

PURPOSE



Leonard Polonsky and Georgette Bennett

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Leonard Polonsky, CBE, was the Founding Chairman of Hansard Global Plc and he currently serves as President. He is also Founding Trustee of The Polonsky Foundation in London. Dr. Polonsky is a Fleming Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford and a member of the Circle of Benefactors at Oxford University; a Benefactor of the Guild at Cambridge University and a Governor and Honorary Fellow of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. In 2013, he received an Honorary Doctorate from the Hebrew University, and in the same year, was made Commander of the British Empire by HM Queen Elizabeth.

Dr. Georgette Bennett, President of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, is a sociologist by training, who has spent the past 23 years advancing interreligious relations. She founded Tanenbaum in 1992 to combat religious prejudice, and the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees in 2013 to mobilize support for alleviating the suffering of Syria's war victims. Today, there are 60 affiliate organizations in the Alliance. Dr. Bennett is also a founding Board member of Global Covenant Partners and a key participant in the Global Covenant of Religions. In addition, Dr. Bennett served in the U.S. State Department Religion and Foreign Policy initiative's working group, which developed recommendations for the Secretary of State on countering religion-based violence.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The mission of the U.K.-based Polonsky Foundation is to advance higher education in the humanities and social sciences, as well as to promote the arts, in the U.K., Europe, the U.S., and Israel. Underlying its programs is a deep commitment to the democratization of knowledge and the preservation of our cultural heritage. To that end, one of the Polonsky Foundation's signature projects is creating open access to rare manuscripts by digitizing contents of some of the most important libraries in the world.

Both of you have a clear passion around philanthropy and addressing need. Would you talk about how important that passion is and how you focus your efforts?

Preserving Knowledge and Culture

An Interview with Leonard Polonsky and Georgette Bennett, The Polonsky Foundation

Leonard: Once I started earning surplus money, I started undertaking philanthropic projects that I wasn't able to do before. I was very focused on higher education, most of it related to universities and major national or university libraries. I knew how important education had been in my life.

That focus has been primarily on digitization. I was in the U.S. Army in 1945. That year saw the destruction of the German National Library in Berlin, and the libraries of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I've since been very sensitive to the capacity for destruction during times of war, particularly of the cultural heritage housed in our major libraries.

Many who are successful in business try to work within philanthropy and they say there is a learning curve.

Georgette: Leonard's strategic orientation eliminates a lot of the learning curve in philanthropy because he's very clear about what he wants to do, where he wants to go, and how he wants to get there.

Leonard: It's easy to raise money when it comes to disease. It's more difficult to raise money for cultural things, which are still necessary, but there is also a learning curve for beneficiaries. One of my priorities is to catalyze collaborative operations between grantees – we provide grants and guide the design of the project, and we bring together libraries from two different cultures and encourage them to work together.

The basic rule is that the digitized material must be made freely available to the public. When we digitized Isaac Newton's papers at Cambridge, no one knew how many people would look at them. In the first six months, we had over 100 million hits. We also digitized Einstein's papers in Jerusalem – the first six months also drew similar numbers.

There is a vast audience about which we know only a bit. Now the digitized material is protected and easily available, and we continue to undertake these collaborative efforts.

Georgette: We also have a collaboration in process between the British Library and the French National Library, but not all our projects are collaborations. We're also working with the Library of Congress to digitize the papers of Sigmund Freud; and with the New York Public Library, to digitize documents of the Founding Fathers of the U.S., as well as some great American literary figures.

Making such material freely available is important. It's very expensive for scholars to travel to where these rare manuscripts are housed. As we've learned, the general public is also interested in seeing them. In the end, we're trying to promote the democratization of knowledge.

The point about preserving knowledge was dramatized for us at the Hebrew University when we saw where the Einstein papers were housed. It's a small room. His papers are beautifully organized in cabinets with glass fronts. It would only take one fire or one bomb to destroy them but, with digitization, those papers can never be lost or destroyed.

Leonard: The ancients live on when we're dealing with manuscripts they wrote themselves.

This is really adapting to the future of how students learn?

