

Zionism's Next Great Task



IN 1971, the Knesset assembled to commemorate the 85th birthday of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. It was to be the elder statesman's last significant public appearance, and he used it to lay out what he hoped would be the eventual completion of the Zionist founders' project by their successors: To continue the ingathering to Israel of most Diaspora Jews and secure the strength of the Jewish state through technological preeminence.

In the half-century since then, Ben-Gurion's vision has to a great extent been accomplished. There are now virtually no remaining Jewish individuals or communities who cannot return to Israel if they so wish. Every year, some 30,000 do. While Israelis now number about one-half of the world's Jews, up to two-thirds of Jewish children born every year are Israeli. Even moderate growth scenarios for Israel now have it with a population of some 16 million by its 100th anniversary in 2048, 80 percent of them (about 13 million) Jewish. It's not implausible to imagine 30 or 40 million Israeli Jews by the year 2100.

The technological preeminence of Israel is also evident. The Jewish state has the second-largest number of technological start-up companies in the world (after the United States) and one of the highest per capita rates of patents filed and produces many more scientific papers per capita (1.9 for every 100 Israelis) than any other country.

But even these extraordinary numbers fail to capture the unprecedented place Israel has earned in Jewish history. The vast majority of Israelis now speak, read, and write in Hebrew, a supposedly impossible feat of resurrecting a buried ancient language. And they live in an independent and distinctly Jewish state, something that the vast majority of people around the world, including most Jews, considered a fantasy only a century or so ago. We may truly recall the words of Ezekiel (37:10) about the valley of dry bones: that "the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great host."

The strength of this threefold golden thread — the return of a majority of the nations to their land, the revival of Hebrew language and culture, and the restoration of an independent Jewish state — will be essential in addressing the next great challenge facing the Jewish people: the future of the communities outside of Israel. Ben-Gurion knew this as well: His last speech also stressed that, for all the friends and allies that the Jewish state might gain along the way, the pillar most essential to its prosperity would always remain the Jewish people. Threats to Diaspora Jewry pose threats to Israel as well.

Israel's success stands in stark contrast to a perilous future for the communities of the Diaspora. While many Jewish communities are currently enjoying unprecedented levels of material prosperity as well as social and cultural vitality, their long-term future appears dim. Declining birth rates, widespread intermarriage, loss of communal

commitment, and an ever-weakening sense of Jewish identification are some of the more evident indicators. As if this were not enough, the pull toward Israel is strongest among those most committed to a fully Jewish life, with the result that Diaspora communities are losing many of their most committed members to *aliyah*.

If these trends continue unabated, within a couple of generations, most Jewish communities around the world will have effectively disappeared or will be a mere husk of what they were. A handful of the largest Jewish communities, particularly those in the United States, France, and Argentina will persist, but even these will have dwindled to a shadow of their former size, composed mainly of Orthodox communities in the larger cities. By 2100, there might be just 2 million or even 1 million Jews remaining outside of Israel.

Some see these trends as inevitable and seek merely to manage the wind-down gracefully. Others try to deny the problem by arguing that intermarriage and a loss of commitment to community are the natural future of Diaspora Jews, suggesting that a kind of watered-down, lukewarm Jewish identity is the best we can expect from among those of some Jewish descent.

There is an alternative. Rather than manage decline, it's possible that Diaspora communities could follow the Israeli path of striving to recover the pride and particularly the energy of Jewish identity—including among those with only partial Jewish ancestry.

Notwithstanding its many critics—and with its very real faults—Israel has now become the undisputed focus of identification and cultural capital for the vast majority of Jews worldwide. It has dramatically transformed the way Jews are viewed around the world. Antisemitism still abounds, often now wearing the garb of anti-Zionism. But at the same time, there has also been an unprecedented development on the opposite front: There is exponential growth in the number of non-Jewish individuals and communities who are proud of having some Jewish descent or affinity.

Up to a generation ago, it was still common, even in Western countries, for people of Jewish descent—including the successful

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and prosperous parents of former secretaries of state Madeleine Albright and John Kerry—to hide this heritage from their own children. This was even more the case with many families of Jewish heritage in Russia and Poland under Communism, as well as in Latin American families that had traditions of being descended from Jews forcibly converted to Christianity. Further afield, there were many people of no Jewish background who nonetheless harbored deep personal admiration for the Jewish people and its state.

These tendencies have been upturned in the past two generations. Despite (or even, perhaps, because of) the voluminous global criticism of Israel, unprecedented numbers of people on the periphery of the Jewish nation are increasingly “looking into” their Jewish roots with real interest. Some are actively “moving in.” As established by an Israeli Diaspora Ministry committee that I have chaired, such individuals and groups already include several millions around the world. It seems likely they might become many more in the near future.

