

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN A NEW GENERATION OF AMERICAN AND ISRAELI JEWS

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As American and Israeli Jewry evolve into distinctive communities, there is evidence of a growing distancing between the younger generations of each society. Both American and Israeli Jewry have vital stakes in a continued strong relationship. Two methods—leadership seminars and high-quality video productions—are described as means of bridging the gap between young American Jews and young Israeli Jews.

The slogan "We Are One" notwithstanding, the history of the relationship between American Jewry and Israel has included its share of tensions. For the first 20 years after the founding of the State of Israel there were strains between those who chose to live in Israel and those who remained in the Diaspora. Still, shared Jewish experiences—witnessing the tragedy of Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel—resulted in a strong identification with and commitment to Israel among Diaspora Jewry and provided a basis for Israeli Jews, most of whom had themselves previously lived in the Diaspora, to understand Diaspora Jewish life. This common historical memory among world Jewry provided a context and served as a foundation for mutual understanding between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry.

This article focuses on changes in levels of understanding and attachment between a new generation of American and Israeli Jews. It first explores the social demographic conditions in each society that suggest the possibility of an increasing distance between younger (40 and under) American and Israeli Jews. Data from public opinion polls are presented that indicate that the younger generation of American Jews has less of an attachment to Israel than older American Jews. The weaker attachment among younger American Jews is not related to current events—the "Who Is A Jew" controversy or the *intifada*—or specific policies of the Israeli government. The article also reviews findings from Israeli public opinion polls that indicate that younger Israelis view life for Jews in America less positively and are less likely to have personal contact with American Jews than their elders.

Recognizing this problem, the Jewish community must create programs for the younger Jews in each society that promote better understanding of the nature of Jewish life in American and Israeli settings. The last part of the article explores some of the difficulties in creating such programs and focuses on two specific methods by which the Jewish community can undertake this critical task.

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THE NATURE OF THE GAP

Demographic Trends in Each Country

Both the American and Israeli Jewish communities are young, evolving, and maturing. Although one may speak of the American Jewish experience, it must be understood that most Jews in the United States are descendants of immigrants who came to this country between 1880 and 1920. Their "American" experience was one of immigration and adjustment. Their children's second-generation experience was certainly colored by the immigrant status of their parents. The third and fourth generation represent a different and in some ways perhaps a distinctively American Jewry. Israeli Jewry in general is an even younger Jewry. Today's younger generation in Israel is composed mostly of second- and third-generation Jews. Thus, what it means to be an Israeli Jew—not an immigrant or the child of an immigrant—is only beginning to come to light.

Within each community, basic demographic trends have an impact on the nature of its Jewishness as well as other social, cultural, and political factors. Although there is no up-to-date national study of American Jews, recent Jewish population studies in various cities give us adequate information for some generalizations about the American Jewish population. One may say that American Jews are simultaneously becoming more "American" and more comfortably "Jewish." Although first- and second-generation American Jews are more likely to identify themselves with the Conservative wing of Judaism, the younger generation of Jews in the United States most often identify themselves as Reform or "Just Jewish." This change in denominational identity can be seen as part of the Americanization of Jews.

In contrast, many third- and fourth-generation Jews have chosen to send their children to Jewish day schools, perhaps indicating that the younger generation is not averse to the ethnic particularism that

elders often called "parochialism." In addition, although the size of the movement is often exaggerated, there are many younger Jews who have become *ba'alai* and *ba'alot tshuvah*, choosing a path of religious involvement greater than that of their parents.

These countervailing trends indicate that the younger generation may be in some ways more comfortable in America. This "at-homeness," however, also results in higher rates of intermarriage among the younger generation. In the 1980s as many as one in four marriages involving Jews is an intermarriage. Thus, the composition of the Jewish population in the United States is slowly changing. Overall, intermarriage without conversion tends to decrease the attachment of Jews to the Jewish community and concomitantly to Israel. This can be seen, in part, in significantly lower rates of visits to Israel among mixed marrieds than among in-marrieds (Rimor, 1989).

