It is truly a pleasure to be joining the “Giving Pledge.” One seldom takes time away from the “busyness” of life to reflect on the character of who we are and the importance of the legacy we will leave behind.

I grew up in the 1930s and ‘40s in a poor family in Auburndale, MA, where we were the only Jews in the neighborhood. My family was secular but the neighborhood kids didn't let me forget that I was Jewish. “Jew boy” and “kike” were typical greetings I received in the school yard. I didn't know much about being Jewish except that life would certainly be easier if I weren't. These personal experiences were followed by the horror of learning about the Holocaust where one-third of the Jewish people were slaughtered. At this time, my Jewish identity was formed as a response to anti-Semitism.

As a young child peddling vegetables from my father's garden or eggs from my uncle's chickens, I knew I had a bent for entrepreneurship and a strong desire to someday achieve financial success. After a couple of unsuccessful business ventures, I bought a two-family house and then a three-family house with a goal to acquire enough real estate so that someday I would owe the banks $50,000. I dreamed of the day I would finally pay off this debt. Sixty years later, I am still a significant partner in the same real estate business, which is now a leading national company in the multifamily industry.

Twenty-five years ago, I had cancer of the tongue and came to the realization at that time that life is about more than making money. I started to think about what my legacy would be. Inspired by my wife, Diane Troderman, and my friends, Michael Steinhardt, Rabbi Irving Greenberg, and Jeremy Pava, I began to explore my Jewish roots. I discovered that I was part of a people whose culture, traditions, and values have sustained them and enriched society for over 3,500 years. Judaism brought joy, meaning, and purpose into my ancestors’ lives: a thirst for knowledge, a passion for justice, a commitment to care for the weak and oppressed, and a desire to make the world a better place. For me, experiencing the richness of Jewish life and absorbing Judaism's message to engage and improve the world was a life-changing lesson. Being Jewish was an incredible gift and I was not going to squander it.

However, as I observed the world through my new Jewish lens, I recognized that while life in America has improved dramatically for Jews, our improved status has created a new, demographic challenge. Thankfully, my grandchildren do not suffer in the schoolyard as I once did, and they are readily accepted into universities, clubs and social groups in ways I could not have imagined in my youth. Among younger Jews, however, our newfound social acceptance has led to a decreased connection with their Jewish heritage. It has resulted in a significant percentage of Jews marrying people of other faiths; and with each passing year, fewer intermarried couples are raising their children with any connection to their Jewish heritage. This trend is of great concern to me because it poses a threat to the Jewish future.
To address this challenge, I decided to create the Harold Grinspoon Foundation to engage Jews in the richness of the Jewish tradition. Our mission is to enhance the vibrancy of Jewish life in our home in Western Massachusetts, in North America, and around the world. We believe that together with our many philanthropic partners, we can strengthen and grow the Jewish community through welcoming, engaging and stimulating opportunities for connection with our Jewish culture. We take a very hands-on approach to philanthropy. Our flagship PJ Library® program, for example, currently distributes 380,000 free Jewish children’s books per month, connecting families around the globe to their heritage. The Foundation partners with donors in over two hundred communities to fund PJ Library® and works with community implementing partners on program implementation. In Israel, the Foundation partners with the Ministry of Education to fund and operate the program. What a powerful moment when a child and parent snuggle together reading a book at bedtime, experiencing the joy of learning Jewish values and culture! We know that this program is educating not only children but their parents as well. In the 21st century, I believe that for Judaism to continue to have an impact on families and society, Jewish living and learning must be actively cultivated. That is why I am committing nearly all my assets to my Foundation to pursue this goal.

The sense of mission and accomplishment that I get through my philanthropy energizes me every day. I feel most privileged that my daughter-in-law, Winnie Sandler Grinspoon, serves as President of the Foundation and that my long-time business partner, Jeremy Pava, serves as a Trustee. I know they share my values and their service will ensure the Foundation’s continuity. I am honored to join the Giving Pledge and encourage others to join as well.

Harold Grinspoon

May 8, 2015