

WILL OUR GRANDCHILDREN BE JEWISH? NO MORE RHETORIC!

ELLIOT GERSHENSON, M. ED.

Executive Director, United Jewish Community of Greater Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

The majority of Jews do not really care about being Jewish, and unless we take action now, thousands of Jewish children will be lost to Judaism. Two steps are suggested—provision of free Jewish day school education to every child and sending every teenager on a free, well-organized program to Israel at least once. We have the money to take these steps, but do we have the needed vision and the courage?

This article is a series of reflections on the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) and a talk that was given by Dr. Barry Kosmin, NJPS director, in Harrisburg to a community-wide forum held in March of 1992. Several local rabbis responded 2 weeks later to the presentation.

There seemed to be a lot of rhetoric and very little substance to the ensuing discussion. Participants were beating their brows, but few positive actions were suggested.

I write this article in hopes that it stirs controversy and thought.

“Will my grandchildren be Jewish?” is a question being asked by many these days. With the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey as a backdrop, there is a growing sense that something is wrong in the Jewish community and that somehow we must do something to fix it. The problems certainly seem enormous. There is growing intermarriage, disaffection among masses of Jews, questions of who is a Jew, strife between the movements, lack of respect for differences, little if any spirituality, and on and on. If only people cared more, believed more, gave more, the problem would go away—or so it seems.

I could quote statistics or refer to scholarly treatises on the many issues, but to what point? What I want, as a Jewish communal professional, is to see a way past the rhetoric to some answers. My *kishkas* tell me we must act now. I propose two actions to keep our kids Jewish.

THE ISSUE

The Jewish community does not have a great deal of vision. We fight among ourselves too much and let the problems fester as we hold onto our own positions.

The basic problem facing the Jewish community is that the majority of Jews do not really care about being Jewish. We may wish that every Jew would observe Shabbat or keep kosher, but that is not the case. It may be true that those who work at keeping mitzvot and finding a personal connection with God will more likely remain within the fold, but that is not a viable path to getting most Jews there in the first place.

It is also true that most parents do not imbue *Yiddishkeit* into the lives of their children. We can bemoan the fact that, although we send most of our children to supplementary Hebrew school to learn about Jewish observance, what they see at home contradicts what they learn in the classroom, and thus Judaism appears hypocritical to young minds. All true. The fact is that these are the same parents who are looking for the minimum for their kids, and they (and we) are getting it!

The end result is Jewish children who have learned that being Jewish is not very important and that Jewish learning is less important than other learning. These are two very poor messages for our children.

TWO ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

I state at the outset that the two actions described below will not save American Jewry on their own. Without quality synagogues and trained rabbis and communal professionals, comprehensive Jewish community institutions and social networks, and all the other accoutrements of Jewish society, these two actions alone will fail. Yet, I believe strongly that by incorporating them into "normative" systems, we have a chance to recapture our Jewish youth despite the apathy of our Jewish parents. We might even bring a few more parents back as well.

Every Jewish Community Should Accept the Concept of Free Jewish Day School

And why not? We accept the concept of free public school and that education is a universal right. However, we relegate Jewish education to a minimalist state. What message does this give our children?

Why is it that some of the most intelligent and knowledgeable Jewish children are also the most ignorant when it comes to Jewish content? I suggest it is because we have made the pursuit of Jewish knowledge secondary to all other study. One beauty of every Jewish day school, aside from all other obvious attributes, is that Jewish and secular learning are given equal footing. This is a critically important psychological message.

There are many questions regarding the implementation of free day school education. Three questions seem to me to be most pressing.

1. Why should the community pay for those who can afford to pay?
2. How can we provide Jewish day schools that would attract the full spectrum of Jews?
3. How can we pay for this enterprise?

The first question is easy to answer. We should not penalize our children for the

behaviors of their parents. Society makes rules all the time for the welfare of its people. This is one such time.

The second question can be answered easily too. We can provide a school with many tracks. The entire student body could learn the secular subjects together, and students could then have a choice of which doctrine or ideology within Judaism they will study. A great deal of effort will need to be made to overcome differences between the movements; however, with good will, they can be surmounted.

The last question is the most difficult, only because funding new areas usually means taking money from some existing programs. I ask you simply, Do we want our children to be Jewish or not? If we do, then we have to stop kidding ourselves and do something proactive—now! We will have to be prepared to make difficult decisions. One funding mechanism could be the pooling of resources by communities and their synagogues—closing supplementary Hebrew schools, for example, so that current funds can be reallocated to provide universal day school education.

Every Jewish Teenager Should Be Sent on a Bona-Fide Program to Israel at Least Once

Once universal day school education is offered, we will have Jewishly educated children. But, remember these children will still be living in their parents' homes and will still be dealing with the everyday pressures of the open society. How do we keep them hooked on Judaism? These young adults are about to go off to college just as they have the most important questions of identity to answer.

Let the Jewish community make sure that before they go off to college they have one more lasting, positive impression of Jewishness to take with them. Encourage them to add new questions to ponder as they develop their identity. What does Israel mean to me? What is Jewish history and where do I fit in? What does it feel like to be in a society where so many are Jewish?

Why do so many of our teenagers find

it so irresistible to interdate? Is it just hormones? Or, is it that they have no sense of history, community, or faith? Could not it be argued that, if the least we do is give them cause to be conflicted about interdating, they may think twice before doing so? If they are challenged time and time again, then they will continue to search themselves, and, potentially, may opt not to leave the fold. My insides tell me this is our only chance.

Therefore, I suggest that we fully fund free organized trips to Israel for every Jewish teen. It should be part of their passage to adulthood.

The cost in dollars is high, but, the cost of doing nothing will be much higher. We will stroke our beards and in 20 years from now nothing will have changed and we will all *schrei* "gevalt"!

CONCLUSION

I have posited two concrete actions to meet the challenge of keeping our youth Jewish.

It is my contention that for all the talk about spirituality and observance, we must face the cruel fact that, unless we do something significant, most of our kids will never know enough to search out the inner truths about the beauty of being Jewish. At that point we will end up writing off thousands of our children to apathy at best and to God knows what at worst.

It is not because of Hitler that I feel that this outcome would be a *shonda*. It is because I believe that we Jews hold a special light for all people, one worthy of our efforts to maintain an authentic Jewish presence. All the posturing in the world will do little to stem the tide until we take concrete steps to address the situation.

These two steps will not resolve all the problems. Yet, I believe they are the two most viable options available to us right now. They are doable right now. We have the money right now.

The question is do we have the vision and the courage to do it. Right now!