Georgette: Yes, and digitization also enables them to bring together, in cyberspace, fragments that are located thousands of miles apart.

Is your audience mainly students and educators?

Georgette: We just know it's very geographically diverse and from the most unexpected places. In some cases, there is also an interesting bridge-building dimension. For example, when the digitized Einstein papers were launched in Jerusalem at a Hebrew University press conference, there were 40 media outlets represented, including Al-Jazeera. There was interest even in the Arab world about something being done in Israel.

Digitization is probably the foundation's highest impact area at this moment, but there are some other strategic aspects of the work.

One part of Leonard's vision for a long time has been to strengthen the bonds between China and Israel. To that end, the foundation provides scholarships that enable Israeli graduate students to study in China.

The whole public focus on Israel, when it's not on the conflict with Palestinians, is on its advanced research and technology – "Start-Up Nation." However, the humanities are very much neglected, so this is a gap the foundation helps to fill. In addition to years of funding arts, scholarships – including for Ethiopian students – and awards at several Israeli universities, the most important thing the foundation has done in Israel is to build a post-doctoral research institute for the advanced study of the humanities and social sciences, modeled on the

Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies. The Polonsky Academy, and the Polonsky Fellows that it hosts, are located on the campus of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute.

Also, within the arts, the only New York theater built to perform Shakespeare, is the Polonsky Shakespeare Center, located in the Downtown Brooklyn Cultural District. It is the first permanent home of Theater for a New Audience, the only American company to be invited to perform in the U.K. by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Leonard adores Shakespeare and has been a long-time supporter of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). When they were doing a campaign to rebuild the historic theater at Stratford-on-Avon, RSC approached him for a capital contribution. Before making a decision, Leonard asked them what they had done about women's toilets, since there never seem to be enough of them in theaters.

Leonard: When they were looking for a substantial contribution from me, I asked about increasing these facilities and they said they would talk to their architects. We got nowhere. When we were approached for funding the theater in Brooklyn, they told us that they had provided 50 percent more space for women's facilities. I told them: "You have a deal!" It was \$10 million.

Georgette, would you also touch on those programs that are close to your heart?

Georgette: I'm a child of Holocaust survivors and a refugee myself. Having come out of Communist Hungary, I developed a powerful respect for the U.S. Bill of Rights. I also have a deep interest in religion, going to the First Amendment of the Constitution, and a particular interest in the misuse and abuse of religion as a justification for hatred and violence. My philanthropic interests are very much formed by those influences.

I have always been driven to get behind the headlines and see what is really going on. How does that translate into philanthropy? I'm deeply interested in conflict resolution and I feel the need to try to dig down into a conflict and see where one can intervene. That is reflected in my founding of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding. One of Tanenbaum's four key program areas is the role of religion in conflict resolution. Our network of peacemakers operates on the ground in conflict zones around the world.

Intergroup relations is another focus for me. That used to mean race relations. Given that there are at least 50 conflicts being waged around the world that are based, at least in part, on religion, and given that these conflicts have generated 60 million internally and externally displaced persons, millions of deaths, and unfathomable destruction, I approach intergroup relations through the prism of religion. I see the misuse and abuse of religion as the single greatest threat to world peace.

Where my personal passions intersect with the Polonsky Foundation's mission is in the area of higher education. My specific interest is in preparing doctoral students for careers outside the academy. Ph.D. programs do their students a huge disservice when they promote teaching as the only valid career option. The truth is that

there aren't enough teaching jobs for them in universities. Why should first-rate Ph.D.s settle for jobs at third-rate universities or underpaid adjunct positions, when they could have exciting, applied careers in all kinds of other arenas?

Using my own Ph.D. in sociology, I worked in government, the criminal justice field, broadcasting, marketing and more. I did work that started, or contributed in a major way to, national and international movements. For example, I did some of the pioneering work in what today is called "community policing," and is practiced all over the world. The first federally funded crime victim service center came from an idea that I advanced. Before that, the entire focus was on defendants' rights; no one was focused on victims' rights. I helped train the first women to go on patrol with the New York City Police Department.

