

***Building a Strong Jewish Future in a Changing World
The Role of the Professional***

WCJCS Author's Forum Category: **Educating for Jewish Peoplehood / Engaging the Next Generation**

Title: **The Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County's
Ewa & Dan Abraham Project:
A New Cultural and Educational Initiative**

Presented by: **Maureen Wise, Director, The Ewa & Dan Abraham Project
Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County**

Overview

The Ewa and Dan Abraham Project was established in 2004, when Jeffrey L. Klein, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County, presented a visionary concept to Palm Beach philanthropist S. Daniel Abraham.

Mr. Klein proposed “an exciting new educational and cultural initiative to enhance Jewish life throughout the greater Palm Beaches.” With this funding, he explained, “Federation would arrange to bring some of the world's foremost Jewish scholars and educators to our area to facilitate symposia and study groups, present Jewish-themed cultural programs, and bring the living presence of Israel into our community.”

Klein sought to broaden the scope of Jewish education and outreach by bringing the highest caliber of speakers and performers to the area to present programming that previously was not available to the entire community. The goal was to create innovative programs and classes for people of all ages and interest levels, focusing on Israel and current events as well as Jewish traditions, holidays and culture.

Since its inception, The Abraham Project has been a program of the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County, staffed by a part-time director and a part-time administrative assistant. It has partnered with Federation departments, beneficiary agencies, local synagogues, educational and artistic institutions and other organizations to plan, publicize and present cultural events and educational opportunities, reaching out to all areas of Palm Beach's burgeoning Jewish community.

The Ewa & Dan Abraham Project is funded by S.Daniel Abraham in cooperation with the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County.

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A Big Idea Requires Big Funding

The concept for the Abraham Project emerged when Federation CEO Jeffrey Klein realized that “there was not sufficient opportunity in the community for relatively larger scale gatherings to bring together unique, extraordinary, landmark programs - and putting together such a concerted effort could not be done within the confines of the annual business of the Federation or within the boundaries of one particular agency.”

Thus, it became necessary for Klein to identify a donor who shared his commitment to Jewish education. He approached S. Daniel Abraham because, “in addition to Danny’s annual campaign support, he is a significant supporter of the Meyer Academy [the local day school, a Federation beneficiary agency which is housed on the Jewish Community’s West Palm Beach campus]... His interest in Jewish education goes beyond the confines of that institution. He has done a number of things nationally. There is a Jewish high school in New York named after his mother, and he’s been a major supporter of Yeshiva University and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Additionally, he is interested in bringing a Jewish message to the world.”

In order to persuade Daniel Abraham to fund this endeavor, Klein wrote an initial concept paper. He recalled, “I gave him examples of what the program would do and of its scale and scope. I emphasized that we couldn’t possibly do something like this without his support and that it would really make a difference in the community.”

Mr. Abraham agreed to fund this innovative program on a year-to-year basis. He has provided \$250,000 annually to cover programming, marketing and staffing. Most Abraham Project events have been free, but, in some instances, nominal fees have been charged.

Creating the Program

In developing the initial parameters of the program, Jeffrey Klein had definitive ideas. He explained, “I knew I wanted it to be multi-faceted. I knew I wanted to attract the best scholars and educators we could possibly get. Considering the geographic nature of the community and the diversity of the population, I felt we needed a diversity of programs as well. I was looking for creative, good ideas for programs that I thought had the potential to make a positive impact.

“Given that Jewish education, in its broader sense, was the goal, I was looking for programs that had strong Jewish content and programs that would take our Yom Ha’Atzmaut and other Israel-related programs to another level. I was also looking for programs that would relate to the broader world and the Middle East in particular. I knew that we could do some extraordinary forums.”

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Traditionally, Federations are considered to be program funders rather than program providers. Although informational programs have always been presented under the aegis of Federation's Jewish Community Relations Council and Israel Program Center, in 2004 the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County did not have a mechanism in place to coordinate large-scale community programs. With funding secured to establish The Ewa & Dan Abraham Project, it then became necessary to hire a director to administer the project.