Demographic trends in Israel indicate a steady increase in the Sephardi or Mizrahi Jewish population. This increase is especially pronounced among the younger population. Thus, demographically Israeli Jewry is becoming more Middle Eastern. Although among second- and third-generation Sephardim there is a movement from the traditionalism of their parents, there is an understanding and empathy for that traditionalism that contrasts sharply with the antipathy toward religion found among European Israelis whose heritage is influenced by socialism. In addition, there has been an increase in the *haredi* population, which again is especially noteworthy among the younger generation. The overall impact of these two separate trends is to increase the "traditional" or "Orthodox" orientation of the society. These trends also result in social, cultural, and political changes that are creating a new, perhaps distinctively Israeli Jewry.

It is difficult to assess what the end result of these trends will be in each society. Clearly, however, forces of change are at work that result in the "Americanization"

of Jews in the United States and the "Israelization" of Jews in Israel. These trends in each society lead in starkly different directions; American Jewry becoming more American means greater integration and in some sense greater assimilation into a general Western society, whereas a significant segment of Israeli Jews are more sympathetic toward tradition than their American counterparts. Part of the gap between younger American and Israeli Jews is thus a function of generational and demographic factors in each society (Goldscheider, 1986).¹

Generation and Identity

Most first- and second-generation American Jews witnessed the Holocaust and the establishment of the Jewish state. In addition, the Six-Day and Yom Kippur Wars left an indelible mark, creating forever the reality of the vulnerability of Jews and the isolation of the Jewish state. Younger American Jews may have been influenced by these events as well. However, for the great majority of third- and fourth-generation American Jews, Israel has always existed, and Israelis have always been powerful and victorious in battle.

The Diaspora experience of immigrant Israelis enabled them to understand what this existence was like, and in some cases perhaps they communicated the nature of the Diaspora Jewish experience to their children. It is common, however, for first-generation Israelis not to discuss their Diaspora experiences with their children. Third-generation Israelis may be even further removed from this heritage and may have very little personal understanding of Diaspora Jewish life. A change in orientation within Israel toward confronting the

Diaspora (albeit in a distinctively Zionist manner) can be seen in the founding of Beit Hatfutzot in Ramat Aviv. However, it is possible that young Israelis today know about Diaspora Jewish life primarily by visiting this museum and have images of American Jewry based on their perceptions of American Jewish tourists and American *olim*.

Less Attachment to Israel Among Younger American Jews: The Data

In a recent study of Jews in Rhode Island respondents were asked whether the State of Israel was extremely important, very important, not very important, or not at all important in their lives (Goldscheider & Goldstein, 1988). Most of the respondents (57%) indicated that Israel was very important in their lives, and 14% indicated that it was extremely important. About one quarter indicated Israel was not very important, and only 4% indicated that Israel was not at all important in their lives.

When looking at the impact of age on the responses, one can see that younger Jews were much more likely to indicate that the State of Israel was either not very important or not at all important in their lives. Figure 1 shows that about half of those under age 35 indicated that Israel was either not very or not at all important in their lives compared to about one-third

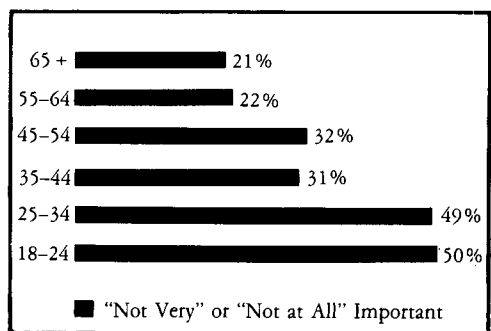


Figure 1. Importance of Israel in Your Life: Percentages responding "not very" or "not at all" in Rhode Island by age

1. Goldscheider has pointed out additional factors that affect differences between emerging leadership in each society. He mentions differences in ethnic composition, levels of higher education, occupational distribution, and the role of women in American and Israeli Jewish communities (Goldscheider, 1986).

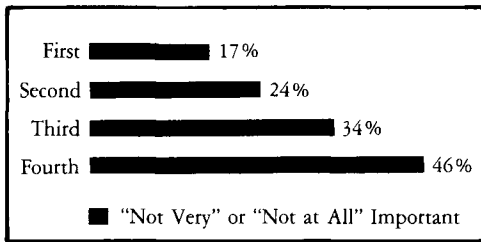


Figure 2. Importance of Israel in your life: Percentages responding "not very" or "not at all" in Rhode Island by generation

of those between the ages of 35 and 54 and about one-fifth of those age 55 and over. Similar differences are evident when the impact of generation on the responses is considered (Fig. 2). Among fourth-generation Jews, 46% indicated that Israel was either not very or not at all important in their lives compared to 34% among third-generation Jews, 24% among second-generation Jews, and only 17% among first-generation Jews. Although the level of importance that respondents attribute to Israel is only one way of measuring the attachment of American Jews to Israel, the Rhode Island study provides startling evidence of the impact of age and generation on the importance of Israel in the lives of American Jews.

