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Does Hollywood give Jewish?

By Brad A. Greenberg, Staff Writer

This is what Hollywood's old-school Jewish philanthropy looks like: 900 Jews worried about anti-Semitism sitting inside the International Hall of the Beverly Hilton.

Holocaust survivors sit side-by-side with some of entertainment's biggest big shots. Onstage, the American and Israeli flags hang together, with "Rush Hour" director Brett Ratner saying the Hamotzi; Rabbi Meyer H. May singing the national anthem and Hatikvah; talk show host Larry King telling jokes and introducing household names, like Queen Latifah, that aren't necessarily Jewish.

It's the 30th anniversary of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the internationally recognized human rights organization and operator of the Museum of Tolerance located a mile and a half away, and the men behind this June 20 gala are Jewish entertainment chieftains □ Time Warner President and COO Jeff Bewkes, Universal Studios President and COO Ron Meyer and, specifically, Jeffrey Katzenberg, a center trustee and CEO of Dreamworks Animation.

No. 40 on the list of wealthiest Angelenos, according to the Los Angeles Business Journal, Katzenberg has given millions to philanthropies ranging from the Motion Picture & Television Fund to AIDS Project Los Angeles to the American Jewish Committee. For the past 15 years, though, his favorite Jewish cause has been the Wiesenthal Center.

"When I took my first tour, the sensation was almost overwhelming -- a combination of anger, sadness, hope and resolve to support this institution in any way possible," Katzenberg tells his \$125-a-plate guests in opening remarks.

This is a familiar sight, one steeped in tradition. The Wiesenthal Center may only be 30 years old, but Jewish entertainment leaders have been deeply involved in Jewish nonprofits since before Hollywood became synonymous with the motion-picture business.

First it came from the fathers of film, Carl Laemmle, the Warner brothers and Samuel Goldwyn; the second take was of "The Last Mogul" Lew Wasserman and game-show host Monty Hall; next came Sherry Lansing, Steven Spielberg, Katzenberg and a few others. Soon, that task will fall to a new generation that is now in its 20s, 30s and early 40s. But who will step forward as tomorrow's Katzenbergs or Wassermans or Warners?

That is a difficult question to answer because most of today's Jewish philanthropists are cut from a different mold than their predecessors.

On the one hand, no longer feeling the insularity and even paranoia that led them to support only their own, many of today's Hollywood's Jews -- notables include David Geffen and Michael Eisner -- are increasingly giving to causes that have nothing to do with Israel or the Jewish community directly.

At the same time, some organizations have found that appealing to the singular Jewish community isn't the only way to go: Jewish World Watch, a decidedly Jewish organization founded by a rabbi and designed to provide relief to people under genocidal attack, has had great

success partnering with black actors, even more so than Jewish ones.

And then there are those who pick and choose their causes specific to their own personal development. Peter Spears, as just one example, came to Hollywood for his work, but recently found himself on a mission to Israel's film industry, which helped him to rediscover his Jewish self in the process.

This is Hollywood Jewish giving ... Take 4 ...

The perception that Hollywood doesn't do squat for the Jews may be as much a part of Jewish belief as monotheism. It's hyperbole, but a disconnect does exist between many Hollywood Jews and the greater Jewish community. Some of it can be attributed to the phlegmatic nature of Los Angeles, some to the city's geography and transient nature of its denizens and some to the growing trend away from Jewish giving.

David Lonner, co-head of the motion picture department at the William Morris Agency -- who has been described in this paper as "the kind of agent whom stars thank by name, along with God, from the Oscar podium" -- has wrestled with these forces as he's tried to engage his colleagues in issues he finds important to the Jewish community, both by taking them to Israel on trips he funds and by serving at one point as the volunteer president of The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles' Entertainment Division.

"In the '60s and '70s you had people from that generation who were very affected by those two gigantic earthquakes in Jewish history," said Lonner, 45, referring to the Holocaust and the creation of a Jewish state. "Now you've got an assimilated, prosperous society who is also focused on what affects their lives directly. It is not that they are shunning Jewish causes; it is just that they are removed."

To be sure, this phenomenon is affecting young Jews across the country, not just in Hollywood. Recent studies -- by Brandeis University, Reboot, sociologist Steven Cohen, Hillel -- have found young Jews are conflicted about how to express their identity. They are proudly Jewish -- some more "Jew-ish" -- and cherish the culture, but they have little attachment to Judaism and reject the idea of remaining part of an insular tribe. In terms of charity, or tzedakah, they want to heal the world, but they aren't so comfortable doing it the way their parents did.

