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ASAF’S STONES: A HEBREW LESSON

Private email, Oct. 14, 2013

Dear parents,

I want to share a Hebrew update with you. This past month our students have been learning about names. We’ve studied songs “L’chol eesh yesh shem” (to every man there’s a name), read a story “Yad Vashem”, and we’ve also learned about a family that lost their child in a suicide bomb attack.

In 2003 one of many suicide bombs took place in Israel. This specific attack happened on the #37 bus line in Haifa. One of the 17 fatalities was a 17-year old named Asaf Tsur. Three years after Asaf was murdered, at the ages of 46, his parents, Yossi and Leah, were blessed with another child. Yossi and Leah struggled with whether they should name their new child Asaf, in memory of their son. After much thought, they decided to name their baby Eitan. In the Torah, Eitan was the brother of Asaf and they felt that connection was most fitting. Moreover, the name Eitan means strong in Hebrew. A description they felt was very representative of their lives.

After we read about this family, we learned that his father keeps the memory of Asaf by collecting rocks sent to him from people all over the world, which he then places on Asaf’s grave. Yossi has collected over
1,500 stones from over 73 different countries. In addition to the stones, people send Yossi pictures they’ve taken in different places all over the world, while holding a picture of Asaf—In a way, despite having his life cut so short, Yossi and Leah are comforted by seeing that their son is still thought of by so many people as they travel to parts of the world Asaf would have enjoyed seeing if he had lived to travel.

Today was our much anticipated Skype conversation and the students were AWESOME. They asked questions we prepared previous to the class, they listened intently, they eagerly participated, and it was obvious that they came away from the experience of honoring Asaf’s memory and speaking to his father with compassion and empathy.

During the next month or so I will ask the students (and I will need your help with this) to collect stones from places that they visit and take a picture of them holding the picture of Asaf. After I collect the stones and the pictures I will send them to Yossi to put on Asaf’s grave in Israel.

Again, I wanted you to know how proud I am of your children and how mature they were with this sensitive and emotional subject. What they will do in honor of Asaf is not only a mitzvah, it is a wonderful character-building opportunity.

Best, Ortal (teacher)

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PEW POLL: 1 IN 5 AMERICAN JEWS HAVE ‘NO RELIGION’

Sam Sokol

Jerusalem Post, Oct. 1, 2013

Jewish identity in the US is undergoing a significant shift, with one in five Jews identifying as having no religion, according to a Pew Research poll released on Tuesday. According to the study, which surveyed almost 3,500 Jews between February and June, there has been a generational diminution in identification as a “Jew by religion.” This development echoes broader trends within American religious life, the study asserted.

Members of the so-called greatest generation are 93 percent likely to define themselves as Jews by religion, while only 68% of millennials – those born after 1980 – are apt to describe themselves in such terms. Thirty-two percent of millennials “describe themselves as having no religion and identify as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity or culture.”

The Pew findings came a day after Brandeis University published a study asserting that demographers have been seriously underestimating the number of US Jews, pegging the country’s total Jewish population at some 6.8 million. More than 4.2 million adult Americans identified their religion as Judaism, according to the Brandeis report, which asserted that “the number of adults who consider Judaism their religion was more than 33% higher than the parallel number observed in the National Jewish Population Survey [of] 2000-01.”

According to the Pew results, among those who define themselves as Jews by religion, just over half consider Jewish identity “a matter of ancestry and culture,” with a majority considering belief in God to be unnecessary to be considered a Jew. Belief in Jesus as the messiah, however, still constitutes a disqualification for being described as Jewish for most respondents.

