

The Endangered Next Generation of Israeli-American Jews

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Close to a million Israelis live in countries other than Israel. The majority have settled in the United States and Canada for the long run, teaching at universities, running business, and becoming entrepreneurs. Most identify as secular and send their children to public schools. Although they maintain a vague Israeli identity, most of the children call their current country of residence home. Far removed from Israel, which provided them Jewish identity by osmosis, these children's Jewish life, identity, and culture is tenuous and vulnerable in the Diaspora.

Instead of absorbing Hanukkah in the streets as their parents did in Israel, they are, to their parent's naive surprise, bombarded by Christmas. Instead of Kiddush on Friday night and a national ambiance of Sabbath on Shabbat, they have soccer practice and the myriad extracurricular activities of the average American child and teen. When the High Holy Days come, whereas in Israel their families might have stepped into a synagogue or community center for prayer, they now must contend with the notion of buying tickets for the first time, something those who had grown up in the Israeli zeitgeist find bizarre, as strange and foreign as paying for synagogue membership.

Diaspora Jews, no matter their denomination, for the most part retain their Jewish identity by forming religious communities around synagogues. Synagogues

provide Diaspora Jews with a religious connection, communal identity and association, rudimentary education, and a vital sense of Jewish peoplehood. Most secular Israelis did not attend synagogues in Israel and may never have been in a synagogue. They were acculturated to see religion as dangerous, political, and coercive. They do not easily connect to non-Orthodox synagogues, because, as the cliché goes, for secular Israelis, the synagogue they do not attend is Orthodox. They, and especially their children, are left Jewishly unmoored.

The story of Israelis in America at this moment is foreboding. It tells of a population that is so connected in some ways to its Jewish roots and memories, but whose children are assimilating into American culture more quickly than the children of immigrants a century ago, who at least had their European parents, synagogues, and Jewish institutions to keep them connected. Secular Israelis in the Diaspora retain some of their cultural heritage through social connections with fellow Israelis and by gathering for events such as Israel Independence Day. They hope their children will avoid intermarrying and assimilating, but in reality Israeli culture alone is a thin string with which to maintain the next generation's Jewish connection, and will not act as a bulwark against assimilation.

In America, it is religious community and institutional connections that help one retain Jewish life. The American Jewish community, with few exceptions, has not begun to address this population's Jewish needs, and for the most part is not sure how to do so. Several years ago an Israeli came to my synagogue, Bais Abraham Congregation in St. Louis, Missouri, and told us that there was something even secular Israelis wanted from the Jewish community: a school to teach their children to read and write the Hebrew language. Realizing this was an opportunity to engage secular Israelis on their own terms, and perhaps eventually to engage them in the Jewish community and religious life, we opened a synagogue-based religious school specifically for the children of secular Israelis. We staffed the school with experienced Israeli language teachers and used opportunities such as Jewish holidays to teach this population about Jewish life, which, to their parents' chagrin, they know almost nothing.

Over the first few years, family after family recounted that they had never expected to feel at home in a synagogue with religious people. They expected coercion, derision, and alienation. Instead, they were surprised to feel embraced and at home in a Jewish religious environment. Indeed, Bais Abraham is particularly suited for them, as an Orthodox congregation that has consciously removed as many barriers to entry as possible. It boasts a most diverse congregational makeup of religious from birth, Jews raised secular, converts,

intermarrieds, and people on a spiritual journey.

Two years into the school's existence, the Israeli families began to trust us and to realize the importance of some Jewish education, to the extent that they asked for an extra hour of study each week for their children to learn about Judaism. I saw this as the school's true *raison d'être*. The "Shelanu" Hebrew School now acts as a foundation upon which we provide holiday parties, free High Holy Day seats, Shabbat meals, classes, and connection for Israeli families.

Opening up Jewish Community Centers and other culturally Jewish institutions to Israelis will never be enough to retain Israelis abroad as part of the Jewish people. It will take congregations that are open and welcoming in nature, learning about Israeli culture and the subtleties of engaging this population and meeting their needs, and working to retain their children as part of the Jewish people and engage them in Jewish life. It requires Israeli *shelihim*, who both understand secular Israeli culture and appreciate a synagogue's religious life, to serve as a bridge to local Israelis. Time is running out. We now face not much more than a 20-year window before the children of these Jews assimilate *en masse*. It happens as they finish high school and go to college in America with almost no Jewish religious knowledge, identity, or practice. There is little except the desire of their parents and a fuzzy connection to a land across the ocean to stop them from marrying the non-Jew they have met on campus. They have less to hold them back than their Reform or Conservative American-born, synagogue-connected counterparts. We can make a big difference in retaining these Jews and their children as part of the Jewish people and Jewish religion.

It is, in some ways, much easier than engaging a secular American Jew in that Israelis all have much stronger Jewish identities and memories. If we do not wake up quickly and put resources toward this challenge, equipping synagogues across the country to engage Israelis and to understand their unique culture and needs, it will soon be too late for the next generation.