



The Origins of Our Philanthropy

The Rochester Jewish Community

The rich philanthropic tradition of Rochester is often credited to George Eastman. However, many groups contributed to that tradition, not the least of which was Rochester's Jewish community. Philanthropic giving is a strongly held value in the Jewish tradition. The Hebrew word *tzedakah*, often translated as "charity", actually means "justice" and exemplifies the Jewish tradition of giving to and doing good for others as a cultural imperative.

Mutual aid societies were a common form of U.S. charity in the 1870's and 80's as immigrant groups organized to welcome new residents. In 1881, when George Eastman was making his first philanthropic gift of \$50, German Jewish immigrants in Rochester had established United Jewish Charities and Associated Hebrew Charities, formed by the mergers of multiple Jewish charities. The 20th century brought the Russian Revolution, World War I, and a greater influx of Orthodox Eastern European Jewish refugees, and the charitable focus moved beyond self-help to cultural assimilation (see Baden Street).

Baden Street Settlement House (now part of Community Place of Rochester) was established in the early 1900s by Reform Jews to "Americanize" and integrate young East European immigrants into the Rochester community. It became a model for social welfare work in the city, publishing a city-wide paper, *The Bulletin*. This paper grew into a community publication, *The Common Good of Civic and Social Rochester*, which addressed welfare problems, health and sanitary issues, city planning and public education. As the character of the neighborhood changed in the late 1920's, the Settlement House became more nonsectarian, and today serves a diverse racial and ethnic population.

By the 1920's the Jewish population in Rochester numbered 15,000, primarily divided by their origins in Germany or Eastern Europe – each with their own charities. The two charities merged at the urging of leaders of the Rochester Community Chest, but the merger didn't last. It was Jewish youth, born and raised in Rochester, and the rise of Zionism that ultimately united the reform and traditional communities and their charitable associations. The *kristallnacht* pogrom in Nazi Germany in 1939 was a precipitating factor that brought the community together. The Jewish Community Federation of Greater Rochester was formed that year to provide unified fundraising for local Jewish charities, and national and international Jewish causes.

The Rochester Jewish community exemplifies today's philanthropy, following the call of *tikkun olam* (repair the world). They have supported disaster relief, giving millions for victims of Hurricane Andrew and the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake. They have helped welcome Soviet and Ethiopian Jews to Israel, and supported the re-establishment of that Jewish nation, and they continue to generously fund local nonprofit organizations.

Although the greater Rochester Jewish population has remained relatively stable over the past 70 years at 22-25,000, their philanthropy has gradually increased. Rochester is considered a city with mid-level Jewish population density – one among 37 similar Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the U.S. The Jewish Community Federation of Greater Rochester is among the top 40 federations out of 200 in North America, raising over \$4.9 million in its last annual campaign with an endowment over \$30 million. "It is the global story," says Larry Fine, director of the Jewish Community Federation, "that compels the continued generous giving of our community. We value both the national pride of Israeli Jews and the cultural affinity of Americans who are Jewish."

Sources:

A Brief History of the Federation System, United Jewish Communities. 2001-2006, www.ujc.org.

Philanthropic Giving Among American Jews: Contributions to Federation, Jewish and Non-Jewish Causes. From the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001. United Jewish Communities Report Series.

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