Among those polled as a whole, 62% said “being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture,” as opposed to only 15% who considered it a “matter of religion.” Considering one’s selfidentity in religious terms, no matter how defined, the report noted, correlates strongly with raising one’s children as Jews and with the practice of endogamy. “Interrmarriage is a related phenomenon,” the report added. “It is much more common among secular Jews in the survey than among Jews by religion: 79% of married Jews of no religion have a spouse who is not Jewish, compared with 36% among Jews by religion.” Intermarried Jews are also much less likely to raise their children Jewishly or to socialize within a Jewish context or belong to Jewish institutions.
Concurrent with evolving attitudes toward Jewish identity cited in the report, “intermarriage rates seem to have risen substantially over the last five decades” and “among Jewish respondents who have gotten married since 2000, nearly six-in-ten have a non-Jewish spouse.”

However, the respondents cautioned against mistaking correlation with causation, hedging that it is “not clear whether being intermarried tends to make US Jews less religious, or being less religious tends to make US Jews more inclined to intermarry, or some of both.” Still, it continued, “whatever the causal connection, the survey finds a strong association between secular Jews and religious intermarriage,” which it deemed “circular or reinforcing, especially when child rearing is added to the picture.”

While Orthodoxy is growing, it is still overshadowed by the Conservative and Reform streams; Reform constituting the largest denomination of American Judaism with one third of all US Jews identifying with the movement. While around half of those surveyed who were raised Orthodox say they have left the movement, the “falloff from Orthodoxy appears to be declining,” and due to a high birthrate, the Orthodox “share of the Jewish population [is expected to] grow.”

Despite changing attitudes toward Jewish identity seen in the shift towards a non-religious Jewish self-definition, once described by sociologist Samuel Heilman as a “symbolic ethnicity,” Pew reports that “94% of US Jews (including 97% of Jews by religion and 83% of Jews of no religion) say they are proud to be Jewish.” Three-quarters of US Jews stated that they had “a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people.”

However, while American Jewry’s overall “emotional attachment to Israel has not waned discernibly among American Jews in the past decade,” the report stated, such sentiments are “markedly stronger” among those who define their identity in religious terms and those belonging to the older generation. Seven in 10 Jews said they considered themselves either very or somewhat attached to Israel, and over 40% of Jews surveyed stated that they had visited the Jewish state. However, just under 40% consider Israel to be making “sincere” efforts in making peace with the Palestinian Authority.

One of the primary goals of the survey was to determine what being Jewish means in the contemporary US, and according to Pew, 73% of Jews responded that “remembering the Holocaust” was “essential to their sense of Jewishness.” Sixty-nine percent cited living ethically in this regard, and over “half (56%) say that working for justice and equality is essential to what being Jewish means to them.” Forty-three percent cited Israel, and 42% stated that a “good sense of humor” is an essential part of Jewish identity.

However, despite the fact that the majority of American Jews frame their Jewish identity in religious terms, only “19% of the Jewish adults surveyed say observing Jewish law (Halacha) is essential to what being Jewish means to them.” Intermarriage among secular Jews is much more common than those that identify as Jews by religion, a new study notes.

Despite the trends cited in the article worrying many American Jewish leaders, San Francisco Federation CEO Jennifer Gorovitz said that this generation's challenges can "also bolster the core mission of our Jewish Federations – to support the Jewish community while making the world a better place – while reminding us that changing and innovating to engage the next generation is not just the right path but the essential one."

Gorovitz stated that she preferred "not to see the bogeyman of ‘assimilation’ as an impossible negative but, rather, as the changing face of a community that has integrated into a society that is more accepting than any in our long history. Our reasons to keep our traditions – or to remain apart – in America have increasingly had less to do with self-preservation or survival and more to do with seeking community, meaning, connection, and continuity."

It is the job of the organized Jewish establishment, she said, "to redefine and expand the concept of Jewish Peoplehood to ensure that our tent is appropriately broad and flexible.”
While around half of those surveyed who were raised Orthodox say they have left the movement, the “fall-off from Orthodoxy appears to be declining” and due to a high birthrate, the Orthodox “share of the Jewish population [is expected to] grow.”