From there, I went into broadcast journalism. I was able to do stories that others could not do because of the sociological knowledge I brought with me. I specialized in shattering myths and challenging conventional wisdom. Later, I was Chief Marketing Officer for a bank. I was able to do all this with my sociologist's tool kit.

I'm now also deeply involved in the Syrian humanitarian crisis. My late husband, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, one of the pioneers of interreligious relations and a powerful advocate for refugees, left me very inspired by his work. When he died, I decided nothing I had been doing professionally was as important as building on his work.

I founded the Tanenbaum Center. Marc's professional association was with the American Jewish Committee, but his volunteer activities involved many organizations. Of all of them, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) was the one about which he was the most passionate. So when he died, I offered to take his seat on the board.

In January of 2013, the IRC issued a report on the Syrian crisis. When I read it, I was blown away by the devastation – especially the gender violence – the report described.

Even though these were Syrians – and because I'm a Jew, supposedly my sworn enemies – they are people who are suffering unjustly and severely. I could not stand by idly in the face of this vast tragedy.

I wasn't seeing a Jewish communal response at that time. By mobilizing the Jewish community, I felt we could bring urgently needed help to people who were in desperate straits. This was an opportunity for Syrians and Jews to see each other in a different light.

We were in Jerusalem the year the Polonsky Academy for the Advanced Study of the Humanities and Social Sciences opened. Alan Gill, then-head of the Joint Distribution Committee, was there at the same time. When I asked him about the Jewish response, he got it immediately. We formed the Jewish Coalition for Syrian Refugees, a part of the Jewish Coalition for Disaster Response, which has 46 Jewish organizations in it, and this sub-group has 16.

I had been in close contact with the Jordanian Ambassador to the UN because we were focusing on Jordan initially for a number of reasons. We scaled up the initiative, under

the auspices of the Tanenbaum Center, to a multi-faith alliance, which now has 60 affiliate organizations.

We have a four-part mission.

First is to raise awareness of the crisis and its growing dangers, which involves doing international briefings for government and civil society groups. We also brought a Syrian refugee/activist to Israel for 10 days to meet with every level of government and civil society groups, and he gave lectures at four major Israeli universities. This is historic.

We do many nongovernment briefings as well. We do speaking tours all over the country, and we do work in D.C. We have a team member in Washington because we have a policy reform agenda that will make the resettlement process and screening more efficient without compromising U.S. security criteria.

The second part of the mission is to raise funds in support of organizations that are providing direct services to Syrian war victims. Between the Jewish Coalition and multi-faith alliance, we have raised over \$1.1 million to do that. Individual affiliates of the Alliance have raised millions more through their own organizations.

The third piece is facilitating partnerships between organizations that would not normally think to work together even though they work on similar issues. My favorite example is bringing together HIAS, an organization with Jewish roots, with Orient, a Syrian organization with Muslim roots.

Finally, we're planting the seeds for future stability in the region with people-to-people engagement between Syrians and Israelis.

A number of organizations that were applying to us for funds were Israeli, which is how we learned that there are Israeli NGOs doing work all over the region, at great personal risk.

We further learned that Israelis and Syrians were working together as partners in delivering humanitarian aid. This was potentially a game-changer: enemies could rise above politics and suspicion to work together to alleviate terrible human suffering.

We built on that to create a diplomatic channel for influential Syrians and influential Israelis to work to identify areas where they could work together, looking toward a time when Syria and Israel could be partners instead of enemies.

We have been able to leverage our funds to build this initiative and to attract other funding, but this is the most time-consuming, hands-on philanthropy within my area of interest.

Leonard is my partner in this work. His particular interest is in funding scholarships to bring Syrian undergraduates to universities in the U.K. and U.S. One of the big tragedies of this war is interrupted education. These children, who have been out of school for years, could be the extremists of the future. We must rescue them.

Leonard and I are also involved in the Global Covenant of Religions, which started at Cambridge University with our funding. Its entire focus is delegitimizing the use of religion as a justification for violence and extremism. I don't think that philanthropy can get more timely or relevant than that. ●