

Resources for a Shared Partnership

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Mr. President, distinguished guests, I am delighted to be in *Beit Hanassi* again, particularly on a day as historic as today might very well turn out to be. It's good for us to be able to step back and reflect on the long-term challenges facing the Jewish people. As I look out at the audience, I see so many people with whom we have worked in multiple vineyards to strengthen Jewish life throughout the world.

The first Annual Assessment of the Jewish Policy Planning Institute, is *kol ha'kavod* [merits praise], an outstanding paper, far beyond what many of us, even those close to the Institute, had anticipated. It is a rich report, provocative and useful. The UJA has reviewed it with our Executive Committee in New York, and I encourage other leaders to take the report home and study it. Perhaps you should even hold a session with your senior leadership, for the report can serve as a lens through which to assess our organizations' present priorities.

I agree with the report's finding whereby, and I quote, "the most critically acute issue facing the Jewish people today involves the policies that should be adopted with respect to the Palestinian conflict." It is not just the security of Israel that's at stake; it's the very future of the Jewish state and the people of Israel, with broad ramifications for the region, the US, and the entire Jewish people.

One thing is clear. In the last five years, after numerous observers cited the growing distance between North American Jewry and Israel, American Jewry demonstrated the depth of its commitment to "stand with the people of Israel" as they faced unrelenting violence.

The Conference of Presidents was critical to the success of this united stand, as was every organization in this room. Thousands of North American Jews journeyed to Israel to be here with our people in the land. We organized rallies and mobilized hundreds of thousands to travel to Washington for the sake of communicating the depth of our solidarity with the people of Israel. And we raised hundreds of millions of extra dollars, which enabled us to send thousands of Israeli children to summer camps [in North America] and build the Israel Trauma Relief Coalition.

Having said this, it is far less clear whether the Jews of the Diaspora have taken full advantage of the opportunity to help the people of Israel make the difficult policy decisions. The report calls for, and I quote, “innovative measures to ensure the involvement of the Jewish people in this process...” This subject requires further study and experimentation. There are many leaders here who devote their time to these international strategic issues; hence I leave these issues to them. However, I would like to emphasize the urgency of the challenges that my esteemed colleagues are toiling over.

Being Jewish is a Personal Choice

Instead, I want to focus on many of the report’s core findings and recommendations concerning the far-ranging issue of strengthening our youth’s Jewish identity. In North America, the issue of Jewish identity has assumed a higher position on our communal agenda ever since the 1990 National Jewish Population Study reported an intermarriage rate of 52 percent. This figure sent shockwaves through much of our community. People came to the recognition that the borders and boundaries between the Jewish and non-Jewish community which had historically maintained Jewish cohesiveness have eroded. In other words, it became abundantly clear that being

Jewish is no longer a condition thrust upon us, but rather a personal choice.

And so in order to answer the ever-present question, “Why should I be a Jew?” and maximize the likelihood of positive Jewish identification, we forged many strategies, three of which I would like to call to your attention:

- 1) Strengthening our core gateway institutions – synagogues, community centers, Hillel Houses – because these are places where even those who were not raised by committed families or communities might be introduced to Jewish life.
- 2) Increasing the numbers of Jews who partake in what have been documented to be the most powerful Jewish identity experiences: Jewish summer camps (sleep-away and day camps) and trips to Israel.
- 3) Increasing our resources so that we can recruit and retain the highest quality Jewish educators and communal professionals possible.

Since 1990 we have made some gains, but they have been modest. This report challenges us to do far more. However – is there always a ‘however’ in Jewish life? – the philanthropic community, including the Federation system, has yet to muster the confidence needed to believe that we can raise the necessary funds by inspiring our donors with the language of “opportunity.” Our public language remains mired in crisis. I would like to present two examples that epitomize this problem:

Firstly, we continue to raise money for Israel on the basis of an “Israel at risk.” While Israel faces numerous challenges, at the end of the day it is not Jewish philanthropy that will secure the state. Even an extra \$500 million – a sum that can no doubt go a long way will not guarantee Israel’s future.

This has not always been the case. For those of you who had the opportunity to see Tovah Feldshuh's wonderful production "Golda's Balcony" in New York, there is a relevant scene that you may recall. In 1948, David Ben Gurion sends Golda Meir to the Untied States to raise \$50 million. These funds will determine whether Israel will be able to obtain the necessary resources for its first six months of existence. Without them, according to the script, Israel will not survive. Meir easily surpasses Ben Gurion's stated objective and the rest is history.

During the first years of Israel's existence, North American philanthropic funds amounted to one-third of the Israeli government's expenses. The financial support from North American Jewry provided the indispensable lifeblood for the entire fledgling enterprise known as the State of Israel. Today, philanthropic funds raised in North America have been re-contextualized, as Israel now boasts a Gross National Product in excess of \$100 billion.

