

Interview on Water and Philanthropy

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Seth M. Siegel is a lawyer, serial entrepreneur, and author of the New York Times bestseller, "[Let There Be Water: Israel's Solution for a Water-Starved World](#)," which has been published in 50 countries and 16 languages. The longtime Jewish Communal Fund fund-holder lectures about water scarcity all over the world and is a Senior Fellow at the University of Wisconsin's Center for Water Policy. He took time out of his busy schedule to talk with the Jewish Communal Fund about how he became an expert on water scarcity and the innovative solutions used to increase water supply globally, as well as the charitable causes he and his family hold dear.

Interview with Tamar Synder, Jewish Communal Fund

Jewish Communal Fund: What are the key messages you like to share with a wide audience?

Seth M. Siegel: The world is heading into a period of water scarcity. The U.S. government believes that 60 percent of world's land mass and billions of people will be affected by this. Innovative solutions to these problems can be found in Israel, which is good for the world and good for Israel.

JCF: How did you first get involved in this issue?

SMS: My interest began simply as a concerned citizen. I'm a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and I went to a meeting in 2013 where a U.S. government intelligence official made a presentation about coming global water scarcity. This sparked my attention and I found myself thinking about what we, as concerned citizens, were going to do. I soon learned that Israel was source of nearly every solution to water scarcity. This was an interesting and valuable story for people to know, that Israel serves as a solution to global problems.

JCF: When you discovered that no book existed in any language about Israel's contributions to the global water supply, you decided to write just that. Were you always very water conscious?

SMS: . We live in New York City, which is a very wet region. So there isn't an urgency about water conservation. Still, I shut off the water if I'm not using it. But the water used in homes is a tiny part of water usage. We're facing really grave problems around the world, in terms of not having the water we need to grow food and or to generate energy. We need large quantities of it for both of

those.

JCF: How important is it that we take short showers?

SMS: I suppose that every savings is good. We need to focus on agriculture because that's where the bulk of water gets used. Still, everyone can contribute—by watering your lawn more intelligently, fixing leaks in your home, and using water more efficiently. Perhaps more importantly, be more mindful of how you use energy with lighting or heat. The average American uses 2,100 gallons of water a day, of which only 100 gallons are used for drinking and cooking. Hidden water consumption involves the foods we eat and the energy we consume. To grow food is enormously consumptive of water—it takes 37 gallons of water for all of the elements of a single cup of coffee, and more than 100 gallons of water for a pound of bananas. In fact, it takes 17 times more water to produce a pound of beef than to grow a pound of corn. Although I'm not one of them, vegans have one of the lightest water footprints because they don't rely on animal protein.

JCF: You have pledged to donate all proceeds from your book, "[Let There Be Water: Israel's Solution for a Water-Starved World](#)," to charity. Tell us about the causes you have been able to support as a result of the book's success.

SMS: Yes, I don't use any of the book royalties to pay myself back for the expenses of researching the book. One-hundred percent of the gross royalties are donated to charities that have something to do with water. Most of the charities are based in Israel, but not all. These royalties have been donated to several worthy causes, including water education projects, the Jewish National Fund's water program, scholarships for master's students in water science programs at Ben-Gurion University and Tel Aviv University, equipment for the water lab at Ben-Gurion University, and a Palestinian-Israeli water management education project for high schoolers. After the forest fires in Israel, we donated 100 percent of the royalties from one best-selling foreign edition to Keren Kayemet Le-Israel (KKL) reforestation efforts in the Gallilee. In a ceremony in the Czech Parliament, those funds were matched by the publisher and others.

Not a penny has been given to any charity that my wife and I were already donors to before the book came out. It was important to us that we use the proceeds to support new causes we weren't already aware of.

JCF: What was your philanthropic upbringing like?