In selecting a director, Klein sought someone with strong organizational skills, fundamental Jewish knowledge and the ability to work with others. After interviewing a number of Jewish educators, he asked Maureen Wise to oversee the Abraham Project. Ms. Wise, who had recently moved to Florida from Rockland County, N.Y., was then working part-time at the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County as Director of Community Connections. In that capacity, she had become very familiar with the Palm Beach community by providing information to current and potential residents and by serving as a Federation liaison to communal institutions. In New York, she had built a long career as a Jewish communal professional and an active lay leader. She had garnered extensive experience working with both national leadership and local volunteers. She had earned bachelors and masters degrees in education and had acquired a strong background in the performing arts.

As administrator of the Abraham Project, Ms. Wise has been reaching out to Federation departments and beneficiary agencies, local synagogues and communal organizations, educational institutions and civic groups to plan and present programs with much success.

Forging Partnerships

Given the scope of the Project, as envisioned by Jeffrey Klein and Daniel Abraham, it was necessary to draw in partners who were willing and able to develop and implement unprecedented programs that would be germane to their constituents.

"Partners are going to be naturally attracted when they think that funds are available to them," asserted Klein. "Getting them to express an interest has not been difficult at all. What we had to make sure of was that we were not funding programs that they were already doing. The purpose of this has been to fund innovative, important projects that they couldn't possibly do without the support of the Abraham Project."

Beneficiary agencies such as the Friedman Commission for Jewish Education (CJE), the Jewish Community Center of the Greater Palm Beaches (JCC), Alpert Jewish Family & Children's Services (AJFCS), Morse Life Senior Campus, and the Arthur I. Meyer Jewish Academy have been natural partners. Similarly, many Federation departments such as the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Israel Program Center, Women's Division, Young Adult Division, and Business & Professional Division have benefited as co-sponsors of Abraham Project programs.

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Whereas most Federation programs involve volunteer chairpersons and committee members, the majority of Abraham Project programs have not. The Ewa & Dan Abraham Project has been managed by professional staff members from Federation and participating agencies.

Activities have been scheduled during the day and at night, throughout the week, at sites on and off Federation campuses and in different geographical areas to touch diverse populations. For the past three years, we have endeavored to build and strengthen a collaborative network of program providers and hosts. By sharing resources such as professional expertise, communal contacts, venues and funds, we have maximized our effectiveness, thereby providing more quality programs for people of all ages. By partnering and cooperating as a community, we have been able to accomplish much more than any one institution could achieve.

Many performances and lectures have been placed in colleges and universities, hotels, clubhouses and cultural centers to maximize accessibility and attendance. Additionally, local congregations have been eager to host Abraham Project events. Thus far, programs have been scheduled in 14 synagogues of all denominations. Future sites currently being considered include theatres and country clubs; nightclubs, restaurants, bars and comedy clubs to attract Young Adults; and malls, outdoor shopping centers and amphitheatres to capture the attention of the unaffiliated.

Most community groups have been quite willing to host Abraham Project events. When approached, the colleges and universities have agreed to co-sponsor lectures and seminars that conform to their curricula and schedules. This type of collaboration has provided all parties with positive publicity and recognition and has created a greater sense of community.

Both the Abraham Project and the participating partners have derived a multitude of benefits from these partnerships. Participating organizations have provided creative ideas, local contacts and outside resources, staff support, cost-free venues, supplementary publicity and marketing, and, of course, an audience. In return, the Abraham Project has brought them world-class speakers and performers at little or no cost, community recognition, Federation's professional marketing expertise, and the opportunity to reach the public-at-large and bring new audiences into their facilities. It has proven to be a win-win situation for everyone.

Selecting Programs

In his initial communiqué to partnership agencies, Jeffrey Klein emphasized, "This program has the potential to be the major step in a transformative effort, bringing the level of diverse Jewish programming to this community to the highest level. I welcome and appreciate the creative contributions of all involved."

Regular consultation with Daniel Abraham and Rabbi Joshua Lookstein, Executive Director of the S. Daniel Abraham Foundation, has provided guidance and inspiration. Rabbi Lookstein, who is based in Manhattan and travels frequently to Israel, has proven to be a very valuable resource and sounding board regarding potential speakers and performers.

