

The Answer to Jewry's Crisis

By Stephen J. Savitsky



It was my privilege to represent the Orthodox Union at a meeting of communal leaders from Israel and the Diaspora convened by the president of Israel, the Honorable Moshe Katsav. The objective of the meeting, which was held this past summer at the president's official residence in Jerusalem, was to address the crisis that threatens Jewish survival. With its alarming rate of assimilation and intermarriage, lack of attachment to Israel and Jewish communal life and declining birthrate, Diaspora Jewry is in trouble. We all know that the Jewish people have become a smaller and smaller percentage of the world population, while other religious groups grow in number. Moreover, it is no secret that over seventy percent of Diaspora Jewry has never visited Israel.

In his address, President Katsav stressed—as he did when he spoke before the OU's national convention in Jerusalem last November—the need for an action plan to solve these problems and ensure Jewish continuity. To that end, he appointed a steering committee to plan next year's conference, which he calls "Beit Yisrael: World Jewish Forum."

Fair enough. The President is deeply concerned, as we all are, about the situation. It is also welcome that he sees an Israel-Diaspora partnership as vital to confronting these problems. Yet as I listened to the deliberations between the various leaders representing Jews across the ideological spectrum, I grew increasingly disturbed; during the entire range of discussions, hardly any-

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one spoke about Torah, about the traditional Jewish values that have guided our people for thousands of years.

It seemed to me that in the minds of the participants, Israel is viewed as the center of the Jewish people. While this is certainly true, there was no men-

tion of the even greater centrality of Torah, which binds together the Jews of Israel and the Diaspora. We follow the same Torah, observe Shabbat and *yom tov*, eat kosher food and follow the laws as stated in the *Shulchan Aruch*.

The reason President Katsav found it necessary to convene this conference, and a leading reason for the turmoil in the Jewish world today, is a refusal among much of the Jewish leadership to accept the reality that God gave the Torah to the Jewish people and created for us the most beautiful and meaningful way of life imaginable. The answer to the problem of assimilation is simple: We need to convey the wisdom and beauty of Torah to our non-observant brothers and sisters.

As a businessman, when I seek to improve customer service, I look at businesses employing best practices. I know that if I want to be as exceptional at customer satisfaction as Disney, Nordstrom and Federal Express are, I have to study what they have done and implement the same policies and procedures.

In Jewish life, who offers the best practices in dealing with the problems that President Katsav outlined? Who has the lowest rate of assimilation and intermarriage? Who has the strongest feelings toward Israel? Who visits Israel in the greatest numbers? Who makes *aliyah*? And who is guaranteeing the continuity of Jewish existence? It is those Jews whose lives revolve around Torah and *mitzvot*.

Drawing on the concept of best practices, world Jewry should try to follow a system that was designed by God and has proven its ability to keep the Jewish people vibrant forever.

As OU Jews, we represent the merging of worldliness with strict adherence to Torah; we combine our love of Torah with our involvement and participation in all the modern world has to offer. As such, we serve as ideal models for our secular brethren, showing them how it is possible to be cultured, sophisticated and articulate, yet at the same time deeply committed to tradition.

Still, many Jewish world leaders reject our model of success and continue to look for solutions that do not involve Torah, *mitzvot* and Jewish tradition. Their mistakes have led to the incredible crisis afflicting world Jewry.

Assimilation is not limited to Diaspora Jewry; the rising secularism of Israeli society was yet another concern addressed at this conference. Israelis are surrounded by robust Jewish life, which so many of them reject. Moreover, the intermarriage rate among *yordim* (Israelis who settle outside of Israel) is very high.

Reaching out to secular Israelis is one of the Seymour J. Abrams OU Jerusalem World Center's top priorities. The Israel Center offers a wide variety of programs to bring Israelis home to Judaism such as Makom Balev, which provides spiritual nourishment to 2,000 elementary and junior high school students from all over the country. Another such program is Kehilot Yisrael, which promotes positive religious experiences in communities throughout the Golan Heights, Jordan Valley and Shomron. The Israel Center's Zula program helps hun-


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dreds of at-risk teens find their way back to tradition. The Israel Center recently opened an expanded facility for this program named the Pearl and Harold M. Jacobs OU Jerusalem Outreach Center (Zula), thanks to a generous endowment from the Jacobs family.

These initiatives have been overwhelmingly successful, and we at the OU are going to continue to grow these programs so that they make an even more meaningful impact on Jewish life in Israel.

I proposed to the conferees that if they really want to address the spiritual alienation among world Jewry, they should commit to a simple but powerful notion: Every Jewish child is entitled to a free Jewish education. While many agreed with me in principle, they felt it was not financially feasible. I feel that any problem that can be solved with

money is a problem that Jewish leaders are obliged to undertake. That is why this issue of *Jewish Action* is dedicated to exploring the tuition crisis in the Jewish world. At the OU we have set up a special task force to deal with the problem of escalating tuition costs, a problem affecting Jews in communities across the country.

My message to President Katsav and to the steering committee is this: New thinking is essential, but without Torah, without the realization that you can live in the Torah world and the modern world at the same time, the Jewish future remains at risk. You can create new programs, but our program, given to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai, is the only long-term solution to the crisis. We are the model for success and are proud of it. 

The National Jewish Tuition Initiative

With the rising costs of day school tuition, the Orthodox Union has formed a task force chaired by Elliot Gibber, senior vice president of the OU, and directed by Betty Ehrenberg, deputy to the executive OU vice president for strategic community planning, that will explore ways to involve the government, the broader Jewish community and philanthropic resources in an attempt to address this problem.