The Jewish nation must decide how to address this development. It can either ignore or resist the newcomers, or it can welcome them to a dialogue and a partnership. The first approach is not only morally miserly, but also self-defeating. When so many young Jews are

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dispiritedly gravitating away from community life, the best way to infuse communities with new energies is to welcome those who are approaching the Jewish people with interest and even enthusiasm.

Most of those in the new circles growing around the Jewish core are not currently seeking to become Jewish. Rather, they are interested in learning more about their shared inheritance and in connecting in some active way with Jewish communities and the State of Israel. A minority of this new periphery will in time consider actively joining the Jewish people, and some eventually will. It is pointless to speculate today about the actual numbers of either group, because we are only seeing at this point the tip of the iceberg—an emerging new periphery. But it is not impossible that this development could, by the end of the century, result in millions joining the Jewish people, with tens of millions more regarding themselves as connected and committed to the prosperity of the Jewish nation. The examples are more numerous than you may think:

- In Italy there are some 8,000 recorded Jewish households. Yet every year, about 80,000 Italian households choose to devote 0.8 percent of their taxes to the Union of Italian Jewish communities. Who are those tens of thousands?

- In Colombia, the established Jewish communities count some 3,000 members. Yet several new unrecognized *bnei anusim* (descendants of forced converts) communities are already estimated to be 20,000 strong and growing. What are the implications of such a situation?
- In Poland, there is a growing wave of “red *anusim*” who have discovered that their families converted or hid their Jewish identity under Communism and now wish to return to the fold, to the point that a majority of the Warsaw Jewish community now consists of members who did not grow up as Jews. How many more such people are there in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union?

Beyond the obvious direct benefits of such a development, it will also transform Jewish life in Diaspora communities with an infusion of those who are eager and enthusiastic about Jewish life and values. It would be anti-Marxist, in the Groucho Marx sense—there are people out there who *do* want to belong to a club that would have them as members.



How would such a great endeavor come about?

Instead of piecemeal responses by individual communities or organizations or Israeli officials, we need a wider reckoning about the scale and significance of this development. Significant resources and several decades will be necessary to properly meet this challenge. It will require a joint effort between Jerusalem and the communities of the Diaspora—where, after all, much of the actual engagement with newcomers will take place—to build up a wider House of Israel.

To begin with, a serious program should be developed and offered to the members of the new periphery. Let’s call it “Affinity

Birthright,” to educate them about Jewish history and values, as well as Jewish communal life and the State of Israel. A visit to Israel will be beneficial but will not suffice. It should be complemented by a visit to a significant Jewish community in the Diaspora with which most members of the new periphery are not familiar. Such a trip would entail encounters with educational, religious, and social institutions, and participation in their activities, even a weekend spent with families in the community. The goal would be to expose the visitors to the full life of a living Jewish community, so that they could help rebuild their own communities accordingly.

At the same time, a significant research-and-education institute (and eventually several) must be founded, possibly named after one of the more famous forcibly converted Jews who later returned to the fold, such as Maimonides or the Lisbon-born Doña Gracia Mendes-Nasi. Such an institute would study the as-yet mostly unknown history and current state of peripheral communities, as well as offer education catered to those among these communities who will wish to gain it, be it Jewish history, Hebrew language, or religious studies. Their numbers will eventually reach tens of thousands, and perhaps more.

Moreover, it might be expedient not to limit educational efforts only to specific centers, but rather to reach out to peripheral communities, with small groups of young Jews from Israel and the Diaspora that would be trained to visit these communities and impart basic education in Jewish subjects. In the same way that many young people are drawn to programs like the Peace Corps, so, too, could an affinity-based program appeal to peripheral communities and assist them in various ways. In the process, these young Jewish ambassadors will be fortified in their Jewish identity and practice.

Eventually, there should be a significant Jewish organization, devoted to organizing and giving a voice to these individuals and communities who are reaching out to the Jewish people. In the 1920s, a “Jewish Agency for the Land of Israel” was founded as a

partnership between the fledgling Zionist communities in the Land of Israel and the great Jewish communities and organizations of the Diaspora. To a great extent, it achieved its goals admirably. Similarly, in the 2020s it is time to consider a “Jewish Agency for the Dispersed of Israel,” to be created as a partnership between the Jewish people and the State of Israel, with the emerging peripheral communities.

Although this will be a decades-long and many-faceted endeavor, its effects would start to be evident quite soon, especially within the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, which will be energized by this common effort to build “a highway for the remnant of His people” (Isaiah 11:16). Ingathering from the four corners of the earth, not only the scattered from the tribe of Judah but also those seemingly lost, the dispersed of the house of Israel, must become the next great and necessary task of the Jewish people and their state. *