



- Visual: Merei Sandbrink

Philanthropy after Jeffrey Epstein

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(Social) impact Opinie

Elite lifestyle accessory or profound force for social change – the tussle continues.

- Major figures listed in the Epstein files include Bill Gates, Leslie Wexner, Richard Branson, Ronald Lauder, and Ariane de Rothschild
- Gates Foundation staff feel compromised while Wexner Foundation scholarship recipients whose careers profited wrestle with the burden of Epstein ties
- Is the Ashru fund's reparative philanthropy a model for institutional philanthropy?

The Epstein files confirm what we knew but don't like to speak of much. Respected philanthropists were part of Epstein's universe. That puts foundation staff, scholarship recipients and institutional philanthropy in an uncomfortable place.

When one looks at the number of philanthropists splashed across the Epstein files, it's hard to disagree with critics who point to philanthropy being as much an elite lifestyle accessory as a serious force for social change.

When the US [Department of Justice](#) opened Jeffrey Epstein's inbox to the world - go ahead and see for yourself here via [The Economist](#) and its partnership with [Jmail](#) – it revealed Epstein's role at the heart of a philanthropic elite. He could no longer be casually cast off as one bad apple or unfortunate by-product.

The glittering array of leading philanthropists scattered across the Epstein files include Bill Gates, Leslie Wexner, Ronald Lauder, Richard Branson and Ariane de Rothschild. How do we explain this? Professional relationships only? Of course. Bad judgement? Acknowledged. Conned? For sure.

We knew nothing

It should be made clear that all the above figures deny any knowledge of Epstein's behaviour and none can be deemed responsible just by virtue of being named in a newly released set of files.

We already knew that Bill Gates travelled privately with Jeffrey Epstein thanks to investigative reporting by the [New York Times](#). Now, we've learned more about how Gates Foundation staff were tasked with working with Epstein to build a philanthropic fund to draw on and in his elite contacts - all in the service of public health.

We know that Leslie Wexner –arguably the most influential philanthropist in contemporary American Jewish life – handed his financial management and attorney powers to Epstein all while the fruits of his businesses funded the best and brightest scholars and Rabbis through many hundreds of Wexner fellowships.

Across the Atlantic, Ariane de Rothschild played a leading role in both banking and the [Edmond de Rothschild Family Philanthropy](#). Its corporate banking strategy was devised by Epstein and they planned liaisons in [Paris](#).

Damage to philanthropy

The revelations are damaging to philanthropy.

They inevitably lead the public to question whether major philanthropists should be trusted to address societal harms – including sex trafficking - while associating themselves with someone who caused so many of them?

They also raise questions of integrity. In response to allegations, many sought to play down their associations with Epstein only for further revelations to suggest closer ties than had been known. Philanthropic leadership, like any leadership, relies on trust. And it's hard to see these leaders being trusted in quite the same way.

The revelations also point to an accountability problem. Whilst one of the UK's most senior political figures, Peter Mandelson, was forced to resign, no one can force the resignation of a philanthropist from his own foundation. The foundation's work continues on the global stage. Philanthropists continue to wield the power of presidents with little in the way of formal accountability. The Epstein revelations don't change that.

But what does this all mean for the people working at, say, the Gates Foundation or the hundreds of recipients of Wexner grants and fellowships?

Advance the cause of those who are harmed (Isaiah1:17)

Staff at the Gates Foundation reportedly expressed their concerns through official channels. Bill Gates is understood to have apologised at a staff meeting and the foundation issued a [statement](#) saying it 'regrets' having what it says was a 'small number of foundation employees interact with Epstein...'

While this may have been enough for some staff at the Gates Foundation, Wexner Foundation grantees have demanded a deeper public reckoning. They have faced a deeper reckoning. Wexner Foundation alumni have set up a reparations fund known as the [Ashru Fund](#) – Hebrew for 'aid the wronged'. The fund is a type of [expressive philanthropy](#) acknowledging guilt and complicity and taking concrete action through philanthropy to support victims of sexual violence. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, one of a group of Rabbis and Wexner fellows who is spearheading the fund told the [Religion News Service](#) that 'Alumni of the Wexner Foundation programs benefited ultimately in financial ways, so it makes sense that financial reparations would be the way,' she said. "It makes perfect sense because concrete amends, instead of words, is a way to have a real impact.'

The [Ashru Fund](#) has raised \$55,000 at the time of writing to be donated to a network of survivors of abuse.

Where does this leave the institution of philanthropy itself?

What can and should it do?

We need to be tougher on ourselves. Not because we wish to diminish acts of generosity or reduce them in size or scope. Far from it.

By setting higher standards, we ensure that genuinely good work is better appreciated and respected. Our professional field sometimes seeks to divorce philanthropy from philanthropists. We act as if philanthropists are not part of our field when in fact our field would not exist without them. Many of the examples above are celebrated philanthropy leaders not marginal figures. It is therefore inevitable that philanthropy attracts scrutiny.

As hard as it is, we should ask how the enduring institution of philanthropy looks to the public against the backdrop of the Epstein files? It would be foolhardy for anyone to suggest it emerges unscathed and that its license to operate has not been damaged.

And that's where institutional philanthropy's version of the Ashru Fund could be a powerful example to consider.

We need the public to know that philanthropy is a powerful tool for returning resources to society. We need to show that philanthropic capital is being directed with public purposes always front and centre. And that we act to repair damage for today's mistakes not just those of the past.

If the Epstein episode teaches us one thing, it's that we need the whole philanthropy system to operate according to higher standards. Philanthropy is a profound way to express care for our society - just as we care for our family. But when it becomes a conversation between financial and social elites, we all lose. No philanthropist worthy of the name should have been anywhere near Jeffrey Epstein no matter how much he promised to raise and contribute to causes close to a philanthropist's heart.

It follows that it is not just the job of institutional philanthropy to promote good behavior but to take a stand against bad behavior. For as long as certain philanthropists get a shrug of shoulders and a free pass, it diminishes the work that needs to be done and deepens social ambivalence to the institution of philanthropy itself.

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