"It is an acknowledgement that one's responsibility is to the broader community," said Dan Adler, a former talent agent and vice president of business development at Walt Disney Imagineering, now working on an Internet venture. "Whether it is Darfur or poverty, or whether it is any cause it might be, the Jewish community is doing a great job of honoring those broader pillars of Judaism, whether you want to frame it in tikkun olam or frame it in a responsibility to the broader community."

But what has this meant for Los Angeles' Jewish community?

It is no secret that Jews built Hollywood, but less widely known is that Hollywood helped build L.A. Jewish life. The American Jewish Committee's local chapter and the ancestors of The Federation have their roots in the entertainment industry. So do prominent synagogues like Temple Israel of Hollywood and Wilshire Boulevard Temple. Sixty years ago, about a third of the annual contributions to The Federation's predecessor, the Jewish Welfare Fund, came from the entertainment industry. In 2005, the proportion of The Federation's total from the industry was between 8 and 10 percent.

That generation was less concerned with Jewish education or culture or benevolent services than with telling the story of Jewish assimilation and affluence in America, said Gerald Bubis, founding director of the Irwin Daniels School of Jewish Communal Service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

"Their efforts were not altruistic," Bubis said. "They were concerned about what would gentiles think about Jews. The bulk of what they did in the Jewish community was focused on how to protect the good name of the Jews, not to help Jewish people in need."

Some, like talent head William Morris, preferred to support Jewish efforts that dropped the word "Jew" from fundraising literature. And others, like David Selznick, wanted nothing to do with Jewish causes regardless of how they were framed.

"I am not interested in Jewish political problems," Selznick told screenwriter Ben Hecht, according to Hecht's memoir "A Child of the Century," when he was raising money for Jews in Palestine during World War II. "I'm an American and not a Jew. I'm interested in this war as an American. It would be silly of me to pretend suddenly that I'm a Jew, with some sort of full-blown Jewish psychology."

For those not at the top, there was plenty of pressure to give. The United Jewish Welfare Fund circulated a magazine that listed how much Jewish entertainers had given, and the constant demand for money, often coming from studio higher-ups, was enough to drive some crazy.

"Jack Warner demanded that his Jewish employees donate a percentage of their salary to the United Jewish Welfare Fund," Neil Gabler wrote in "An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood." "During a fundraising drive, he would call them into the studio commissary.

"When we were all assembled,' screenwriter Alvah Bessie remembered, '[Warner] marched in and -- to our astonishment -- brandished a rubber truncheon, which had probably been a prop for one of the anti-Nazi pictures we were making. He stood behind his table and smashed the length of the rubber hose on the wood, and then he smiled and said, 'I've been looking at the results of the Jewish Appeal drive, and believe you me, it ain't good.'" Here he paused for effect and said, "Everybody's gonna double his contribution here and now -- or else!" The rubber truncheon crashed on the table again as everyone present reached for our checkbooks."

Historically, though, Hollywood was considered a dry well for all charitable causes. But a decade ago that trend started to shift, marked by a 1997 New York Times article that stated, "In Hollywood, a new generation of philanthropists is being born -- and not a moment too soon."

The report largely focused on people making sizable contributions to improve L.A. culture -- David Geffen giving \$5 million to the Geffen Playhouse in Westwood and Michael Eisner committing \$25 million from his then-media empire, the Walt Disney Company, for downtown's Disney Concert Hall -- but also noted people like Spielberg who were donating millions to enrich specific communities.

"For all their glitzy wealth and self-promotion, residents of Los Angeles, particularly members of the entertainment industry, have been relatively stingy when it comes to charity," the paper reported.

Compare that to this turn of phrase by The Hollywood Reporter in its annual philanthropy issue this month. "These days, executives themselves are as likely to be found rolling up their sleeves for charity as they are posing for paparazzi at posh dinners. Indeed, the people at the top can be a nonprofit's best friend."

The shift in Hollywood's attitude toward philanthropy can be partially attributed to a sort of economic enlightenment, said Alan J. Abramson, director of the nonprofit sector and philanthropy program at the Aspen Institute. Hollywood gets that conspicuous acts of charity can be a good investment.

"Celebrities are like corporations, so philanthropy has the same attraction," he said. "It gives them

a chance to get their names out there associated with a humanitarian cause that might go down well with the public, and so the public might think better about celebrities like they would about corporations doing philanthropy in the U.S. and the world.

"It is good to better the world," Abramson said. "But it also makes good business sense."

Hollywood Jews have gotten more involved, too, and they aren't limiting their support to organizations building schools in Israel or fighting anti-Semitism in Europe.

