Everyday Kiddush Hashem: The Power of the Personal Model

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I'll never forget what happened on my first trip to Israel.

It was the summer I turned 25, and I had been working on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. At the time, I had been invited to join a parliamentary fact-finding mission organized by the Canadian Jewish community through the Canada-Israel Committee.

I had joined the trip having been raised a Christian in rural Canada—a world that can feel light years away from the Jewish community, let alone the Middle East. It was my first trip overseas and, suffice to say, I would experience many "I'm not in Kansas anymore" moments in our brief but packed time in Israel.

Of all the remarkable sights, people, and conversations I would encounter, one that still resonates took place at the *Kotel*. A small group of us—all Canadians who were not Jewish—were standing in the men's section of the plaza, observing this fascinating world in which we found ourselves. An Orthodox Israeli said something to us, possibly in Hebrew, and our guide responded to him. Apparently, he had asked if we were Jewish and would like to borrow *tefillin*, to which our guide politely responded that the group wasn't Jewish.

The Orthodox man quickly and warmly responded in English: "Welcome to Israel!"

Three simple words in an encounter I'm sure he would forget momentarily, and one that he no doubt had experienced many times before. But for me, it spoke volumes.

Here we were at a site of extraordinary holiness to a man who, by all appearances, took the holy very seriously. We were tourists soaking it all in and standing out in the crowd with our awkward, cardboard *kippot*.

And yet, he made us feel welcome. Like we belonged there.

When I share my story of choosing to become Jewish, I always speak of the power of that trip—and so many other serendipitous events that would draw me to discover the beauty of *Am Yisrael* and the beauty of our precious *Torah*. Little did I know back then that an unexpected moment at the Kotel would be a milestone on a journey into Zionism, Judaism, and ultimately dedicating my career to serving the Jewish people as an advocacy and communications professional.

In the years that followed, my spiritual path went hand-in-hand with my career path. I took a job at the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA—the advocacy agency of Canada's Jewish Federations) and, later, UJA Federation of Greater Toronto. In a world where Jews and Israel are so often misunderstood, if not outright maligned, I was passionate to make a difference. And I felt that my personal and professional background could make for a unique contribution.

So, too, my training in public opinion research—developed at a consulting firm I had joined after Parliament Hill—would give me a window into how Canadians view Jews, Israel, and antisemitism. Over the years, I would have the privilege of working on the research teams conducting some of the most important studies of Canadian public opinion on these issues, uncovering data trends and messaging proven to open minds and win allies for our cause.

Those years of research, including data gathered in the wake of the heinous October 7th attacks, revealed a wide range of nuanced findings that are perhaps best left to another essay. But in the context of the title topic of this article, I am reminded of a few findings that offer compelling evidence of the power of the personal model—the power of *Kiddush Hashem*—in shaping views of Jews beyond our community.

In Canada, home to the Diaspora's third-largest Jewish community, Jews constitute roughly one percent of the general population. Broadly speaking, the research is fairly consistent in terms of how Canadians perceive us.

When it comes to views of different religions, Judaism is among the most positively regarded, with favorability scores similar to Protestant Christianity. The only religion that typically surpasses Judaism in popularity among Canadians is Buddhism. Every other religion, including Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity, enjoys lower favorability scores than Judaism.

But to be Jewish is, of course, also to be part of a people. And when it comes to views of Canadians of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, Jews are similarly seen in very positive terms. The proportion of Canadians who have positive views of Jews is comparable to those who have a positive view of people of British or French origin, the two groups with the highest such scores in Canada (which is no doubt indicative of their relatively large representation within Canadian demography). Across studies, there is a consistent majority of Canadians who feel that Jews make a positive contribution to Canadian society.

On the other side of the ledger, the research certainly shows that antisemitism exists in Canada. Based on all of the studies I've worked on or reviewed, I would estimate that somewhere between ten and fifteen percent of Canadians hold clearly antisemitic views. Depending on the antisemitic trope being tested by a pollster, the numbers climb disturbingly higher than that threshold on particular questions. Most Canadians have little understanding or opinion either way when asked about antisemitic tropes. The issue is largely *tabula rasa* to a public that has devoted minimal consideration to a topic that appears to have no meaningful connection to their lives. However, as a general rule, when asked whether a respondent agrees with a particular antisemitic trope or conspiracy theory, for every *one* Canadian who agrees with such a hateful statement, there are approximately *two* Canadians who strongly disagree with these views.

A two-to-one ratio is, of course, an encouraging sign if one is marketing a product or a political party. But that's not what we're doing when we advocate for Jews, Israel, and—for that matter—fundamental human rights. Experience suggests that it doesn't require a hateful majority for a society to cross an antisemitic Rubicon. It simply requires the forces of moderation to remain silent and preoccupied with other matters, while a loud and aggressive fringe dominates the discourse and shatters the boundaries of what's socially acceptable—increasingly marginalizing and threatening Jews in the process. Of the many lessons we Diaspora Jews should urgently internalize from the post-October 7th experience, it's the danger posed by this dynamic. The question is: How do we combat it?

