sigh while looking longingly at a bottle of whiskey, strap in for a likely 5th national Israeli election not long after this round is over.

**End:**

**This has been this week's The Jews Are Tired podcast, I'm Lev Gringauz, don't forget to subscribe and share, and hopefully next week, the Jews will get some rest.**

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