Howard Gordon, executive producer of "24," and his wife, Cami, contribute heavily to both University Synagogue and the Stroke Association of Southern California. They also give to the "I Have a Dream" Foundation, which, among other things, provides college scholarships to inner-city children who maintain good grades.

"Helping someone help themselves is the greatest form of giving," Howard Gordon said. "It was not a Jewish charity, per se, but it is based on Jewish values."

Such enlightenment has put Jewish organizations in fundraising competition with those searching for a cure for breast cancer or trying to slow the pace of global warming. "Or," The Federation's Meredith Weiss said, "whatever the sexiest cause is."

Right now, that would be Africa.

The entire July issue of Vanity Fair, guest-edited by U2's Bono, was dedicated to issues affecting Africa. A front-page Sunday story in the Washington Post last month followed Drew Barrymore up the Capitol steps as she lobbied on behalf of the U.N. World Food Program for African child-feeding programs. George Clooney just filmed the documentary "A Journey to Darfur," Brad Pitt helped start the One Campaign to Make Poverty History after visiting Ethiopia and South Africa, and his love interest, Angelina Jolie, is a goodwill ambassador for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

Within this milieu, only a short jaunt over the Santa Monica Mountains, Jewish World Watch began three years ago at Valley Beth Shalom and has since received international recognition for its efforts to end the slaughtering in Darfur. The organization receives most of its support from synagogues and schools, public and private, Jewish and Christian.

Jewish World Watch has not set out to court celebrities, though it has caught some of their attention. Actors Danny Glover and Forest Whitaker attended its Seder for Darfur and Don Cheadle, who starred in "Hotel Rwanda," just filmed a public-service announcement promoting the Encino-based organization's Solar Cooker Project, which fits refugee camps with solar heating and protects women from the dangers of leaving the camp for firewood.

The organization has not asked Hollywood Jews and been rejected, said JWW President and CEO Janice Kamenir-Reznik said. It simply hasn't asked. To date, only a few Hollywood Jews have gotten involved, chiefly actress Monica Horan Rosenthal and her husband Phil Rosenthal, creator of the sitcom "Everybody Loves Raymond."

"We can't turn a blind eye on things of a horrific global nature," said Horan Rosenthal, who was raised Catholic and converted to Judaism before marriage. "The worst genocide of all time was the Holocaust, and from that I think the Jewish people have taken on that we are never going to let that happen again."

Across the nation, though, Jews are increasingly giving to non-Jewish causes. The Institute for Jewish & Community Research found that between 1995 and 2000, only 6 percent of the money given away by Jewish mega-donors went to Jewish causes.

In 2002, the year before the study was published, David Geffen, the movie and music mogul, was the fourth-most generous donor in the country, according to the Chronicle of Philanthropy. But of the \$206.2 million he donated or pledged, \$200 million was for the UCLA School of Medicine and \$5 million the Geffen Playhouse, leaving at most 0.5 percent of his charity for Jewish causes. The year before, when his foundation reported \$2 million in charitable contributions, \$110,000 went to Jewish organizations.

But that does not mean Jewish philanthropy has gone wrong. Jews have long cared about the arts and about medicine, about creating a better world, whether it's the world of Jewish life or the whole globe.

"What's best is the person who is not saying, 'I will care for the whole world at the expense of the Jews,' or 'I will care about the Jews at the expense of the world,'" said Bubis, the Jewish communal service expert. "A wholesome and fulfilled Jewish philanthropist is one who finds opportunities and outlooks and bridges those two into the fusion. That is why for me a Jewish World Watch is a healthy fusion of something universally mindful out of a sensitivity of what a Jew is supposed to care about as a human being based on what Jewish texts teach. It is not either/or."

These are better days for Hollywood Jews. They no longer need to change their names -- sometimes not even their noses. Orthodox screenwriters like David Sacks of "The Simpsons" and "Malcolm in the Middle" find producers more understanding of Shabbat. Young stars like Natalie Portman, Sacha Baron Cohen and Seth Rogen make it cool to be Jewish.

But a chasm remains between Jewish identity and Jewish institutions. One reason has as much to do with geography and economy as it does with generational shift. The problem in Los Angeles is not simply that young Jews aren't interested in Jewish organizations. The problem, in part, is Los Angeles.

"There is plenty of blame to go around. Some of it is Los Angeles, some of it is the Jewish community, some of it is the lack of appeal to younger people," said Donna Bojarsky, an adviser to Hollywood figures. "In the Los Angeles Jewish community, most people didn't grow up here. You don't have those communal ties that sometimes facilitate engagement. The Jewish community itself, therefore, is perceived as your mother's or grandmother's Jewish community, so it doesn't seem as interesting to younger Jews."