Other recent surveys shed additional light on the impact of age on levels of attachment to Israel. Surveys of American Jewish public opinion conducted by Steven M. Cohen in 1986 and 1988 showed that levels of attachment to Israel among younger Jews were lower than the levels of attachment among their elders. These lower levels of attachment among younger American Jews preceded the political debates that emerged in response to the "Who Is A Jew" controversy and the *intifada*, and the levels did not change in the wake of these events. Thus, the lower levels of attachment cannot be attributed to these events. It is noteworthy, however, that the differences are especially pronounced among those who have never visited Israel and those who have visited Israel only once.

Table 1
ATTACHMENT TO ISRAEL BY AGE
AMONG THOSE WHO NEVER VISITED ISRAEL

Attachment	Age		
	21-39	40-64	65 +
	(%)		
High	16	21	20
Moderate	37	45	49
Low	47	34	38

SOURCE: Adapted from Cohen, 1987, p. 11.

Overall, those who have not visited Israel (about two-thirds of American Jews) are not highly attached to Israel. Table 1 shows moreover that younger Jews who have never visited Israel tend to be less likely than their elders to have either high or moderate levels of attachment to Israel and therefore more fall into the category of a low level of attachment.

The relationship of visiting Israel on attachment levels can be seen by comparing Table 1 to Table 2. The impact of one visit, however, differs depending on the age of the individual. Among those 40 and over, one visit results in a 40% rise in those whose attachment level is high. Although the impact among those under 40 is substantial, it is also markedly less than that among their older counterparts. Only among those who have visited Israel more than once (14% of American Jews) do we see similar levels of attachment regardless of age.

Some may be tempted to attribute these differences to the lack of overall attachment to Judaism among younger American Jews. Cohen, however, indicates that

Table 2
ATTACHMENT TO ISRAEL BY AGE AMONG
THOSE WHO VISITED ISRAEL ONLY ONCE

Attachment	Age		
	21-39	40-64	65 +
	(%)		
High	46	61	64
Moderate	39	28	33
Low	15	9	4

SOURCE: Adapted from Cohen, 1987, p. 11.

younger Jews had similar levels of commitment to other areas of Jewish life as their elders and that their levels of attachment to Israel could not be explained either by their lack of opportunity to visit Israel or by an assumed weak involvement in Jewish life (Cohen, 1987, pp. 13, 89).

A countervailing trend that might be expected to have a positive impact on younger Jews' attachment to Israel is their greater level of personal contact with Israelis. The youngest group of respondents, those aged 21-29, have as many if not more personal ties with Israelis than their elders. "Almost twice as many young adults as other respondents said that they had all four types of relations with Israelis—family, friends, migrants, and potential dinner hosts" (Cohen, 1987, p. 25). This increased personal contact with Israelis, however, seems to have no impact on the overall attachment of younger American Jews to Israel.

The Younger Generation in Israel: Data from Opinion Polls

Public opinion surveys of Israeli Jews indicate that there are some noteworthy generational differences in perceptions of American Jews. One survey asked Israeli Jews whether they agree, disagree, or are not sure about the following statement: "For the Jews there, life in the United States is really good." Among all Israelis answers were evenly split, with about one-third giving each reply. However, third-generation Israelis who had visited the United States were the most likely group to reject the statement (42% disagreed), and only 24% agreed. Although visits of Israelis to the United States do not ensure contact with American Jews, it is noteworthy that for third-generation Israelis such visits correspond with a less positive evaluation of the quality of life for American Jews (Smith, 1983, p. 13).

