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3rd Place Winner

6th Annual Dov and Arlein Chetner Chai Essay Competition

Waging and Winning the Jewish War Against Assimilation

– The Problem – The Solution

Is the threat from within worse than external threats? Has indifference led to a decline of our Jewish culture and religious values?

From the first call to Abraham to leave his home for a life of covenant, the Jews have been a people apart. The modern Jewish community in North America is not alone in seeking to preserve its unique cultural and religious heritage; however, its complex history of innovation and continuity over centuries of migration and persecution give it distinct tools from which to draw a roadmap for the future. In addressing the problem of assimilation, the Jewish community must rethink the strategies it incorporates in its promotion of community involvement. In doing so, it must be aware of the mindset of new generations who have a different attitude towards society. The community must encourage active involvement of members in creating programs and institutions suited to their needs, strengthen educational outlets, and promote diversity of Jewish practice and affiliation.

The North American context has distinct implications for the evolution of the Jewish community. According to Heinrich Heine, a 19th century Jewish-born writer, conversion to Christianity is one's ticket to acceptance within Germany at the time. Such a desire to escape the exclusion and persecution of their minority status compelled a wave of assimilation but ultimately proved to be illusory, as even after conversion Jews remained alien to mainstream society. In a modern North American context, however, the sense of outsidership and accompanying fear that motivated European Jews and earlier generations of Americans to replace their traditions with those of the mainstream Christian culture has diminished. Anti-Semitism is largely a feared sport to practice, with considerable resources dedicated by the Jewish community to combating anti-Semitic incidents and rhetoric. In the urban centers where the majority of Jews reside, not only is there a lesser sense of direct persecution, there are also frequently traces of Jewish influences in the character of the city. The contribution of the Jewish community to the development of Canadian cities is well-recognized. As a result, being a proud Jew is an easy lifestyle to uphold, even just in terms of available resources to support a religious or culturally Jewish life. As a Jewish young adult living in Montreal, there are alone four synagogues in walking distance of my house, not to mention more than a dozen kosher restaurants just a short drive away, and a whole variety of Jewish organizations around the city.

Even with all these resources and the background of religious tolerance, assimilation remains a prominent issue for the Jewish community. However, the landscape in which the latest threat to Jewish continuity is taking place looks radically different from any other context in Jewish history. Our globalised world looks nothing like the shtetls of Eastern Europe. The exchange of information is easier, faster, and occurs in greater volumes; an acute awareness of the outside world and its competing enticements is a reality for all but the most remotely isolated Jewish communities. In a multicultural society, this is a struggle for many cultural communities who are trying to preserve their heritage. The daily interaction with and exposure to secular society is true even for those who attend Jewish schools, work in Jewish organizations and socialize only with other Jews. We need to recognize that it is unrealistic to create an insular community that makes people feel confined, and instead address the problems within the community that cause individuals to disengage.

Assimilation is still to some extent driven by external pressure or enticement from secular society. In a historically homogenous and exclusionary culture, success for individuals has often come at the expense of Jewish identity. A businessman will take off his kippah or tuck in his tzitzit, even if only unconsciously; also, once accepted into the world of success, there is the accompanying enticement to participate in all its rituals, many of which may be incompatible with those of Judaism. There is as well the general trend of society's secularization and the decline in formal religious affiliation. The appropriate response to this may therefore be to provide models of Judaism, whether cultural or religious, that provide individuals with a more meaningful and stimulating daily Jewish existence.

Assimilation presently represents the loss of younger generations of individuals who find that the life offered by their communities no longer resonates with their desires and sense of identity. It is far too easy for to argue blindly in favour of preserving Jewish religious and cultural tradition as it always was, and mourn the degeneration of the values and practices of our forefathers. Some feel that to combat assimilation, the community must respond by becoming more insular and conservative, rather than asking how it can adapt – even if only structurally and not in its core values – to the demands of a new reality.