Scott Halle's story makes the case for the importance of communal continuity. A 28-year-old native of the San Fernando Valley, Halle grew up attending the shul his grandparents help start -- Valley Beth Shalom -- and watching his parents in volunteer leadership at The Federation.

"I can see my stepfather running around at the West Valley JCC on Super Sunday, talking on his walkie-talkie. He always looked happy."

So when Halle returned in 2002 from the University of Wisconsin, volunteering at The Federation would have to fit into his schedule somewhere between co-founding a production-management company and participating in the AIDS Walk.

"I always knew I was going to be involved in Jewish causes," he said.

For Keren Markuze, who arrived in the Fairfax District from Montreal without a thread of attachment to the Jewish community surrounding her, getting philanthropically plugged in was much more challenging.

She eventually discovered the Progressive Jewish Alliance, which hooked her up with a victim-offender mediation program, and once she decided she was going to stay in Los Angeles a while, she called Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters. For the past three years, the 30-year-old documentary

TV writer -- Markuze's main work has been scripting medical programs for Discovery Health -- has spent a few hours every other week with her 11-year-old little sister.

"One of the most important aspects of my Judaism is the sense of love thy neighbor as you love thyself," Markuze said. "That is where I draw a lot of my identity from in terms of giving back. If you look at tradition and ritual, a lot of the things we do are ultimately about how our actions can benefit our community and society."

The Federation has created a feeder for both the Halles and Markuzes in the form of its Entertainment Division. The division, which has been around longer than officials can remember, has been recently re-energized by director Meredith Weiss, who left Creative Artists Agency last year after five years in its entertainment-marketing group. It operates a yearlong leadership institute, organizes industry socials and facilitates missions to Israel.

"The goal of this is to get them to start believing in philanthropy now so it is a part of their being as they grow in their careers and professional development," Weiss said.

In a place where time is money -- and the young have no time to spare and even less money -- donating energy and enthusiasm is how many young Jews choose to give back.

"In Israel, you did Milu'im, which is reserve duty, and officers do it between 30 and 42 days a year. If you live in America, you don't have to do that. The least I could do is volunteer for the community and help people less fortunate than us," said Amotz Zakai, vice president of Echo Lake Productions.

Zakai, 34, who moved from Israel to Los Angeles 12 years ago, volunteered for five years with The Federation and ran a youth program at Temple Israel of Hollywood that planted trees, cooked for AIDS patients and visited women's shelters.

"We really live in this bubble, especially in Hollywood. There is no connection to the real world. It is like this magical wonderland," he said. "Think about it: We do jury duty for one or two days here, and we get upset about it. In Israel, you serve in a reserve unit in the Gaza Strip and you might die."

Cynical. Pessimistic. Lazy. Uninspired. Gen-Xers may be the most maligned generation since the Gilded Age, but they also learned a lot more about charity at a younger age than their parents. That's become increasingly the case with Generation Y, or the Millennialists.

"What I am getting from the people who come to me -- the agents and celebs and whoever else comes through -- is this, and this is refreshing," said Michelle Kleinert, executive director of the Lastfogel Foundation at William Morris. "I don't want to just write a check. I write a lot of checks. I want to get involved. I don't have a lot of time, but I want to do something I am passionate about."

For Brad Fuller (photo), producer of "The Hitcher" and "The Amityville Horror," that meant delivering Shabbat meals to homebound Jews and getting involved with the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and its annual dinner at which an entertainer -- the past three were Barry Meyer, Amy Pascal and Joe Roth -- is given the Dorothy and Sherrill C. Corwin Human Relations Award, which is named for Fuller's maternal grandparents, who owned Metropolitan Theaters.

"It is my responsibility to continue the tradition of my grandparents," said Fuller, 41. "If you can, it is a blessing to be able to give back. I was taught to do it. I was raised doing it. I don't know anything else."

The AJC reported that last fall's dinner brought in \$1.5 million for the national organization. A lot of that is thanks to having a name like Meyer's, the chairman and CEO of Warner Bros., on the

program. This is an advantage of being a household name in Hollywood: Your involvement with charities doesn't so much demand that you dig into your pocket as it creates the expectation you'll inspire others to reach into theirs.

And when words speak louder than actions, an entertainer's message often means more than their money. That is why the Consulate General of Israel recently created a special consul liaison to Hollywood. And that is why Sam Nazarian, a young Persian Jew, whose company SBE Entertainment owns several nightclubs and produced the film "Mr. Brooks" this spring, held a fundraiser last October at his Sunset club Privilege for victims of Hezbollah rocket fire in Israel's north.