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In the three years since the Project was established, programs with the Abraham Project imprimatur have developed a reputation for excellence. To date, it has presented over 100 programs and classes, reaching more than 20,000 people of all ages and interest levels.

Programs have been created and selected to appeal to particular audiences or to develop special themes. Visiting delegations from Federation's partnership communities in Israel have presented artistic programs and educational workshops in conjunction with Abraham Project events. On occasion, a renowned scholar has been brought in for two or three days to deliver a series of lectures. Afterwards, local scholars have developed the themes through follow-up classes. Kabbalah and mysticism, advances in Jewish genealogy, end-of-life issues, Jewish women leaders and the multiple facets of Israeli culture are just some of the topics that have been explored in-depth.

Daniel Abraham's commitment to Israel and Middle East peace is legendary. He co-founded the Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation in Washington, DC, as well as the S. Daniel Abraham Center for International and Regional Studies at Tel Aviv University. He authored the book, Peace Is Possible, and spent a decade engaged in shuttle diplomacy between American and Middle Eastern leaders. Under his guidance, an annual Middle East Seminar has been a highlight of the Abraham Project's annual calendar.

Regional arts groups have been invited to perform in conjunction with Abraham Project events. Both Ballet Florida and the Florida Stage theatre group have presented special performances for the annual Women's Symposium. At a Chanukah concert featuring Afro-American Jewish gospel singer Joshua Nelson, local synagogue and church choirs were onstage singing back-up.

Guest scholars have included Rabbis Joseph Telushkin, Elliot Dorff, Doniel Hartman, Michael Melchior, Arthur Green, Yitz Greenberg, Irwin Kula and Edward Reichman, M.D.; Deborah Lipstadt, Ambassadors Martin Indyk and Husain Haqqani, Dr. Everett Fox, Blu Greenberg, Danny Siegel, Vicki Kelman and Dr. Ron Wolfson.

Performances have brought Debbie Friedman, Joshua Nelson, David Broza, Micky Gavrielov, Craig Taubman, Geshet's "Four Faces of Israel," Daniel Pearl Music Day and a three-part Jewish Comedy Festival to local stages.

Special events have featured annual Women's Symposia and Middle East Seminars as well as conferences on Jewish Spirituality and Bio-Medical Ethics and county-wide celebrations of Hanukkah and Yom Ha'Atzmaut.

Outreach efforts to young adults and families have been implemented through: "My First Sukkah," "Around the Shabbat Table," Jewish Family Life Education programs, a "Shabbat in Israel" dinner series, a Storytelling Festival, "The Immigrant Experience," "Bible Comes Alive," "Cup of Joe and Five Books of Moe," classes for young adults and women, and teen theatre productions.

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As Project Director, Wise constantly searches for top-notch speakers and presenters to enrich and expand the community's Judaic knowledge. She combs national publications and on-line Jewish websites to keep abreast of newsmakers, social trends, popular performers and concepts for programs.

When booking presenters, Wise has found that it is essential to identify those who are dynamic speakers and performers. Just because someone has excellent academic credentials does not insure that he/she will engage an audience. Mistakes can be costly, particularly when an event has attracted new people who do not usually attend programs of Jewish content. If they leave feeling disenchanting, they are not likely to return in the future. Therefore, she consults with other Federations, agencies and think-tanks to determine which speakers and entertainers have been most effective.

Operational Procedures

Mr. Klein's initial Summary of Directions outlined broad general directions for the Abraham Project. Since then, the Project Director has formulated precise directives to be followed by each participating partner. While most Federation-funded programs require limited oversight by the grantors, the Abraham Project was designed to function with the Project Director's more "hands-on" involvement and financial supervision. Because Mr. Abraham and Mr. Klein both have very specific goals and priorities, it is necessary for the Project Director to be fully cognizant of all program details throughout the funding year. All budgets, speakers, performers and contracts must be approved by the Abraham Project Director before they are finalized. Goals must be set regarding target audiences and the most effective way to reach them. Follow up measures must be planned and carried out.

The following outline delineates some of the procedures to be followed.