However, the numbers may not tell the entire story, wrote Rabbi Eliyahu Fink of the Pacific Jewish Center in Venice Beach, California. "Think about the orthodox Jewish friends and family you know. Does it make sense to say that over half of them are no longer orthodox," he asked. "83% of people raised as orthodox Jews under the age of 30 stay...So the people who were raised orthodox and no longer are orthodox are mostly older people," Fink said.

The numbers could signify "a shift in who attends orthodox schools," he mused. "In other words, 20-30 years ago it was far more likely for a family to send a child to an orthodox school and identify as orthodox even if they were not totally observant of halacha. There was more cross-pollination and there were fewer non-orthodox options. So you wind up with more people from previous generations identifying as being raised orthodox even though they weren’t truly orthodox through and through. This is rarer today because we are more insular and non-orthodox or unaffiliated Jews feel less comfortable in orthodox institutions."

A lowered rate of denominational change could also be attributed to a strengthening of orthodoxy and a swing to the right, he added.

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**AMERICA’S VANISHING JEWRY**

*Robert Fulford*

*National Post, Oct. 12, 2013*

A survey by the Pew Research Center of 3,500 American Jews has produced results that disturb many Jews and satisfy, so far, one Jewish American journalist. It’s clear that the American Jewish community is shrinking in proportion to the U.S. population. Half a century ago, 3-4% of American adults said their religion was Jewish. Now it’s about 1.8%. If you include those who say they are not religious but definitely Jewish, the percentage reaches only 2.2.

The reason is assimilation. Aside from those who are Orthodox, about seven out of 10 American Jews marry non-Jews. Intermarried Jews do not usually raise their children as Jews. This is an issue that Jewish organizations — in Canada as well as the U.S. — have been worrying about for decades. It raises a question that wouldn’t have occurred to anyone a century ago: “Do Jews have a duty to maintain Jewish life?” I’m a gentile married to a Jew, therefore concerned. The thought of a world without Jews strikes me as appalling, but that’s the future predicted by demographers (though demographers are often wrong).

Those who see the survival of the Jewish community as their responsibility sound dispirited. Mark Charendoff of the Maimonides Fund said that “As a community, we made a decision a couple of decades ago to focus on Jewish continuity and Jewish identity, and we don’t seem to have moved the needle by even one degree.” Michael Steinhardt, a philanthropist who supports trips to Israel for Jewish children and many related programs, said that the Pew survey confirms what everybody has already sensed. He’s not optimistic about the community producing an effective response.

Gabriel Roth has stirred up controversy by taking a radically different view. His article in Slate is headed “American Jews Are Secular, Intermarried, and Assimilated. Great news!” He’s a Jewish non-believer, married to a non-Jew, therefore part of the problem, which he believes is no problem. “I think it’s time we anxious Jews stopped worrying and learned to love our assimilated condition — even if it means that our children call themselves half-Jewish and our grandchildren don’t consider themselves Jews at all.”

He believes the loss of Jewish identity may be sad but naturally results from freedom. American Jews no longer suffer systemic discrimination, so they meet potential spouses the way their gentile peers do.
Those who mourn assimilation sometimes say that Jews like Roth are doing Hitler’s work by putting an end to Jewish culture. But he believes “the dissolution of Jewishness into the mainstream is Hitler’s worst nightmare.” The fruits of Jewish culture, gifts to the world, become part of humanity’s heritage.

Caroline Glick, an American-born Israeli, wrote in the Jerusalem Post that Jews with Roth’s views lack basic Jewish literacy. She sees the drama of the Jews, set out in the Bible, as a story about a nation choosing freedom over submission while maintaining allegiance to a sacred trust, an ancient people and a promised land. “When you understand this, remaining Jewish is a privilege, not a sacrifice.”

Roth seems to me to have fallen into an un-Jewish way of thinking. (But who am I to say? Well, I press on regardless, a saying among my people.) Among the most powerful ideas imbedded in Jewish tradition is the necessity of asking questions. It comes through in the Hebrew Bible, it’s deeply honoured by the rabbis in the Talmud, and it affects even those who haven’t read the Bible or studied religion.