"People in Hollywood are often viewed as trendsetters," Nazarian said, "and that is an important role when translated to charity."

Spielberg, in particular, wields unfathomable influence; in May, he told the Chinese government that he was ready to meet with President Hu Jintao to urge Beijing to help stop genocide in Darfur.

But Tinseltown is a fickle place, and even Spielberg's popularity as a supporter of Jewish causes has ebbed and flowed. After directing "Schindler's List," founding the Shoah Foundation to record the stories of Holocaust survivors and creating the Righteous Persons Foundation, to which he has contributed about \$70 million, predominantly for Jewish causes, Spielberg's social capital took a significant blow two years ago with the release of his film "Munich" -- criticized as "an anti-Zionist epic" and "a politically correct 'Mein Kampf' for our time."

"It takes a Hollywood ignoramus to give flesh to the argument of a radical anti-Semitic Iranian," Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer griped.

Less than a year later, with Israel at war with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, Spielberg was exalted as a hero when his Righteous Persons Foundation donated \$1 million for Israeli relief. The money was significant, but his philanthropic adviser said the gesture was more so.

"Having someone like Steven Spielberg back a cause provides a seal of approval, a mark of credibility, for much of the Hollywood community," Andy Spahn told The Journal last August.

Israel has traditionally been taboo for Hollywood philanthropy, too politically charged for the image-conscious. Sure, Joshua Malina had no problem speaking out during the Second Intifada on behalf of Israel and Jason Alexander wasn't punished for joining a few other actors on the Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative One Voice. But such cases have been the exception, not the rule -- until a few years ago, and not just for Jews but non-Jews, too.

Last summer, 84 celebrities signed a letter that ran as a full-page ad in the Los Angeles Times urging the world to support Israel's fight against Hezbollah, Hamas and terrorism. Jews and non-Jews joined hands, including Sylvester Stallone and Sumner Redstone, Nicole Kidman and Haim Saban to state: "If we do not succeed in stopping terrorism around the world, chaos will rule and innocent people will continue to die."

There is, however, another emphasis for entertainers concerned about supporting the Holy Land - giving a leg up to Israel's burgeoning picture business.

"The Jewish mentality and the Jewish sense of the importance of art and the importance of culture is now exploding out of Israel," said Joan Hyler, founder of Hyler Management. "And thank god we have something to talk about, except for the other explosions out of there that have haunted us for the past 10 years."

In May, not long after the Israeli Film Festival came through town, Hyler, another talent agent and

an actor/writer/producer went with The Federation to Tel Aviv to teach a three-day class titled "Hollywood 101." On the third day, Peter Spears shared his journey from Kansas country boy to producer of the new HBO series "John From Cincinnati."

"This is your moment," Spears told a crowd of actors and writers, according to The Federation's newsletter. "Hollywood is looking at Israel right now."

This was the first time Spears, 40, had been to Israel and the second time he had gotten involved with The Federation. The first experience was volunteering to help the elderly after noticing a flier for the organization at an audition. To his pleasure, he was connected with a nonagenarian who made a name in silent films, Loyal Lucas.

"I'd only been out here several years, not a long time, and trying to do this whole Hollywood thing. And here was somebody who had been there in the beginning of Hollywood," Spears said.

Spears' second involvement -- the sojourn to Israel -- so moved him that he had his bar mitzvah at the Western Wall. Coupled together, the experiences taught Spears the importance of getting personally involved.

"It is easier to write a check, but you don't get as much back from the experience as you do when you do it in person," he said. "I wouldn't have the fond memories of going to Israel or spending time with Loyal. I only have a vague recollection of it during tax time. And then you get kind of solicited by them for eternity. That one-on-one thing is really great. Twice now in my life it has been an amazing experience The Federation has afforded me. And if they called me again, I wouldn't hesitate to do whatever it was they asked."

When asked to compare the next generation to the legends of show biz, Bruce Ramer, the high-powered entertainment lawyer and honorary national president of the AJC, said it couldn't be done.

"Wasserman was supportive and active in ways and respects that were appropriate to that day and age," Ramer said of his late friend. "I don't think one can indulge and say he did it better than others. We continue to have exceedingly generous and great people who are leaders. I'm not sure I can compare them; that was a different time.

"Different times, different styles, different methods, different technology, different concerns."

In other words, Hollywood will continue to have Jewish leaders who care about more than themselves, who give time and money to Jewish organizations and secular ones too. The times will change. So will the methods and expressions of charity. But the values remain the same.

Cut!