



Can We Talk?

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WHEN I CAME TO WASHINGTON IN 1984 to assume a major Jewish public affairs post, there was broad consensus around three issues that were central to Jewish communal concerns:

1) Commemoration of the Holocaust and its use as a rallying point to remain vigilant against any manifestations of anti-Jewish attitudes or behaviors.

2) Support for the state of Israel, seeing in the Jewish homeland both a source of pride and a potential refuge for Jews needing to flee persecution.

3) Protection and possibly rescue of endangered Jewish communities around the world.

This post-war, ethnic/survivalist agenda is no longer central to the Jewish consciousness and identity. Instead now-grown baby boomers are more interested in spirituality, social justice, and learning than they are in the Jewish community as a national entity. The National Jewish Population study of 1990 showed that the younger the Jewish age group the less commitment there was to what the survey termed "public Judaism." The recently released study by Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen, *The Jew Within*, arrives at much the same conclusion, declaring that "personalism" now reigns supreme among American Jews.

This phenomenon is easy to miss because there are so many pockets of emerging Jewish vitality and energy. Jews are seeking out new options in the realm of Jewish spirituality not only at independent retreat centers, but, with growing frequency, within the established denominations. A wide array of new groups have also emerged that integrate ecological consciousness with the teachings of Judaism. Concern for the pursuit of social justice has spurred new Jewish organizations to promote Jewish service and political activism.

These narrowly framed Jewish organizations, however, are not necessarily leading Jews to more global Jewish commitments. We are witnessing an unprecedented balkanization of the Jewish community, a breakdown of our community into narrowly framed interest groups. One can now encounter eco-Jews, Federation Jews, spirituality Jews, feminist Jews, gay/lesbian Jews, healing Jews, and social justice/polit-

ical Jews. The question is: Can they talk to each other?

Perhaps we should celebrate the fact that each of these constituencies has found some critical mass among fellow travelers so that they can create a sub-community within the larger Jewish community. We might also celebrate the fact that there is enough money and organizing savvy among Jews that each of these constituencies can find an organization or two that address their interests and needs.

But we must also understand the temper of many of these Jews. They see themselves as outsiders to the mainstream Jewish community and they behave accordingly. For the most part, they are not contributors to Federation campaigns. Many are suspicious of synagogues, affiliating only when they cave in to their interest in educating their children through the stage of bar/bat mitzvah. Few of them show a modicum of interest in the health and welfare of the Jewish community as a polity that unifies all Jews, regardless of denominational or special group interests.

The future of Jewish group identity in America will be based neither on ghettoization nor appeals for ethnic solidarity. Rather we need to stake the claim for Jewish identity on the conviction that Judaism and the Jewish community have a unique contribution to make to a society desperately in need of a moral compass. Judaism can inform our conversations about creating a sustainable ecosystem, narrowing the gap between rich and poor and a host of other social concerns. It also provides a formula for a rich inner spiritual life in a society that otherwise engages in the idolatry of consumerism.

If our religious and communal leaders begin to make this case to younger American Jews, they might just be interested in what our heritage and our community have to offer. ●

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