Overall, the younger generation of Israeli Jews seems to have less contact with Ameri-

can Jews than their parents. Mina Zemach found that,

Among Ashkenazi Jews, parents have more personal relations in America than their children; but the children have more personal relations among *yordim* than their parents. Among Oriental and Sephardi Jews, the second generation has more personal relations in America than the parents, most of them with *yordim*. These data suggest the possibility of an increase in personal relations with *yordim* and, at the same time, a decrease in personal relations with American Jews (Zemach, 1987, p. 17).

Zemach's findings indicate that young Israelis may have more relatives and friends who are *yordim* living in the United States than their parents. However, these personal relations do not result in increased contact with or understanding of American Jews. This may explain what appears to be a mystery. Why would third-generation Israelis who have visited the United States be less likely to believe that life is good for Jews in the United States? It is possible that those who have visited their Israeli friends and relatives in America find life for them difficult and therefore conclude that life in the United States is not good for the Jews. Or, it is possible that having seen life among *yordim* in the United States, these younger Israelis need to explain to themselves why they have not chosen this life for themselves. This may be a manifestation of cognitive dissonance, denying that life in America could be good for Jews. In either case, the evaluation of life for Jews in the United States is based not on contact with American Jews but with *yordim*, whom they may still regard as Israeli rather than American Jews.

Judaism in America and Israel

Thus far this article has focused on the younger generation of American and Israeli Jews and the differences between their perceptions and experiences and those of their older counterparts in each society.

However, it is important to note the context in which these changes are taking place. As Steven Cohen has recently noted,

The growing gap between what is Jewish in Israel and what is Jewish in the United States poses the possibility that Israel will become Jewishly irrelevant to American Jews and vice versa. It is already the case that the two Jewries do rather little to enrich each other's internal Jewish life. The most notable and admirable features of American Judaism—denominational pluralism, personalism, innovation, feminism, voluntarism—have had little impact on Israeli Judaism; what may be some of the potentially useful aspects of Israeli Judaism for American Jewry—the emphasis on family; national interpretations of Jewish symbols and holidays, appreciation for the meaning of the land; and a sense of commandment—are hardly even recognized in the United States (Cohen, 1989, p. 11).

The problem Cohen identifies—a growing gap in the meaning and nature of Judaism in each society—will only intensify as a younger generation of American and Israeli Jews becomes more central in the functioning of each community. It is therefore imperative for American Jewish communal leaders, lay and professional, and Israeli leaders—professionals, civil servants, and politicians—to recognize the problem and begin taking steps to promote better understanding among the younger generation in each society.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Obstacles in Approaching the Problem

The problem of a distancing of attitudes between the younger generation of American and Israeli Jews does not lend itself to easy solutions. Before considering options, however, it may be helpful to identify two specific obstacles that may impede working toward solutions.

Perhaps the most central problem in addressing the gap among American Jews is their tendency to project onto Israel distinctively American ideals and propose

“solutions” to Israeli life based on American or sometimes American Jewish models (Gal, 1988).² Evidence from polling data indicates that more than one-third of Israelis feel that most American Jews treat Israelis as though they were the “younger brothers” in the relationship. The purpose of bridging the gap cannot be for American Jews to “solve the problems of Israeli society.” This approach would result in Israeli Jews feeling patronized by their American counterparts. Instead, the goal must be for American Jews to understand how Israeli life functions on its own terms, without making analogies to American Jewish models and without the nature of Jewish life in Israel being evaluated according to American Jewish standards.

A different problem exists in increasing Israeli understanding of American Jewish life. This expresses itself most strongly in the Zionist concept of *sblilat bagolah*, the negation of the Diaspora. If Israeli Jews cannot accept the possibility that Jews can live a Jewish life in America, then it seems likely that efforts to increase understanding between the Jewish communities will fail. Thus, our goal must involve exposing Israeli Jews to the accomplishments and possibilities of Jewish life in America.

Seminars for Leadership

Many programs have been undertaken to ensure greater contact between American and Israeli Jews. In most of these, American Jews visit Israel for short periods of time.

Travel programs have proven a successful way in which to educate American Jews

2. There is a great deal of evidence that American Jews have tended to project their own images of what it means to be Jewish onto Israel. This in itself may not create problems. In fact, in the past such projections may have had a positive effect on American Jewish involvement with Israel, creating an ideal image of Israel and, with this image, very high levels of attachment to the Jewish state among American Jews (see Gal, 1988).

about Israel. However, missions and study tours for adults are often limited to 1 to 2 weeks, whereas longer programs of 1 to 2 months in duration are designed for students. In addition, most of these programs focus on seeing Israel and not on increasing the Americans' understanding of Israeli life. Thus, many American Jews who have spent time in Israel have seen sights, but have not come to understand the nature of life in Israeli society.