The assimilation debate as it currently stands needs to define and refocus its strategies. The tone of the argument against assimilation is predominantly pessimistic. There is no question that Judaism is built around remembrance of the past and the strength of our shared history. This history must be used to paint an affirmative picture of Jewish continuity, rather than one of victimhood. The argument is often that we have to maintain our Jewish identity out of respect for those who were persecuted for their faith, and out of concerns about future discrimination. While these themes are important, it doesn't provide a daily experience of Jewish identity, or one which is forward-looking. Continuity for continuity's sake is not enough.

It is also easy to rely exclusively on demographic statistics to paint a bleak picture of the Jewish community. The National Jewish Population Survey, conducted in 2001 by the UJC, certainly confirms the realities of high rates of intermarriage and an aging population. In the past twenty years, rates of intermarriage have hovered consistently at around 50%, with only 33% of intermarried couples raising their children as Jews. This too is an ineffective argument to convince young Jews to marry within the community, or maintain their involvement. How so-

called rates of assimilation are measured, and the degree of alarm such an analysis will provoke in the community, will also depend on the definition of Jewish identity being used. To some, the decline of religious practice among Jews is a sign of assimilation; to others, Judaism's significance is that of cultural community. There is also debate over children of intermarriage are counted as Jewish, even if they self-identify as such.

As an alternative way to address the issue of assimilation, we must take a fresh look at community building, with respect to both structure and values. Innovation and creativity are hallmarks of the Jewish tradition. When Jews are faced with new circumstances, they adapt in both practice and philosophy. During the Babylonian exile, a dispersed and de-contextualized Jewish population forced the rabbis to replace centralized sacrificial worship at the Temple with prayer services that could be performed by individuals and smaller groups. The period of the Enlightenment of 18th century Europe and the wave of assimilation that accompanied it sparked the creation of new theological movements within the Jewish community, such as Reform and Conservative Judaism, as a response to waning interest in traditional modes of practice. In the current North American environment many traditional communities are not fitting into the ever evolving life styles of the 21st century contemporary Jewish population. Many of those who wish actively wish incorporate Jewish practice into their identity are falling short because of the lack of outlets that reflect their needs or interests, whether spiritual, social or intellectual. Edgar Bronfman suggests in his article, appropriately titled "A Time to Innovate," that as the young Jewish community is evolving Judaism is failing to evolve with it. He says that that lack of interest by the youth in "traditional Jewish institutions" signals a decline in North American Jewish life.

Over the years, many innovative responses have been proposed to reignite the interest of young Jews and maintain their involvement in the community. There is currently large reliance on Israel programs to instill a feeling of Jewish identity in teenagers and young adults; Birthright is frequently cited as one of the most important recent innovations for the promotion of involvement with the community. As a 2009 report by the Cohen Center of Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University has found, however, there are few follow-up opportunities for recapturing a meaningful Jewish experience after Birthright. The same report found that young Jews preferred "small gatherings to large, anonymous 'meat market' Jewish events". The community must adapt the programs offered to correspond to the daily life of young Jews. It must also promote leadership and empowerment by encouraging these young Jews to create their own peer-driven programs based on their needs.

This increase in the involvement of the younger generations in active community building is an important step in addressing the alienation of young Jews from large Jewish institutions that Edgar Bronfman describes. This can also be addressed by developing community structures that are formed by the individuals involved, instead of having them passively conform to rigid establishments. This does not imply rejecting traditions, it means reimagining them as being practiced in settings that new generations can identify with.

The creation of non-traditional Jewish spaces to promote community involvement is not a new phenomenon. This is evident in such initiatives as the Jewish camping movement and the creation of Jewish community centers as the hubs of cultural activity, among others. These also

served to replace the social use provided by the synagogue. It may be time to also rethink those spaces that are taken for granted as fixed and institutionalized, and that have become alienating for even those who continue to frequent them. The best example of this is the traditional North American synagogue. A significant percentage of Jews maintain some affiliation; the previously mentioned UJC survey places it at 46% of the Jewish population, a number which is likely higher in the more close-knit Canadian communities. Affiliation, however, does not equal attendance, as can be noted by anyone witnessing the aging weekly population at services, and the phenomenon of “High Holiday Jews,” those whose Jewish experience is limited to three days a year.

