

A Unique Prize Taps Jewish Wisdom to Defend Democracy. Who Are the Winners?

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen



American democracy is under attack, the institutions at its very foundation—the press and the courts, among others—getting daily criticism from extremist voices that were once on the margins of U.S. society, but are now, through amplification by social media and the president, more powerful than ever before.

Acutely aware of the weakening of democratic norms and values, the Lippman Kanfer Prize for Applied Jewish Wisdom decided this year—its second—to focus on funding projects bringing Jewish wisdom to bear on strengthening democracy and increasing civic engagement.

Partnering with the Democracy Fund and an anonymous donor, the prize is awarding a total of \$150,000 to seven new and established projects addressing these topics through a Jewish lens.

“We’re supporting the prize because we’re living in a moment where the fragility of American democracy has become apparent to everyone regardless of where you sit on the political spectrum,” said Joe Goldman, president of the Democracy Fund, which was created by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. “It’s really important at a time like this for people of all walks of life and backgrounds to commit to the importance of our democracy and commit to taking responsibility for the health of our political system,” he said in an interview. The Democracy Fund primarily underwrites initiatives that focus on journalism, elections and governance.

The catalyst for Lippman Kanfer’s pivot to addressing democracy was the 2016 presidential election, in which Donald Trump edged out Hillary Clinton in the electoral college vote after campaigning on a platform anchored by chants of “lock her up” and promises to build a wall to keep Mexican and Central American immigrants out. In the more than two years since President Trump took office, he has added to his list of tropes questioning “fake news” media, accusing the press of lying, and challenging the worthiness of sitting federal judges.

Day after the election, the foundation’s board met, said Aaron Dorfman, Lippman Kanfer’s president, in an interview. “Much of the conversation was about ‘what does this mean for this country and its democratic institutions?’ We made a commitment that if we’re in the business of bringing Jewish wisdom to bear on critical questions facing human beings, we have to tackle democracy.” The Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah’s grantmaking in 2018, aside from the prize, was \$1.6 million, and Dorfman said it expects to spend about the same this year.

The prize winners were announced today at the annual meeting of the Jewish Funders Network, which this year is being held in San Francisco. Roughly 550 funders and foundation staff from nine countries are attending the JFN conference, said JFN spokesman Seth Chalmer.

There were 127 applicants for the prize, Dorfman said, and through a multi-stage review process, the judging committee selected three established Jewish programs to receive \$30,000 each; four new endeavors were awarded \$15,000 each. Dorfman stressed that prize organizers took care to ensure that judging was totally nonpartisan, and included experts with a range of political views from left to right. The anonymous donor partner is unidentified due to concern that critics might view such involvement as partisan, said Dorfman.

Winners of the 2019 prize in the “established” category are: Facing History and Ourselves, which provides teachers with resources to connect humanities content to Jewish history, wisdom and text, and to students’ ethical dilemmas; Minyan Tzedek’s Organizing for Social Change project from the Los Angeles congregation Ikar, which uses community organizing principles to cultivate a social justice-oriented culture, and registered 100 percent of its community members to vote; and Tivnu: Building Justice. Tivnu, the only U.S.-based gap year program for Jewish high school grads, engages participants in direct service work in Portland, including skilled construction of houses for homeless individuals and advocacy organizing.

New ideas category winners include a pre-college program at Brandeis University called “Being the Change: Public Policy, Justice, and Advocacy.” Program participants will apply the Talmud’s wisdom to navigate differences of opinion and learn about the value of being in reciprocal relationship with text and democracy. Another winner is a Reform temple called Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation in Reston. Its new “Rebuilding Democracy Project” will teach participants to use Jewish concepts and values to elevate a sense of shared national purpose, see others as human rather than partisan, and safely work through conflicting narratives. Another “new ideas” winner is Mah Tovv [or “what is good], an “inclusive Jewish space” in St. Louis. Its project “Three Occasions: Shalosh Regalim for Civic Engagement” is tied to the three Jewish holidays, Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot, that were historically occasions for pilgrimage to the Temple, which was the seat of governance and ritual observance in Jerusalem. Its goal is “to help increase civic engagement and advance regional progress.”

The last has a portmanteau of a name: CIVruta.

The new project is rooted in the idea of a study partnership, which in Hebrew is *hevruta*, but focused on civics. Its sponsor is the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, and the goal is to create a day-long “civic *beit midrash*,” or “house of study,” which will bring together about 50 local community leaders—some Jewish, many not—to learn specific skill sets and their foundations in Jewish values and commitments, said Mary Kohav, vice president of community engagement at the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.

Three of L.A.’s top civic leaders—the mayor, controller and city attorney—identify as Jewish, but it’s often unclear how Jewish values can inform local policies and approaches, said Shawn Landres in the same interview. Landres is chair of the L.A. County Quality & Productivity Commission, which oversees the nation’s oldest and largest local government innovation fund and is a Jewish federation lay leader who initiated the idea for *CIVruta*. The goal of the day-long conference, which they expect to happen late next fall, said Kohav, is to “take these universal Jewish values and illuminate how this Jewish wisdom informs just and fair social justice practices. Perhaps the awareness that Jewish values underpin a lot of what we see as the right direction for our city and our country isn’t so known or understood,” she said. The \$15,000 prize money will pay for renting space for the program, publicity and providing food and honoraria for some speakers.

The funding behind the Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah lies in carbon and tar, and the difficulty that Goldie Lippman, the grandmother of current foundation leaders, had cleaning her hands at the end of each day she worked in an Akron, Ohio rubber factory during World War II. Her husband, Jerry, enlisted the help of a local professor, and together, they developed GoJo hand cleanser, which was used in factories and then food service and healthcare facilities. In 1988, the company developed Purell instant hand sanitizer, which was introduced to the consumer market a few years later—and is today ubiquitous.

Perhaps in the grand scheme of things, it’s no irony that money made from cleaning dirty hands now ensures that those who control American democracy have clean hands themselves.