For instance, it is not unusual for a Jewish federation professional to have visited Israel many times. During these visits the professional serves as staff to the delegation of lay leaders whom he or she accompanies. These professionals often leave Israel with a sense of what does not work, or how something is not done "the way we do it." Thus, a common American Jewish reaction to Israel is how it is different from the United States. Of course this is a natural reaction. However, when these same professionals are expected to explain what is happening in Israel to their leadership, they often lack a broad personal understanding of the strengths of Israeli society that would give substance and perspective to their explanations.

Programs that bring Israelis to America are relatively rare (when compared to programs taking American Jews to Israel). Most often, Israeli leaders visit the United States as speakers for Jewish organizations. Their exposure to American Jewish life is often limited to meetings of American Jews, and the agenda of these meetings is not Jewish life in America, but focuses on what is going on in Israel.

Thus, although many American Jewish leaders have visited Israel and some Israeli leaders have visited America, their visits were not designed to cultivate an understanding of the society, its modes of operation, or its strengths and weaknesses. For American Jews attaining this understanding requires getting to know how Israelis and their institutions deal with day-to-day issues, including reserve duty, medical care,

education, unemployment, and services to the young, the elderly, and newly arrived immigrants. In addition, American Jews should experience how Israeli educational and cultural institutions design programs for Jewish holidays and celebrations. In turn, Israeli Jews should be exposed to the organization and operation of the Jewish community in America. This would include the voluntary nature of the Jewish community in America and how it deals with a wide array of social, religious, educational, cultural, and public affairs issues: from child care to elderly care, from Jewish education to litigation on church-state separation, from dating services to conversion.

Young leaders should have the opportunity to learn about how the Jewish community in each society works, and how it differs from their own not merely by spending one hour or one day in a school but by working in an environment for 2 weeks or more. Thus, young American Jewish educators could spend time studying how the educational system is organized in Israel and then could work in an educational setting for a substantial time period. Young Israeli political leaders could visit Washington for one week in which they will learn how the American system of government works and how Jewish agencies interact with it; they could then spend time in a Jewish community relations agency working with its staff on specific programs.

Leadership seminars in which young American Jewish leaders would visit Israel and young Israeli Jewish leaders would visit America would promote greater understanding among each group of the society they are visiting. Models for such leadership seminars for Israelis and Americans already exist. The World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency have begun a program in which Jewish Agency employees visit the United States for one month. The seminar begins with a week of study about the American Jewish community, which is spent at Brandeis Uni-

versity; the seminars are organized by the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service. Participants then spend 2½ weeks visiting a local Jewish federation, becoming involved with day-to-day operations. The trip culminates in attendance at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations.

The Jewish Welfare Board's Executive Fellows Program (EFP) is another example of a model program. In the spring and summer of 1989, the EFP took 14 Jewish Community Center executive directors and their families to Israel for a 3-month period. The rationale behind this investment of time and substantial resources (\$240,000) in providing top-level professional leaders with the opportunity to live in Israel is the belief that such experiences contribute substantially to a deeper connection between the participants and Israel. As a result of direct, daily interaction with Israelis and the Israeli environment, it is hoped that North American leaders will experience a heightening of their own commitment and identity as Jews.

This kind of exchange among young leaders in each society should enable our leadership to have an in-depth understanding and respect for the enterprise of their counterparts. These seminars can form an important base for increasing commitment among leadership and forging better ties between the Jewish societies.

Video for the Masses

Leadership programs are a beginning, but do not address the need for the great majority of Jews in both societies to learn more about the other society. Since both American and Israeli society are media conscious, video can be used successfully to enhance exposure and understanding between Jews in each society.

In the Public Broadcasting System television broadcast, "Heritage: Civilization and the Jews," \$14 million was invested in

nine segments examining the Jewish past. Each segment was watched by 2.5 million Americans. Although it is not known how many of these individuals were Jews, the possible impact of the "Heritage" series and the materials produced in conjunction with it was enormous. Using more limited resources, the contemporary situation in Israel has been examined in the "Rechov Sumsum/Shalom Sesame" videos, which were designed primarily to introduce Israel to young American Jewish students. However, no effort has been made to create video productions for adults in both Israeli and American Jewish societies that would deal with everyday life in their respective communities.

