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Titans of Industry Join Forces To Work for Jewish Philanthropy

By Lisa Miller Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

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When movie mogul Steven Spielberg, Seagram Chairman Edgar Bronfman Sr. and former hedge-fund manager Michael Steinhardt met at Mr. Steinhardt's Manhattan apartment last month, the main topic was neither films nor high finance but considerably more complex than either: being Jewish.

The three men, among others, were convened for a meeting of the "Study Group," also known informally as the "Mega Group," a loosely organized club of 20 of the nation's wealthiest and most influential Jewish businessmen. Formed seven years ago by Leslie Wexner, chairman of Limited Inc. and Charles Bronfman, Edgar's brother and Seagram Co. cochairman, the group meets twice a year for two days of seminars on topics related to philanthropy and Jewishness. At the April meeting, Mr. Spielberg spoke about his personal religious journey, and then the group discussed Jewish summer camps.

Big Challenges

The Study Group represents some of the nation's most successful executives trying to apply their skills to the world of Jewish philanthropy as it wrestles with big challenges. As the Holocaust recedes in time, if not memory, and Israel becomes a more ambiguous symbol, American Jews are losing some major reasons to identify themselves as Jews. Today, some estimates put the intermarriage rate at nearly 50%.

And as Jewish identification declines, so does giving. At the United Jewish Appeal's UJA Federation-New York, donations have been flat this decade, hovering around \$250 million a year, in spite of the booming economy and the increasing wealth of the donor pool.

The Study Group's members want to take a more entrepreneurial and strategic approach to giving-learning from one another, contributing to one another's causes, launching projects together. "You meet people who are of like mind," says Charles Schusterman, chairman of Samson Investment Co. of Tulsa, Okla., and a Study Group member. "It gives us an opportunity to develop partnerships."

There are similar groups in Judaism as well as other faiths, but few are from the business world's highest ranks -- and few keep such a low profile. The Study Group's meetings are private, and it doesn't publicly release its membership list. Among the members: Harvey "Bud" Meyerhoff, a retired Baltimore-area real-estate developer; Leonard Abramson, founder of U.S. Healthcare Inc.; Lester Crown, a Chicago billionaire and part owner of the Chicago Bulls; Laurence Tisch, chairman of Loews Corp. ; Max Fisher, Detroit financier; and bagel tycoon Marvin Lender.

New members must be recommended by existing members of the group. Mr. Spielberg was a guest at the April meeting, but members say he is considering joining.

Several members declined to discuss the group, and others didn't return phone calls. "We don't want to be seen as the Sanhedrin," says Charles Bronfman, referring to the highest court of the ancient Jews to explain the group's aversion to publicity. "We don't want to be looked at crooked." Furthermore, he says, the group doesn't want to open the door to all kinds of solicitations. Charles Bronfman worries that people will say, "All these hot shots sitting there, let's go schnorr them."

No Threat

Another reason advanced by members for the Study Group's low profile: It doesn't want to look as if it is rebelling against or distancing itself from the UJA Federation system, for decades the backbone of American Jewish philanthropy. "From the beginning, we didn't want to be seen as a threat to anybody," Charles Bronfman says. "And that still pertains." Indeed, the idea for the Study Group originally came from a UJA executive, and the group requires that members contribute to their local UJA.

In working to solve the current crisis, the group is conscious of image: "We want to make it cool to be Jewish," says Edgar Bronfman, whose company's keen sense of image has made it one of the world's most successful marketers.

The Study Group moved from discussion to action about four years ago, when Hillel, the Jewish organization on college campuses, needed refinancing. A small group of members agreed to make a \$1.3 million combined annual donation over five years. Last year, six Study Group members put up \$1.5 million each to help Mr. Steinhardt launch the \$18 million Partnership for Jewish Education, a foundation that makes matching grants to Jewish day schools. Currently, Charles Bronfman and Mr. Steinhardt are working on the nascent Birthright Project, which will help send "any young Jew born on this planet" to Israel who wants to go, Mr. Steinhardt says.

Such efforts sometimes fall short of expectations. Three years ago, the Bronfman Foundation started the Bronfman Curriculum Initiative to help private high schools teach Jewish ethics and philosophy. The Taft School, an elite boarding school in Connecticut, taught a course from the

Bronfman initiative last year, but "there wasn't a lot of response," says school chaplain Michael Spencer.

This year, Taft isn't offering the course. But Mr. Spencer says he hopes to incorporate some components of the course into general-interest subjects such as philosophy and ethics.

Pricey Dues

Though mostly informal, Study Group meetings have a certain protocol. Each meeting begins with dinner and a speaker at someone's house or at a hotel on a Sunday night, then continues the next day with seminars from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Each member contributes \$30,000 a year to pay for research, speakers and incidentals. Many members' wives attended the latest meeting, thanks to the efforts of Andrea Bronfman, Charles's wife. "My wife said, 'You want to talk about Jewish continuity? Where the heck are the women?'" Charles Bronfman says.

Many Study Group members have their own foundations that further the cause of Jewish identity. Mr. Schusterman's foundation will pay a third of the way for any Jewish person in Tulsa under the age of 25 to go to Israel or to a Jewish summer camp.

Mr. Steinhardt has started several projects to draw assimilated young adults to Judaism. Among them is the Jewish Campus Service Corps, a kind of Peace Corps in which recent college graduates spend no less than one year on a college campus. The goal is to create a Jewish life there with everything from leaflets and speakers to Jewish film series and kosher sushi-rolling parties.

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