

## The Jewish State and the Jewish People

by

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Slowly but surely, almost without notice, the thread that binds Jews in Israel with the Jewish communities abroad is steadily unraveling. This is a process that both sides are responsible for, a process that is going to end badly if the leadership – here and there – doesn't comprehend the big picture, understand its implications, and have the foresight to navigate us to safer shores.

As far as the Jewish communities abroad are concerned, no explanations were required for the generation that survived the holocaust regarding the necessity of a home in which the Jewish people could exist, defend itself and flourish. The next generation, which grew up during the 6-Day and Yom Kippur wars, did not need reminders that above the third temple hovers a clear and present danger. Both generations could be proud not only of our ability to build around us one of the world's strongest defensive shields, but also – and perhaps, in particular – they could take pride in the incredible development of Israeli society in non-defense realms during the post-independence years.

Since then, the threat of a violent demise has thankfully receded – and with it, the sense of urgency and closeness between both sides (in Israel and abroad) of the subsequent generation. The process that our children's generation is undergoing today will have profound implications on the future – if not the existence – of Judaism world-wide.

Israel's image is not what it used to be, and this is no coincidence. Our national priorities have changed from top to bottom, and the consequences should surprise no one – with all that this implies regarding the future link between the young generation of Jews living abroad and within Israel.

Our kids need to learn from the communities abroad that Judaism is not a simple binary decision: that is, one's choice set is not limited to being either orthodox or secular. This is particularly important in a country where being religious is all too often linked with (1) the behavior of the ultra-orthodox who do not carry their own weight in defending their country, nor in working for a living, and (2) with the behavior of many settlers for whom religion all too often implies needlessly putting our children in harm's way, and whose messianic vision for the future of Israel is incompatible with core democratic values.

Under these circumstances, when the religious option is viewed as binary, the result is that many of our children are growing up not just secular, but increasingly anti-religious (anyone who tunes into the reverberations emanating from Tommy Lapid, Avraham Poraz and their Shinui party understands exactly how beckoning is the soil that they relentlessly fertilize). The implications of this are disturbing, and they do not bode well for a country that wishes to continue as the home of the Jewish people. It is crucial for our children to become much better acquainted with their brethren abroad – to be exposed to Jews who can show them a different face to our religion, heritage and culture.

For Jewish kids overseas, the problem is different, but no less serious. In countries where assimilation is rapidly increasing, there is a growing need for young people to be exposed to a Judaism beyond the confines of the orthodox, conservative and reform synagogues and temples. They need to see a proud, vibrant and successful Jewish people with religious and non-religious lifestyles that can complement and substantially expand their current outlook on Judaism.

From the perspective of Israel's Jews, the time has come for a turnaround in national priorities, for a new national agenda that ensures not only Israel's physical existence, but also ensures the continuity and strengthening of the Jewish people inside and outside of Israel.

From the perspective of Jewish communities abroad, the time has come to switch from fund-raising for issues such as poverty and education that the Israeli government is both responsible for and has sufficient funds to deal with – once it gets its priorities straight – and focus on programs, like Taglit, that bring young people here from abroad so that they may see with their own eyes the national home of their people, and get to personally know some of its inhabitants. In doing so, they will provide an invaluable contribution toward reducing our rampant provincial grasp on the essence of Judaism.

As it approaches its 57<sup>th</sup> birthday, Israel cannot remain content with its role as a Jewish safe haven, nor even as an international leader in science, technology and the arts. The Jewish people's national home must aspire to be an “or la'goyim”, or global beacon, as a strong, vibrant and moral egalitarian society, with the highest living standards in the world – and the lowest poverty rates. Sounds ambitious? This is a very special people, and the heights to which it has ascended over the course of human history should provide an indication of its internal strength and ability to surmount odds and rejuvenate itself.

Israel is the home that all Jews – wherever they may be – can and should be proud of and want to identify with. It is all in our hands.