For a series of video productions designed to portray life in American and Israeli Jewish communities to be successful in communicating to their target audiences, they must have high production values and a network of distribution and/or syndication within both societies. In the Israeli setting, syndication is a less significant problem; Israeli television could be responsible for airing the videos. In the United States, distribution would be more complicated, but depending on locale, public television stations, privately owned television stations, and public access cable could all be tested for maximum access. Copies of the videos could also be made available to public and university libraries, advertised in the Jewish and general press, and, of course, made available to Jewish institutions and agencies.

These videos would not only provide American and Israeli Jews with an opportunity to learn about their counterpart communities but would also contribute to each community's knowledge of itself. American Jews often have little sense of their own community, what it is, and how it operates. Israeli Jews are often too busy to concern themselves with how particular problems are approached within their own society.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of American and Israeli Jewry into distinctive communities is a natural outgrowth of the change of generations in each society. In some ways it is inevitable that as the Jewries become, respectively, more American and Israeli, the nature of the commonalities that bind them will evolve as well. This process may result in a greater distancing between a new generation in each society. That change in perceptions and levels of attachment has already begun. It is important to recognize that this problem of distancing is not related specifically to current political events in Israel, but is something more basic and structural in nature. This does not mean that political events in Israel may not in the future have an additional impact on these relations. Rather, the foundation on which such future relations rest is already eroding.

Both Jewries can benefit from bridging this gap. American Jewry, which is very dependent upon Israel, needs to confront the challenges faced by the Jewish state. American Jews who have been projecting American ideals onto Israel need to acquaint themselves with the nature of Israeli democracy and Jewishness in Israel. The images of Israel forged in the minds of first- and second-generation American Jews will not necessarily work for the third and fourth generation. New images are needed, based not on dreams and aspirations alone but on the realities of current life in Israel. Deepening the understanding that American Jews have of Israel and Israeli society can also contribute to strengthening American Jewish identity by reducing the temptation to live our Jewish lives vicariously through an idealized notion of Israel.

Israeli Jews have difficulty understanding a Jewish community that has incorporated the values, goals, and world view of a pluralistic, multicultural, Gentile society into its deepest core of being—a commu-

nity that has in many ways lost even the perception of conflict between Jewish and American values. American Jews see their Americanism and their Judaism as inextricably linked. Moreover, they not only feel at home in America but they also feel that they comprise a valuable force in American society. For Israelis to bridge this gap they must try to understand this American Jewish disposition. Just as Israelis chafe at being condescended to by their American Jewish brothers and sisters, American Jews resent the scorn often implicit in Israeli attitudes toward American Jews. These feelings may interfere with American Jewish political support for the Jewish state. A deeper and more sympathetic Israeli understanding of American Jewish life can help reinforce and ensure continuing strong support for Israel among American Jews.

In this article two specific kinds of programs—specially designed leadership seminars and video productions to reach the masses—have been suggested as means to bridge this gap. The purpose of this article is to be suggestive, rather than exhaustive. There are other possible programs that might be considered. Michael Strassfeld (1989) has suggested that *shlichim* might serve the dual purpose of educating American Jews about Israel and taking back information about the American Jewish community and that *yordim* and *olim* might be potential bridges between our communities. Since many American Jewish organizations now have offices in Israel, one might regard individuals employed by such agencies as American *shlichim* who bring back to the American community information about Israel while representing their organizations in Israel. In addition, American Jewish organizations that sponsor tours to Israel should incorporate into those tours programs that enable participants to experience day-to-day Israeli life. All such efforts ought to be encouraged. Our suggestions are meant to stimulate such efforts in both countries.

American and Israeli Jewry both have a stake in a continued strong relationship. Reliance upon past interactions as models may be counterproductive in building for the future. Overall, both Jewish communities will benefit from programs designed to promote better understanding between themselves and their Jewish brethren. *Kol yisrael arevim ze laze*—all Jews are responsible for one another. To maintain this sense of responsibility we must begin with a better understanding of who we are.

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