The thesis of this paper is that contemporary patterns of Jewish philanthropy, especially philanthropic ties to Israel, are reflective of broader patterns of Jewish collective identity. The stronger the ties to Israel, the stronger the collective identity.

The paper begins with an overview of the role of philanthropy in Jewish tradition, then turns to the role of Israel in Jewish philanthropy, especially American Jewish philanthropy. Changes in patterns of American Jewish philanthropy during the last third of the twentieth century are analyzed and shown to be related to reflect increasing individualization and declining ethnic identity.

Charity and Philanthropy in Jewish Tradition

Jews have historically been an ethno-religious or religio-ethnic group for whom tzedakah, i.e., charity and philanthropy, is a core value. As Isadore Twersky put it, the centrality of philanthropy (tzedakah and chesed) in Jewish life and its concomitant importance in Jewish literature, starting in the biblical period and continuing through talmudic times into the modern era, is copiously documented. Many rabbinic statements which stress with much verve and persuasiveness, the axial role of chesed are frequently quoted; for example, the dictum that “charity if equivalent to all other religious precepts combined” (Bava Batra 9a) or that “He who is merciful to others, mercy is shown to him by Heaven, while he who is not merciful to others, mercy is not shown to him by Heaven.” (Shabbat 151b)

It is not solely an ethical value but a mitzvah, a religious obligation to provide for the needy. It has its origins in the biblically-legislated obligations to leave gleanings and otherwise enable to

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the needy to be beneficiaries of crop yielding.2 With the move to non-agricultural society, these served as the basis for laws of charity and philanthropy which became central in all repositories of Jewish law, Halakhah. Maimonides included care for the needy as basic to an array of other obligations, such as being joyous on festivals3 and celebrating the holiday of Purim.4 In all of them, he emphasized, the primary obligation is to provide food and drink for the needy and to improve their lot.5 Rabbi Joseph Karo, author of the most widely accepted code of Jewish law, demonstrated the central nature of the obligation of charity and philanthropy when he codified those laws of in the same section that he codified the kosher dietary laws, the laws of idolatry, family purity, and the laws of circumcision.6 The Mishnah7 and Talmud8 appear to assert that Jews are obligated to tithe, to give a tenth of their income to charity, and several medieval Ashkenazi rabbis sought to legislate this obligation as a formal tax.9

In Jewish tradition, providing for the needy includes not only alms for the poor, but also providing for such needs as educating their children, dowries for their daughters, as well as a wide array of social services, including providing for the ill, elderly, redemption of slaves and captives, and more. The religious laws of charity and philanthropy not only specified the obligations but also established an institutional structure for providing the services. Organized Jewish charities existed already in talmudic times,10 and they have continued to develop until the present. The centrality of charity and philanthropy in Jewish tradition was probably one of the major reasons that the initial small group of Jews who arrived in New Amsterdam in the mid-sixteenth century was not dissuaded by the condition for

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2 See, for example, Leviticus 19:9–10; Deuteronomy 24:19.
3 Laws of Festivals 6:18.
6 In this, he followed the structure of his predecessor, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (1270–1340), author of the Four Pillars (Arb’a Turim).
7 Pe-ah, ch. 8, no. 6.
8 Ketubot 50a.
10 Second through fifth centuries CE.