

# THE JERUSALEM POST

## Helping Israel fight poverty and support the weaker sectors

By Greer Fay Cashman , April 18, 2019

In an ego-oriented, digital world in which you've got to keep your name out there or you don't exist, the Leven family, which for decades has been at the helm of the Rashi Foundation, is a notable exception to the rule.

Even before the digital world cast its tentacles over our lives, philanthropy was a form of self-promotion and the perpetuation of one's name. That doesn't mean that philanthropists didn't care about the causes they supported. Of course they cared, but in the overwhelming majority of cases, when asked to underwrite a large-scale project, the six- or seven-digit check came with the proviso that the donor's name would be attached to the project in perpetuity.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, and in the case of the Leven family, there are five generations of exceptions – and according to Hubert Leven, they are not the only ones who don't seek public recognition.

His uncle, Gustave Leven, who was born in France in 1914 and died there in 2008, is best known as the founder the French mineral water company Perrier. Prime minister Shimon Peres called him "one of the greatest philanthropists in our history." He was a consistent donor to Zionist and Israeli causes for 60 years and also among those who financially supported the creation of Israel's nuclear research center in Dimona. He initiated and supported numerous educational, health and social welfare projects, and in 1984 founded the Rashi Foundation, with his nephew Hubert the founding president.

Hubert was also vice president of Alliance Israelite Universelle, which Gustave's grandfather Narcisse Leven had played a significant role in founding in 1860. The Alliance group of young French Jews wanted to protect the civil rights of Jews in all the lands of their dispersion and enable them to realize their potential by giving all Jewish children access to education. Narcisse Leven helped create a vast network of schools that educated more than a million Jewish children, mostly in the countries of North Africa. It didn't end with education. The goal was also to improve the quality of life for impoverished Jewish individuals and families.

Gustave's mother's family had been involved with the founding of ORT, the global association for training youth in skilled trades.

After the Second World War, Gustave's mother Jeanne established a philanthropic enterprise to help Holocaust survivors and others in need. Basing his own philanthropic activities on her work, Gustave became passionately involved with Israel, opening both his heart and his hand.

His exceptional success in promoting spring water as being much more beneficial to health than tap water made him an extraordinarily wealthy man.

Like many exceptionally successful businesspeople, Gustave was also a man of vision who wanted to be sure that the projects for Israel's future in which he had invested would continue to flourish and that more funding would be available for dealing with Israel's future needs.

THIS LED him to establish the Rashi Foundation. He had given anonymously for many years, although the recipients obviously knew the source of the gift. He also wanted this anonymity to govern the future funding by the foundation that he created.

The Rashi Foundation, like many others, worked on a grant allocation basis, which gradually evolved into a social entrepreneur identifying needs, especially in Israel's peripheral communities, and coming up with viable solutions for the challenges posed by those needs. Over time, Rashi developed relations with a number of philanthropic affiliates, creating a philanthropic conglomerate of more than 170 partners, with members of the Leven family remaining in executive positions.

This partnership coalition of shared knowledge, experience and dedication enables Rashi to make a great impact in all the fields in which it operates.



FRANCOIS (LEFT) and Hubert Leven at the changing-of-the-guard ceremony last November, when Hubert passed the torch of philanthropic leadership to his son. ( Yuval Yosef)

To reward outstanding individuals and organizations for their contributions to humanity and to Israel, Peres created the Presidential Medal of Distinction in 2012, based on America's Medal of Freedom. Due to Peres's long association and personal friendship with Gustave Leven, the Rashi Foundation was among the first group of recipients. (Unfortunately, President Reuven Rivlin has declined to continue with this award, even though it does not bear the name of its founder.)

In November 2018, Hubert Leven passed the torch of philanthropic leadership to his son Francois, who is now president and chairman of the Rashi Foundation; Hubert remains honorary president.

In an interview with The Jerusalem Post late last year, Francois intimated that philanthropy is part the family's DNA, and the next generation is already involved.

Hubert remains a vice president of Alliance Israel Universelle and a member of the Board of the Alliance educational subsidiary Kol Israel Haverim, which is dedicated to educational excellence and in Israel is involved with both formal and informal education.

Francois, who also sits on the Alliance Board, noted that he was the fifth generation of his family to do so, "and we're working on the sixth."

Father and son have considerable business and finance experience. Hubert was the CEO of a Parisian brokerage firm for many years and Francois has worked in equity markets and in private banking.