It comes down through parents and grandparents to the Jews of the present, secular and otherwise. It’s in the social air that the Jews and their friends breathe. It’s one reason the Jews produce so many scientists (note the Nobel prize lists) and lawyers, not to mention philosophers and writers. It crops up in many a Jewish joke with lines like “How come you always answer a question with a question?” When everyone else is asking questions, Roth informs us in Slate that he knows the answer. The disappearance of all non-Orthodox Jews is a natural result of the pursuit of happiness.

In fact, he’s ready to score it as a win: “Over the next century, American Jewish culture may come to an end — not in tragedy but in triumph.” Perhaps assimilation will do the same for others, extinguishing all distinct groups. Perhaps that will mean an end to social conflict. Perhaps after a century everyone will solve all social problems by boring themselves to death. Hardly a happy vision of the future.

**AN ISRAELI SOLDIER TO AMERICAN JEWS: WAKE UP!**

*Hen Mazzig*

*Times of Israel*, October 10, 2013

As a young Israeli who had just completed five years of service in the IDF, I looked forward to my new job educating people in the Pacific Northwest about Israel. I was shocked, however, by the anti-Israel bigotry and hostility I encountered, especially in the greater Seattle area, Oregon, and Berkeley. I had been very liberal, a member of the leftist Zionist party, Meretz, but the anti-Semitism and hatred for Israel that I have seen in the U.S. has changed my outlook personally and politically.

As part of my work as an educator at StandWithUs, between January and May of this year, I traveled to college campuses, high schools and churches, sharing the history of modern Israel. I also shared personal stories about growing up in the Jewish state, and about my family. I always spoke about my military service as an officer in an IDF COGAT unit that attends to the needs of Palestinian civilians who are not involved in the conflict and promotes Palestinian civil society. Each time I would speak and take questions for an hour or more. I have shared my personal story with over 16,000 people at many, many college campuses and high schools, including UC Berkeley, Stanford, the University of Washington, Seattle University and many others. Many of those to whom I spoke were supportive, friendly, and open to hearing about my Israel. But, sadly, far too many were not.

When I served as a soldier in the West Bank, I got used to having ugly things said to me, but nothing prepared me for the misinformation, demonization of Israel, and the gut-wrenching, anti-Israel, anti-Semitic hostility expressed by many students, professors, church members, and even some high school students right here in the Pacific Northwest.

I was further shocked by how unaware the organized Jewish community is and how little they are actually doing to counter this rising anti-Semitism, which motivated me to write this article.
This new form of bigotry against Israel has been called the “new anti-Semitism,” with “Israel” replacing “Jew” in traditional anti-Semitic imagery and canards, singling out and discriminating against the Jewish state, and denying the Jewish people alone the right to self-determination. The new anti-Semitism is packaged in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign (BDS), which claims to champion Palestinian rights though its real goal is to erode American support for Israel, discredit Jews who support Israel, and pave the way for eliminating the Jewish state. One of BDS’ central demands is the “complete right of return” for all the descendants of the original Palestinian refugees, subtle language that means the end of Israel as the Jewish homeland because it would turn Israel into a Palestinian-Arab majority state.

It is surprising that an extremist group like BDS is ever taken seriously, but BDS advocates have found receptive audiences in some circles. Their campaigns are well organized and in many cases, well financed. They have lobbied universities, corporations, food co-ops, churches, performing artists, labor unions, and other organizations to boycott Israel and companies that do business with Israel. But even if these groups don’t agree to treat Israel as a pariah state, the BDS activists manage to spread their anti-Israel misinformation, lies and prejudice simply by forcing a debate based on their false claims about Israel.

To give you a taste of the viciousness of the BDS attacks, let me cite just a few of the many shocking experiences I have had. At a BDS event in Portland, a professor from a Seattle university told the assembled crowd that the Jews of Israel have no national rights and should be forced out of the country. When I asked, “Where do you want them to go?” she calmly answered, “I don’t care. I don’t care if they don’t have any place else to go. They should not be there.” When I responded that she was calling for ethnic cleansing, both she and her supporters denied it.