SMS: My wife and I both grew up in lower middle class households where the community was important, and to the extent they could do so, donations were given to synagogues and Jewish institutions. When we got married, we were determined that whether we did well or not, charitable giving would always be part of our family's life. From our first days together, we have always been devoted to our community and to helping others in need. Charitable giving has always been important to us.

JCF: Do you have a philanthropic mission statement?

SMS: We give thematically, and within those themes, try to find worthy causes that, for some reason, aren't particularly well funded. We are very devoted to Jewish communal charities and Israeli charities. Jewish education, Jewish media, and Israeli security are important to us. We give money, but also give our time. I've been on the board of trustees of AIPAC for nine years and the Heschel School for 29 years. For several years, I served as the board chair of the Cornell University Hillel. My wife was an active volunteer at the Heschel School, headed a committee at UJA, served on the Board of our synagogue, and has served as a docent at the Jewish Museum for many years.

JCF: You mention volunteering. In addition to your board service, what other volunteer efforts are you involved with?

SMS: I conduct training sessions on a pro-bono basis for Jewish not-for-profit boards on how to solicit funds. I have raised a lot of money as a lay leader at AIPAC, Hillel, and Heschel, and headed development at each of them at one time or another for several years each. I played a central role in securing a \$75 million gift for the National Library of Israel. I like fundraising; I do it comfortably and I enjoy it. Lots of people think that if you ask for money for organizations, you're a shlepper. I disagree. I think you're doing prospective donors a favor by educating them about places they can put their money to make the world a better place.

Everyone wants to live a life of value and meaning. Imagine I knew someone talented who was setting up a company and I gave you the opportunity to get in on the ground floor—something I invested my own money in. You might invest or not, but you'd recognize that I'm doing you a favor. It is the same with charities. You can donate or not, after I tell you why I think it's good. I get nothing out of it, except the satisfaction of connecting people with organizations doing good work.

JCF: How long have you had a fund with JCF?

SMS: I've had an account with JCF for a long time, longer than I can remember. It's easy to use, and it makes my wife and me happy that any surplus is reinvested in the Jewish community. It's an easy process to give grants. I encourage everybody who cares about Jewish life to have a JCF account.

JCF: How have you and your wife instilled philanthropy into your children's upbringings?

SMS: All three of our children know that philanthropic giving is a major value in our family. We've had numerous conversations about giving over the years. As children, we bought them each a beautiful tzedakah box. Every week, I would bring fistfuls of coins and the kids would put them in the tzedakah boxes before lighting Shabbat candles. My wife and I explained that the money was for people who are less fortunate than we are. Every year during Chanukah, we would empty the

boxes and decide which charities to donate the money to.

JCF: Do you have any tips to help others identify charitable causes that are meaningful to them?

SMS: It's important to understand that not every charitable gift will end up being the right gift. Some will be wasted. But I don't think that should paralyze you. People don't take that attitude about investments; they know some will do well, and some won't. I take the same attitude toward philanthropy. My wife and I support the community generally (through UJA, AIPAC, Jewish educational organizations, and our synagogue), but we're also entrepreneurial with philanthropic dollars, and try to give to things we haven't given to before. We like to experiment with smaller charitable organizations. I'm not 100 percent sure these will be the start of a long-term relationship, but it is great when it works out that way. I'm sometimes disappointed, but I accept that not every philanthropic dollar will be perfectly spent.

Also, it's a good idea to decide each year that you won't give less than a certain amount. Put pressure on yourself to look for places to give your money away. It's easy for us to forget the fact that organizations need to fundraise for boring things or they die. Rent, staff, and electricity aren't glamorous, but without paying them, the organization can't do its work.

But more than giving money, it is worthwhile to look for organizations that can use your skills. I encourage everyone to be a donor, but also encourage everyone to get involved and help with one or more organizations. I've gotten much more back from my efforts and our money than I have put in. Israel is safer, American Jewry has a better future, and the world is a better world. It's buying us a better society, and buying our children a better future for the world they will live in. That seems like a pretty good use of funds and time.