In the book “Empowered Judaism” by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, he describes a model of non-hierarchical Judaism that is embodied in independent minyanim, including the Kehilat Hadar minyan which he founded in New York City. Over 60 successful independent congregations have recently been started in American cities. Rabbi Kaunfer cites as factors of their success the integration lay people into the institutional decision-making and participation, volunteer culture, an openness to new ideas, and other practical considerations that are appealing to young people.

For the past two summers, I was fortunate enough to be chosen as a participant at Genesis, a Jewish summer program held at Brandeis University which aims at building a pluralistic Jewish community. At Genesis I experienced first-hand such a model of empowered, engaging Judaism. We were a community of young Jews from diverse backgrounds, ranging from modern Orthodox to entirely secular, and were given the task to form a cohesive community that was still respectful of difference. Each Shabbat, for instance, was planned by different committees which were responsible for everything from how prayers would be organized to the structure of meals. Our diverse backgrounds meant that no one tradition was automatically assumed as right; instead, we discussed what values we wished to express through our practices and proceeded from there. Genesis also challenged me to contemplate Judaism on a personal level, and begin to examine my Jewish journey: why do I practice the way I do (or don't), how and why do I define myself as a Jew. I discovered that Judaism meant more to me than just a birthright; it was a part of my identity that I had to take up and examine critically in order for it to maintain a vibrant meaning in my life. It is important to create opportunities and environments that encourage young Jews to experience a range of Jewish beliefs and practices.

A model of active participation also means involving those who have not had previous involvement in the Jewish community or exposure to Jewish practice and learning. With the decline of attendance at Jewish schools in the last few decades, there is a large segment of the population with little familiarity with Jewish prayer or texts. Programs should be able to be inclusive of those without previous exposure while still making them feel of equal standing in the larger community. The outreach undertaken by the Chabad movement has had an undeniably significant impact on providing an entrance for anyone who wants to explore a religious Jewish experience. The spirituality and values espoused by Chabad have resonated with many who are searching for a sense of meaning and connection. Chabad presents a very specific model of Judaism, however, which does not speak to everybody. Other segments of the community should provide similar dynamic and inspiring educational opportunities from different ideological perspectives.

It is a significant step in strengthening Jewish identity to remember the legacy of learning that is central to the Jewish tradition, and place energy and resources into revitalizing and diversifying educational institutions for both children and adults. Jewish education provides substance and frame of reference to the sense of identity, instead of just social experiences that could happen in any environment. There is evidence, however, that attendance at a Jewish school is not sufficient to instill a lasting sense of connection to the community. A Montreal study from 1981 called "The Impact of Jewish Education on Jewish Identification on a Group of Adolescents" comparing Jewish graduates of Jewish and public schools, showed that the strength of identification was closely correlated to practice in the home as well as educational exposure. The study at the same time affirmed the importance of secondary Jewish education, as adolescence is a time when crystallization of lasting attitudes to one's self and to others occurs.

The larger Jewish community must also unite by reducing division and lack of conversation between different denominations. Common ground cannot only be based on uniting against anti-Semitism or behind affiliation with Israel. There must also be increased tolerance between segments of the community and the fostering of respect for differing theologies. Jewish educational institutions should expose youth to the diversity of thought and practice that has made up the Jewish community for centuries, in order to allow each find values they relate to. One of the most striking lessons I learnt at Genesis was that a meaningful connection to Judaism could take many forms, not just the one I was brought up in.

Assimilation has always been and will continue to be an enduring issue for the Jewish community. So long as we maintain of distinctive religious and cultural identities, there will be pressure to conform to the mainstream. The greatest threat, however, comes from a reluctance to address changing realities and attitudes. A strong, dynamic and meaningful Jewish community is one which encourages the involvement of its members and provides fulfilling educational content.