And during a presentation in Seattle, I spoke about my longing for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. When I was done, a woman in her 60’s stood up and yelled at me, “You are worse than the Nazis. You are just like the Nazi youth!” A number of times I was repeatedly accused of being a killer, though I have never hurt anyone in my life. On other occasions, anti-Israel activists called me a rapist. The claims go beyond being absurd – in one case, a professor asked me if I knew how many Palestinians have been raped by IDF forces. I answered that as far as I knew, none. She triumphantly responded that I was right, because, she said, “You IDF soldiers don’t rape Palestinians because Israelis are so racist and disgusted by them that you won’t touch them.”

Such irrational accusations are symptomatic of dangerous anti-Semitism. Yet, alarmingly, most mainstream American Jews are completely oblivious to this ugly movement and the threat it poses. They seem to be asleep, unaware that this anti-Jewish bigotry is peddled on campuses, by speakers in high schools, churches, and communities, and is often deceptively camouflaged in the rhetoric of human rights.

The American Jewish community and its leaders are not providing a united front to combat this latest threat. Unfortunately, this repeats a pattern of Jewish communal groups failing to unite in a timely way to counter threats against us individually and as a community.

Shockingly, a small but very vocal number of Jews actively support BDS. They often belong to organizations that prominently include “Jewish” in their names, like Jewish Voice for Peace, to give cover to BDS and the anti-Semitism that animates it. A question that we, as a Jewish community must ask ourselves, is whether it is ever appropriate to include and accept Jews who support BDS and directly or indirectly advocate the ultimate elimination of the Jewish State of Israel. I think it is not.

My experiences in America have changed me. I never expected to encounter such hatred and lies. I never believed that such anti-Semitism still existed, especially in the U.S. I never knew that the battlefield was not just Gaza, the West Bank, and hostile Middle Eastern countries wanting to destroy Israel and kill our citizens and soldiers. It is also here in America, where a battle must be waged against prejudice and lies. I implore American Jews: do more.
Israel cannot fight this big battle alone. If you are affiliated with a Jewish organization, let it know you want it to actively, openly and unequivocally oppose the BDS campaign and those who support it. Inform yourself, your friends and families, by visiting websites of organizations like StandWithUs, Jewish Virtual Library, AIPAC, AJC and others that will update you and provide information about BDS and anti-Semitism.

I urge the organized Jewish community and its members to wake up and stand up for the Jewish state of Israel, and for all it represents, and for all it works to achieve.

**ON TOPIC**

*Pew Asked the Wrong Questions:* David Eliezrie, *Times of Israel*, Oct. 17, 2013—Pew asked the wrong questions. First it claims that the numbers of orthodox have dropped over the decades fly in the face of reality. Walk the streets of Pico/Robertson in Los Angeles, North Miami Beach or Flatbush in Brooklyn.

*Pew Research Center: Our Research Is Sound:* Alan Cooperman and Greg Smith, *Times of Israel*, Oct. 18, 2013—We are glad that the recent Pew Research Center survey of U.S. Jews has served as an important source of information for discussions about the state of American Jewry, including David Eliezrie’s recent blog post. However, Eliezrie’s piece contained a number of factual errors and misunderstandings that we would like to correct.

* Hecklers Flee Israeli Speaker at U of Florida:* Lori Lowenthal Marcus, *The Jewish Press*, October 18th, 2013
Anat Berko is a small-framed woman known for her ubiquitous yards long braid. She is also one of the world’s leading counter terrorism experts who has sat in prison cells next to some of the most dangerous serial killers and attempted homicide bombers who ever lived. A handful of anti-Israel University of Florida students chose the wrong speaker to interrupt. "I'm used to sitting in jail cells with serial killers, did they think I would be intimidated by some American college students?"