The Rashi Foundation also seems to be a stepping stone into politics. Eli Alalouf, the Foundation's former CEO, who believes that one of the key functions of any government is the elimination of poverty, became a member of Knesset in March 2015 as part of the Kulanu faction, but announced at the end of last year that he was retiring from politics.

Novice politician and former IDF chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi became the unpaid chairman of the Rashi Foundation in 2012, but resigned after throwing his cap into the political ring, and is now set to become a Blue and White MK.

In the Post interview, Hubert Leven shared his uncle's philanthropic philosophy, saying that his uncle was dedicated to educational projects as a means of changing people's way of life and helping them to emerge from poverty. He respected the fact that they had religious education, but he was concerned that they had no practical education. By providing them with such education, he enabled them to become part of thriving communities.

"Fighting poverty through education and giving opportunities to the weaker sectors characterized the spirit of the Rashi Foundation," said Hubert Leven. His uncle, he added, wanted to make Israel stronger and more significant, and toward this aim pooled together the resources of family,

friends and business acquaintances.

“It was animated by our family, but the group of funders – not all of whom were Jewish – was committed to making Israel a better place. That’s why it’s not called the Leven Foundation; the money did not come solely from our family.”

THE NAME Rashi was chosen in deference to his fame as a commentator on the Talmud, and because he lived in the Champagne district of France, since Gustave was involved with beverage. The Champagne district is known for producing France’s best-known beverage, which takes its name from that district, so Rashi proved to be a good neutral and popular name for the foundation.

Hubert admitted that in its early years, the Rashi Foundation was a learning experience.

“We didn’t know much about Israeli society and how things were done. We had to learn the needs and how to solve them. We were doing a lot of things, but we weren’t really changing anything.”

Change began somewhere around the mid 1990s when the Rashi Foundation began to identify problems and seek the best way to solve them. This led to a pilot project, and they decided that if it proved to be successful, an attempt would be made to find more partners, mostly those interested in social welfare, to integrate them into an expanded program and bring about systematic change through hands-on involvement.

“We touched hundreds of thousands of lives.”

Although he has been involved in the family’s philanthropy for much of his life, Francois Leven is very conscious of the “giant footsteps” he has to follow. He’s “proud to keep going in that direction and to write new chapters” in both the Leven and Rashi sagas. The Levens tend to marry into other philanthropic families. Francois is married to Delphine, whose grandfather was on the board of Alliance.

“In the world in which we live, there is no way to forget about those in need in Israel, which is the present, past and future of the Jewish people,” Francois declared. He feels that continuing the legacy of his great-great grandfather “is the right thing to do.”

Rashi has broadened in size and scope. When it started, its professional team consisted of three salaried personnel. Now there are 200, but because of alliances with local government, their salaries are often paid by the local municipalities with which they work, rather than by the Rashi Foundation. There are 50 to 60 people working as advisers in Rashi’s head office with the aim of making NGOs more efficient.

The NGOs are working mostly on early childhood projects to which many social services are attached. They also work with people who are intellectually challenged or who have physical disabilities or both, and work with the families of such people as well. Rashi has helped to open early childhood centers, including scientific kindergartens.

The main focus is on children and youth, but senior citizens also come under the Rashi umbrella. The Rashi Foundation makes no religious or ethnic distinctions.

“We help all Israelis regardless of their background,” said Francois, who comes to Israel at least once a month – and sometimes as often as four times in a month. It costs less to fly from Switzerland where he lives and to stay for a day, than to spend several days in a hotel, he explained.

He now spends a lot of time in the Negev, where new programs are being created for families of IDF personnel as well as for soldiers who are studying during their service.

Most of the programs are education-oriented, and the Rashi Foundation is working closely with the IDF, the Education Ministry and Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

One of the reasons that the Rashi Foundation is successful, opined Hubert Leven, is that there’s much less ego in philanthropy today, than there was 30 years ago.

“It was much easier then to find a partner if you could put his name in big letters on a wall. Today, people are more interested in results. Young philanthropists want to give money and see it work. Older people used to give money to a fund to be used after their death. Today’s philanthropists want quick numbers and evaluations. The whole approach has shifted – and we’re part of that evolution.”

*<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Helping-Israel-fight-poverty-and-support-the-weaker-sectors-587261>*