Planning & Scheduling

Each spring, as soon as Federation receives confirmation that the Ewa & Dan Abraham Project is to be re-funded, all Federation departments and agencies are invited to attend a "brainstorming" planning session to discuss programming concepts and to suggest speakers and performers for the following year. They are then asked to submit program proposals by a specified date, building upon themes and ideas that emerge at the planning meeting. Several weeks later, the group reconvenes to hear the presentations, discuss the proposed programs and make suggestions. Joshua Lookstein, in his capacity as Executive Director of the S. Daniel Abraham Foundation, is invited to participate.

Departments are asked to prioritize their requests to comply with budget limitations. The CEO and Project Director then evaluate the proposals and determine which programs will be funded, as well as which departments and agencies will partner on each task.

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Once the programs are selected, the department and agency directors appoint the staff members who will oversee each project. All program partners check the community calendar and confer to determine potential dates for each program. Program partners schedule initial planning meetings, which the Project Director attends.

In consultation with the Abraham Project Director, program partners investigate fees and availability of potential speakers and performers, as well as possible venues. Additional planning sessions are held until each program has concluded. The Project Director is apprised of each meeting and participates as necessary.

Evaluation sessions are held after each event, with all program partners and committee members invited to participate. Written summaries (including financial records of all income and expenditures) must be submitted to the Project Director within six weeks after the event.

A complete list of all attendees (with their contact information and demographic data) must be e-mailed to the Abraham Project office within six weeks after an event. The information is compiled and added to Federation's data base to update the Abraham Project mailing list. Thank you letters are sent to each speaker and performer, with file copies sent to the Abraham Project office.

Budget & Finance

The Project Director negotiates contracts with major speakers and performers (\$5,000 and above). Standard letters of agreement are utilized when booking speakers and performers, with copies of all contracts and letters of agreement sent to the Project Director as soon as they are signed.

Estimated budgets for each program are submitted to the Abraham Director within six weeks after each initial planning session. She must be notified immediately if expenses unexpectedly escalate. The budget for each program should cover all expenses, including speaker and/or performer fees, travel, hotel, food, etc.; rental of venues; extra security; sound or audio-visual equipment; printed materials (invitations, programs, brochures, tickets); postage; supplementary newspaper ads; craft materials; refreshments, etc. Staffing fees are not allowable expenses.

If admission is charged or items are sold, the sponsoring agencies are permitted to keep any profits once all expenses have been covered. If any agency wants to use an Abraham-sponsored speaker or performer for a fundraising event, a written request must be submitted to the Project Director and a portion of the presenter's fee must be reimbursed by the agency.

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Marketing & Publicity Guidelines

The Abraham Project logo and the following tagline must appear on all printed matter:
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All news releases, ads, radio spots, and promotional and marketing materials for programs sponsored by the Ewa and Dan Abraham Project must be reviewed and approved by the Project Director prior to production. It is important to assure message consistency on all published materials.

If an agency maintains its own marketing department, its staff designs and produces all marketing materials, writes and distributes press releases, and handles media relations for its Abraham Project events. For all other agencies and departments, those tasks will be fulfilled by Federation's Marketing Department.

A portion of the annual Abraham Project budget is allocated to Federation's Marketing Department in order to place event-specific ads in local newspapers and on radio stations. As soon as the annual program is scheduled, Federation's Marketing department consults with the Project Director and prepares an advertising schedule for the year. That schedule is shared with agency marketing staff members, who then determine if their agencies will run supplementary ads for their programs. The budget for each program should cover all printed materials as well as any additional advertising.

Follow-Up

A detailed report outlining finances and demographic data must be presented after each event. The financial report must include: total cost of event, cost breakdown (marketing, food, rentals, speaker fees, travel expenses, etc.), the value of any in-kind contributions, and income and profit (where applicable). The demographic report must include: attendance, number of people who have attended prior events, number of new participants, age range of participants, home community, and how did they learn about the event?

Demographic data is gathered through pre-registration attendance lists and on questionnaires and "raffle cards" that are distributed at events. Tickets to upcoming Abraham Project concerts or programs are given as raffle prizes, providing an incentive for the cards to be returned. Exit questionnaires also request additional information, such as: Did you enjoy this program? What other types of programs would interest you?

