

Something Odd Happened on the Way to Reviving Jewish Identity

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by Gary Aidekman

Sometime after the publication of the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990, a sense of dread spread over many American Jews. The survey revealed a steep increase in intermarriage, and Jewish leadership grew fearful that Jewish identity would weaken and with each new generation American Jewish continuity would be at increasing risk.

Perhaps without sufficient urgency or resources, the organized Jewish community, including Jewish federations, responded. Continuity, outreach, and in-reach became buzz words in communities across the country. Jewish day schools moved further up on the community agenda. Revitalizing Jewish camping became a greater focus. Several mega-donors joined together and created Birthright Israel. These and many other initiatives poured into our communities in an attempt to turn the tide.

The result...success of a sort. No less an authority than Jonathan Woocher, Chief Ideas Officer of JESNA, recently declared that, "For many, perhaps most, younger American Jews, Jewishness is an inalienable dimension of who they are; we do not need to fear that they will 'stop' being Jewish." *

Need proof? Look no further than popular culture. Comedian Adam Sandler first sang the original "The Chanukah Song" in 1994. Verse after verse mentions all those cool celebrities, and all were Jewish or half Jewish or some percentage Jewish or wanted to be Jewish or had a significant other who was Jewish. Online magazines like Jewcy and record labels like J-dub aimed at the young Jewish market grew in popularity. Identifying as a Jew became hot, cool, and in.

But something odd happened on the way to this revitalization of Jewish identity. Commitment to Peoplehood and the welfare of the Jewish people atrophied. No longer does responsibility for the needs of fellow Jews take precedence over or even equivalence with the needs of others. Through indifference and a misunderstanding of the American value of equality (a very Jewish value we call *b'tselem elohim*), the basic tenet that a Jew should/must help a fellow Jew in need has been diminished. How many in our community from Baby Boomers on down even know the Talmud's instruction that "All Israel is responsible one for the other?" And worse still, giving special attention to meeting internal needs is viewed in some circles as unethical. As the young head of J-dub has said, "The age of peoplehood is over. If peoplehood means that we feel a

connection to all Jews, we are all stuck [because young people] feel responsibility to all people, and some might feel that that idea of peoplehood might be racist.”

Why did this happen? We were so focused on identity for identity’s sake that we failed to teach, promote, and stress a key Jewish value... Jewish mutual responsibility, or “*areyveut*.” We failed to teach it, to discuss it forthrightly, to model it and to provide the experience of it. We did a great job in inculcating Judaism’s universal values and in universalizing our particular, inward-directed values. But we forgot to emphasize that being Jewish should include a deep sense of Peoplehood...a sense centered in shared destiny and internal caring.

So blinded by our desire to keep Jews Jewish we forgot the reason we and the world need to have a strong Jewish people. We are a people with a purpose, not just a religion or ethnicity. We forgot to emphasize that we are to be a light onto the nations. And our role requires us to not only model how to treat those outside the group but also those within. We not only care for others outside the tribe (and of course we should help them) but we must care for our own.

Why? Because an ethical people does not abandon its family, close or extended. Moreover, if we are to set an example of ethical behavior, we need to be conscious of what other peoples think...and what will they think of us if we ignore our own needs and needy? Lastly, because a critical and effective tool for repairing the world is showing others how to take care of their extended family, their people.

Fortunately, many of us have begun to wake up. The Jewish Agency for Israel, our partner in Israel, is prioritizing Peoplehood as a critical part of its mission. It will still be the central address for aliyah and resettlement, but it will expand its Peoplehood efforts to build more living bridges and cooperative efforts among world Jewry to help Jews in need worldwide. The Joint Distribution Committee is increasing its efforts to provide volunteer opportunities to help Jews in need living in the FSU and elsewhere. Here in MetroWest, we are making a concerted effort to provide volunteer opportunities and *b’nai mitzvah* projects that focus on helping our fellow Jews. Moreover, led by our MetroWest Partnership for Jewish Learning and Life, we are beginning to explore ways to promote and inculcate the critical value of Jewish mutual responsibility, a central element of Jewish Peoplehood, in our young people and, more broadly, across the community.

But we need your help. The founders of this wonderful country declared that all men and women are created equal. And it is true. But in our homes and synagogues, and around the community, we need to proudly explain to our children, our families, and our friends that giving special attention to one’s own is not antithetical to that value, politically incorrect or, worse, immoral. Rather, so long as we do not exclude helping others, the act of caring for your own is to be admired and emulated.

Building on Hillel’s wisdom we say, “If we are not for ourselves who will be? If we are only for ourselves what are we?” In short, if we Jews do not care for our fellow Jews what people will hold us in high regard? We will not be much of a people, certainly not one to emulate. Moreover, if we are solely outward directed, we will ultimately lose our identity (can there really be a “we”

if “we” don’t care for “us?”) and if we lose our identity, we will not serve as an ongoing example of ethical behavior, a light, for all nations.

*For context, Jonathan also said, “They [young people] are Jewish, but how and where they will express their identities is not a given. Traditional institutions often feel uncomfortable to them, and they do not recognize a priori claims on their loyalty from a ‘community’ or a ‘people.’ The challenge from a community perspective is how to encourage these individuals to ‘activate’ their Jewishness.”

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