In essence, our philanthropic dollars in Israel are now all about special needs, institutional strengthening, collaboration, and partnership. They are not earmarked towards solving Israel's security crisis or undergirding its economy. (This, then, takes us back to what the paper said is the key strategic issue for the Jewish people: resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.)

The second example of our image problem is that American fundraisers are still speaking about "rescuing those in harm's way." Yet, in real terms, most people that come on aliyah today have other options and arrive on their own volition. Aliyah remains important both as a core value and to the future of Israel, but as Sallai Meridor [the chairman of the Jewish Agency] has noted, it is not about "rescue."

Philanthropy for Strengthening Jewish Identity

Therefore, the question currently facing the Jewish people and Jewish philanthropy is as follows: Can we also inspire and motivate donors, those most committed to Jewish life, to provide the necessary resources for seizing the extraordinary opportunity to strengthen the Jewish identity of our youth and renew Jewish life? Can we inspire our leadership to provide the resources needed to actualize the recommendations of this report?

I would like to take this opportunity to applaud the Israeli government for their investment in Birthright Israel and now Masa [programs bringing young Jews on visits to Israel]. This commitment is indicative of the fact that the Israeli government recognizes the shared fate of Jews the world over. A strong Israel and strong Jewish communities in the Diaspora are all essential to the well being of both Israel and the Jewish people alike.

The government's commitment to Birthright and Masa also shows that Israel's leaders realize that increasing the number of young Jews who visit the country – for either short or lengthy stays—will strengthen Jewish identity, strengthen the likelihood of aliyah, and strengthen the bonds among and between the Jewish people. A triple win for the Jewish people!

At its core, this support is predicated on the desire to seize the opportunity to buttress the Jewish future. As identified in the report, in taking these initial steps, the government of Israel is displaying a growing recognition that this is both a challenge and an opportunity for which the people of Israel have a huge stake. We need to build on these efforts so that Jewish leaders in Israel and abroad can develop the confidence to realize how unique this opportunity really is and respond in kind.

Our generation enjoys unprecedented affluence and influence.

If we put our minds to it and mobilize the necessary resources, we can ensure that every Jewish child who so desires can attend a Jewish day school or summer camp; that every Jewish youth can attend Birthright. Moreover, we can ensure that our camps, schools, and synagogues are the top flight centers of an inspired, caring community.

It bears mentioning that the need to bolster the Jewish education and Jewish identity of Israelis is no less daunting. There is a long list of reasons for why we assumed that speaking Hebrew, living in our national homeland, and relying on the Hebrew *luach* (calendar) would guarantee a strong Jewish identity. Many studies, including the Shenhar Report, have made it clear that just because a Jew lives in Israel doesn't mean he or she will strongly identify with his or her religion and age-old culture. At any rate, it certainly cannot be taken for granted. Enhancing the Jewish identity of Israeli children thus also constitutes an opportunity that is ripe for the taking.

The collective Jewish Identity

Finally, while I have focused on the issue of individual Jewish identity in North America and touched upon identity here in Israel, there is also a third, inter-related challenge: strengthening collective Jewish identity. How do we ensure that Jews in North America and in Israel will identify with and accept responsibility for other Jews? For years now, those involved with the issue of Jewish identity have honed in on the question of "What does my Judaism mean to me?" But this question reflects a sort of inherent narcissism – an over-emphasis on the individual that minimizes the community's capacity to bolster its ties with our people, our fellow communities, and our collective responsibility.

If we are to maximize the likelihood that your grandchildren

in Tel-Aviv and mine in New York will feel mutually responsible for one another, it is imperative that we turn our attention towards devoting the requisite time and resources for creating shared experiences and partnerships.

Jews have always felt that “*kol Yisrael areivim ze le’ze*” (all of Israel is responsible for one another), and we – those gathered at *Beit Hanassi* – still firmly believe in collective responsibility: to care for those in need; to make it possible for all those who want to make aliyah to do so; to help those who come to Israel settle down; to support Jewish education in communities that cannot sustain their own institutions. These are indeed shared responsibilities.

What’s more, if we will it, we can expand our understanding of collective responsibility, seize this unique opportunity to strengthen Jewish identity, and renew Jewish life. To achieve these vital goals, it is incumbent upon us to maximize participation in the most powerful Jewish educational experiences and connect our people in partnerships – weaving a network of relationships between and among Jews throughout the world.

This is no easy task in a world where the “self” is prioritized if not deified. If we can create both “inspiring” and “caring” Jewish communities, if we can weave together a network of shared collective responsibility, then we will help ensure the Jewish future and, by virtue of our compassionate community, reclaim our historic role as an *ohr la’goyim* (a light unto the nations). This report challenges us to do no less.