Once the information is gathered, names are added to Federation's data base so that participants can be thanked and invited to other events. The information is shared with the partnering agencies. The comments culled from the cards and questionnaires help to determine future programs and venues, as well as which marketing tools have proven to be most effective.

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A Valuable Outreach Tool

S. Daniel Abraham, Joshua Lookstein and Jeffrey Klein all believe that one of the Abraham Project's main goals should be outreach. Josh Lookstein emphasized that Mr. Abraham hoped to "attract a broad group of previously unaffiliated members of the Jewish community... and turn people on to the Jewish community through creative and engaging programs." Mr. Abraham stressed, "We must make Jews proud to be Jewish. We must enrich their sense of Jewishness."

Since its inception, one of the primary objectives of The Abraham Project and its partners has been to bring the Jewish community together and to attract segments of the population that have not been engaged in Jewish life. In Palm Beach County, that percentage is quite high.

According to the 2005 Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County Jewish Community Study (a comprehensive demographic study conducted by Ira M. Sheskin, Ph.D.), the Greater Palm Beach area is home to the tenth largest Jewish community in the country. Its population is growing steadily, with the Jewish population increasing by 36,000 people (31%) between 1999 and 2005. Nearly 80% of the Jewish population live here full time (defined as eight months of the year or more). However, only 16% of the populace belong to local synagogues. Moreover, the Palm Beach Federation's Campaign department reports that just 16% of households in their service area donate to the Federation. Thus, there is great concern about Jewish continuity.

In his Summary Report, Sheskin recommended, "In view of the Jewish identity and continuity issues facing the Greater Palm Beaches Jewish community, the organized Jewish community needs to market the many different ways to 'be Jewish' to those who are unaffiliated or only marginally involved. Most Jews who are unaffiliated or marginally involved view Judaism only in terms of synagogue life and religious practice. The ethnic, historical, social and cultural connections should also be emphasized. Adult Jewish education classes and programs... as well as Jewish cultural and social events and programs may attract some unaffiliated Jews. Emphasis on *tikkun olam* and social action programs... and Israel-oriented programming may attract still others."

The younger population is also of great significance. As Sheskin pointed out, "With younger families moving into the Palm Beach area, it is incumbent upon us to provide more entry points for them to experience Jewish cultural life... The younger households exhibit lower levels of Jewish connectivity... Efforts to engage people in Jewish life should clearly be aimed at the next generation, and innovative programming to attract this group needs to be developed."

As this problem becomes increasingly prevalent throughout the United States, more and more Federations and Jewish groups are focusing on art and culture as a vehicle to attract those who are disengaged.

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In an article for *The Jewish Week* entitled, “Who Should Pay For Jewish Culture?” Chanan Tigay interviewed Richard Siegel, executive director of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. Siegel observed, “Culture is far more than entertainment. It’s about education. It’s a means of values transmission; it’s a means of looking into the nature of a community in a new and open way.”

More and more experts are publicly debating the value of Jewish arts as a gateway to further Jewish involvement. At the Spring 2006 Jewish Funders Network conference in Denver, several panels discussed the role of culture and arts. The two-day Sidney Krum Conference, held September 12-13, 2006 at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, examined the impact of modern Jewish arts on the community.

On September 18, 2006, “The New Jewish Engagement: A Conference on Young Adults, Culture and Jewish Identity,” hosted by UJA-Federation of New York, explored findings of a new National Foundation for Jewish Culture study. Commissioned by NFJC and funded by UJA-Federation of NY, “Cultural Events and Jewish Identities: Young Adult Jews in New York” was conducted by sociologists Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman and released on May 19, 2006.

According to the NFJC’s September newsletter, The Cohen – Kelman study analyzed the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey and determined that “ ‘Jewish cultural engagement provides an important link to Jewish life for the intermarried, the geographically remote, the unmarried and the unaffiliated,’ the most difficult populations to reach for the organized Jewish community. The ‘functions’ of Jewish cultural engagement include community-building, networking, challenging the conventional, and serving as a laboratory for new cultural ideas and forms.”