In 2022, I was privileged to be part of a team that conducted a public opinion study as a collaboration of CIJA, Federation CJA of Montreal, and UJA Federation of Greater Toronto. In addition to asking Canadians what they thought of Jews, Israel, antisemitism, and various related issues, we asked the question: Do you have a close Jewish friend or colleague? Nearly one in five respondents answered in the affirmative. We examined their views in depth, and the results were remarkable.

Respondents who had a close Jewish friend or colleague were two times more likely to say that Jews make a positive contribution to Canadian society, as compared to those who did not have a personal connection to Jews. Similarly, those with a close Jewish friend or colleague were twice as likely to strongly oppose antisemitism, again compared to those without a personal relationship to a Jew.

Prior to my conversion, I once spoke to a group of Jewish students in Ottawa, with whom I shared that they would be wise to see themselves as ambassadors for the Jewish people. Having grown up in a rural area where there are virtually no Jews, I shared with them that they may be the first and only Jew that someone meets—and that this comes with both opportunity and responsibility. Years later, I was seeing this principle come to life in the data before my eyes. The results were a stunning demonstration that, just as they say that all politics is local, the *personal is powerful* when it comes to how we understand people from different lived realities.

"Sanctifying the Name,"[i] a characteristically thoughtful essay by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *zt"l*, unpacks how the principle of *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying the divine name) has been interpreted by *rabbonim* throughout history. He notes that martyrdom is, of course, core to our understanding of *Kiddush Hashem*, citing the willingness of Jews to sacrifice themselves for their faith—be it at the hands of the Seleucid Greeks, the Romans, or the Crusaders. But Rabbi Sacks goes on to cite a passage from Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, which has powerful import for our daily lives:

> If a sage "speaks pleasantly to others, is affable and gracious, receives people pleasantly, never humiliates others even though they humiliate him and honors others even though they disrespect him…with the result that all praise him, love him, and approve of his deeds—such a person sanctifies God's name. Of him, Scripture (Is. 49:3) says: "And He said to me: Israel, you are my servant, in whom I will be glorified."

Like most of us, I cannot credibly speak of what it means to be a sage. But as Jews who live in a free and democratic society—a society in which we can express our authentic selves to the world around us—we each have an opportunity to infuse the underlying principles of *Kiddush Hashem* in our daily lives. In this regard, the data seems to paint a compelling picture. By simply being openly Jewish and a good, relatable person, one has the power to strengthen the "brand" of the Jewish people and reduce antisemitism among their peers.

To be sure, this is not to suggest a singular solution to antisemitism. Nor is it to imply that the same kindness and personal connection that creates allies among people of goodwill can somehow transform a hardened antisemite or protect our community from those who wish us harm. But it is to say that, in the fight against antisemitism, if we are solely focused on those who hate us, we are ignoring those who—with the right outreach—will stand with us and on the right side of history.

I would also argue that effective ally-building doesn't begin by telling people beyond our community what they should think. Rather, as the data suggests, it begins by simply showing up as a good person—as reliable friend or colleague—who is openly Jewish, and therefore brings credit to the Jewish people.

In today's environment, it also seems clear that it isn't enough to simply show up. At a time when antisemites are attempting to defame what it is to be Jewish, we need to own and define our identity—and not only for ourselves. We need to warmly share our experiences—our Passover *sedarim* , our Shabbat dinners, our Chanukah parties, our family histories, our photos and stories from our last trip to Israel, and so much more—because the humanization of the Jewish experience is a powerful antidote to the dehumanization of Jews. And as someone who has lived that journey of discovering the beautiful world of Jewish life, I have seen firsthand how we look from the outside in—and we need to open those windows wider than ever if we want a society of allies rather than bystanders.

And last but not least, humanizing the Jewish experience also means humanizing the impact of the hate we're facing. There is compelling psychological research to demonstrate the power of personal anecdotes. We can and must talk about history, hate crime statistics, and the geopolitical threats facing Israel and Jews. But if we talk in abstract terms—if we fail to share the personal impact of antisemitism on our families and communities—we risk giving the impression that this is an academic matter, rather than a threat that's harming and hurting the people they care about: their close Jewish friends and colleagues.

Welcome to Israel. If three simple words from a stranger can shift a paradigm and enter the heart, one can only begin to imagine the power of our personal example—through everyday acts in the spirit of *Kiddush Hashem*—on the lives of those around us.

[i] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Sanctifying the Name," in *Covenant & Conversation, Leviticus: The Book of Holiness* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union, 2015), 321.