Beyond the Victim Mentality

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For many centuries and in many lands Jews have been victims. Even now, when most Jews live in democratic countries where we enjoy equal rights, we still fret about anti-Semitism. The Jewish defense organizations constantly remind us of the increase in anti-Jewish propaganda on social media, of anti-Jewish and anti-Israel demonstrations, of physical attacks against Jews.

Although for the most part we feel safe and free, the “victim mentality” still haunts us.

The Jewish community has spent many millions of dollars to create Holocaust museums and memorials. It is praiseworthy and important to provide Holocaust education. But the down side is that we devote massive resources to emphasizing our victimhood. We like to think that the general public will feel more sympathy with us. And in many cases this may be correct.

But unless handled very well, Holocaust education can work against us. Unsympathetic people, not to mention outright anti-Semites, may view the Holocaust as an example of how Jews were slaughtered by the millions while the world did very little to stop the carnage. In a warped mindset, the Holocaust demonstrates that it’s okay to attack Jews. Even worse, the Jewish victims are blamed for having deserved to be massacred.

In the United States, Jewish spokespeople emphasize that Jews are perhaps 2% of the population but are victims of over 50% of hate crimes. The expectation is that people will be morally outraged to hear this information. Yet, neutral or unsympathetic people may draw another conclusion. If so many people are attacking Jews, it’s ok for us to do so also. Jews must deserve this treatment, otherwise why would they be singled out for so much antagonism?

We cannot ignore anti-Jewish and anti-Israel activity. We must do our best to defeat the haters.

But we need to get beyond the “victim mentality.” We need to do far more to foster a positive, confident and courageous Jewish people. We need to publicize and promote philo-Semitism. After all,

vast numbers of non-Jews feel warmly about Jews, and are appreciative of the amazing contributions of Jews to education, science, medicine, law, the arts, social justice, government, literature etc. Many millions of Americans vote for and elect Jewish candidates to a wide range of offices. American Jews have exemplified the best aspects of the American dream. We are a hard-working, highly educated and socially responsible group.

While it is important to publicize anti-Jewish behaviors, it is also important—even more important—to publicize philo-Jewish behaviors. Jewish defense organizations send out frequent press releases on anti-Semitic acts. They should be sending out (at least) an equal number of press releases highlighting philo-Semitic acts, calling attention to positive interactions between Jews and non-Jews. In order to offset bad trends, we need to encourage good trends.

When it comes to Israel, we are barraged by news about anti-Israel activity in colleges. The BDS movement receives an inordinate amount of news coverage as do politicians who voice anti-Israel animus. We need a barrage of news about all the goodwill shown by millions of people toward Israel. The general public needs to know how much good Israel does, how its technology improves all our lives, how its agricultural advances help nations in Africa and Asia, how it promotes culture, the arts etc. Instead of always seeming to be on the defensive, we ought to confidently let the world know of the incredible achievements of the tiny State of Israel and how it has managed to become a world leader in so many fields. This can be done in a sensitive and thoughtful way, without bragging and without undue self-congratulations.

Our Jewish organizations and each individual Jew can play a role in overcoming the “victim mentality." While fighting against all forms of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, we also need to project a positive and confident self-image. Opinion leaders—Jewish and non-Jewish—can mobilize to move society in a positive and respectful direction.

The “victim mentality” reinforces our victimhood. Let’s look beyond this; let’s develop a positive, confident mentality. We can do this…and it will make a vast difference for the better.