Commenting on their study, Cohen and Kelman said, “These young adult Jews see organized Jewry as alien, uniform, coercive, and parochial, both socially and culturally. In contrast, cultural events create a new space where they can express themselves Jewishly in ways that are distinctive to their generation.”

The NFJC article quoted Alisa Rubin Kurshan, senior vice president for strategic planning and organizational resources at UJA-Federation of New York, who stated that their Federation has been funding cultural projects such as an annual Jewish cultural festival and a Jewish record label for years.

“UJA-Federation commissioned this research because we seek to engage young people in Jewish life through innovative models of programming that foster Jewish connections at a time in life when many young people disaffiliate with the Jewish community,” Kurshan said. “The findings affirm the value of Jewish culture as a means of reaching the unengaged and providing safe spaces for young Jewish adults to explore what being Jewish means to them.”

The reality that emerges is that young Jews are not necessarily turning away from the Jewish community. Rather, they are finding new ways to relate and identify.

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Citing the NFJC study, Jared Newman reported in *The Jewish Week*: “Young Jews, even those who avoid synagogue and JCC memberships, read Jewish books, listen to Jewish music and attend Jewish concerts... Unaffiliated Jews were most comfortable in secular venues.”

Writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Lisa Alcalay Klug described the popular Jewish hipster movement, which “celebrates Yiddishkeit, Ashkenazi Jewish culture, with humor and irreverence.”

Klug detailed how this cultural revival is manifested in feature films with Jewish characters; publications such as *Hebe* magazine and *Guilt & Pleasure*; Original Jewish Gangstas, a Bay Area rap group; and Storahtelling, which uses performance art and “ritual” theatre to promote Jewish culture. The hugely popular Chasidic reggae singer Matisyahu appears on the JDub record label. The Jewcy.com website sells “Super Jew” t-shirts, as does San Francisco’s Jewish Fashion Conspiracy, where “Yo Semite” and “omg-d” are top sellers. Another young businessman in the San Francisco area markets He’Brew: the Chosen Beer.

Klug explained that many of these enterprises are funded by the Joshua Venture, a philanthropic group that grants seed money to young Jewish artists and entrepreneurs.

Looking to the future, Rabbi Joshua Lookstein is encouraging the Abraham Project to schedule more programs for singles, young couples, young families and families with school age children. “I think we should be refocusing the programs to a younger crowd, one whose increased affiliation would impact the community,” he recommended.

Clearly, Jeffrey Klein and Daniel Abraham were accurate in their assessment of the community’s need for expanded and innovative cultural and educational opportunities. As the Jewish community sets plans in motion to reach out and capture the attention and imagination of the unaffiliated and marginally engaged populace, The Abraham Project is in a unique position to implement many of Federation’s goals for outreach and community building by providing multiple learning opportunities, engaging quality educators, attracting broader participation, promoting involvement, linking organizations and using non-traditional sites.

Looking Ahead

In assessing the Abraham Project’s accomplishments after three years of operation, Jeffrey Klein noted, “I’m never one that’s satisfied with things the way they are. We’ve had some very good programs - and we’ve had some misses. In general, I think it has met my expectations. I think that we’ve learned a lot as we go along - and I think the program is getting better.”

Both Mr. Abraham and Mr. Klein want the Abraham Project to become more broad-based. They would like the Project to focus on high profile speakers and performers at more “mega” events and to schedule fewer classes and small-scale programs in the future.

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Klein pointed out, “There are some areas which we haven’t gone into at all, like Jewish theatre and Jewish music, which ...we might contemplate for the future. We haven’t gone into any kind of serious Israel scholarship. I think we have to focus on young people, too... We’re not going to attract people unless we offer them what they cannot find elsewhere. We have to be expansive in our thinking.”

Klein and Lookstein concurred that this is a project that could be replicated in other communities. Klein advised anyone interested in creating a similar program to “develop a proposal showing how the project would transform a community, using our Abraham Project as a model. Then present it to a donor who you think will be compelled and motivated to fund a program like this.

“There are many donors out there who respond to expansive ideas - and this is a very great example. We have to think beyond the boundaries of what communities historically provide.”

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