

Only Jewish Education Insures Continuity

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In their recent collection of short stories by S. Y. Agnon, *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories* (New York, 1995), Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman include a story entitled "The Lady and the Peddler" which serves as a metaphor for the type of Jewish-Gentile relations that characterized so much of Jewish history. Published during the Holocaust, it describes a Gentile society which may present itself as hospitable to Jews, but, in reality, ultimately wants nothing other than to kill and destroy them.

Thank God, this preoccupation of Jewry with a world which seeks its destruction is no longer a central feature of Jewish concern at the end of the twentieth century. While anti-Jewish discrimination obviously persists, anti-Semitism as a whole is down world-wide. Russian Jewry has been freed; Ethiopian Jewry has been saved. The fundamental existence of the State of Israel is also no longer seriously being threatened. External threats to our basic, physical existence as a people no longer dominate the Jewish agenda of the 1990's.

And yet, with the good news comes bad news. For if this major force which fueled Jewish identity for decades has, blessedly, been removed, what is left that will be strong enough to capture our imagination and loyalty? What will insure that our numbers grow in the years ahead? Twelve million Jews across the world is not a large amount of people, especially when one realizes that this number is simply the margin of error in the Chinese census! And it does not seem likely that this number will appreciably grow in the years ahead. In fact, if anything, the opposite is the case. In a world without credible external threats to our survival, and in a world where secular opportunities are more easily open and available to

Jews than ever before, vast numbers of us are opting to have no connection whatsoever with anything Jewish and are slowly disappearing from the Jewish world. The challenge this time is internal, not external, but, unlike in the case of the previous challenge, this time the solution is in our own hands.

To paraphrase a line from the world of real estate, there are three things which will insure Jewish continuity—Jewish education, Jewish education, and Jewish education. The Rabbis tell us that three events attracted the biblical Jethro to the Jewish people: the splitting of the Red Sea, the war against Amalek, and the Revelation at Sinai (*Zevachim* 116a). What will attract people today? The first two, which represent efforts to combat threats to our physical survival, are, thank God, no longer viable. We are left with the last, the most positive, lasting and meaningful attraction—the study of Torah, the practice of Jewish rituals, the experience of living authentic Jewish lives.

Who is a Jew? He or she who has a Jewish grandchild. How can we insure that we be blessed with a Jewish grandchild? There is only one answer—through Jewish education. It is imperative for federations across the country to acknowledge—I mean really acknowledge—the fact that all studies show that the greater the level of Jewish education, the greater the fealty to Judaism and to the Jewish people. It is as simple as that. Anyone concerned with the future of world Jewry must stress this point and, when we are tired of doing so, must stress it again. In this regard, and in this regard only, we must be fanatics, mindful of Winston Churchill's definition of that word: "A fanatic is someone who will not change his mind and refuses to change the subject." The sooner we all recognize this fact, the better chance we will have of insuring a Jewish future for American Jews and for Jews everywhere.

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