

FROM THE EDITOR

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As intermarriage and assimilation rates soar out of control – with a mind boggling 71% intermarriage rate among non-Orthodox Jews in the USA¹ – Israeli Education Minister Rafi Peretz recently set off a firestorm of criticism when he referred to assimilation, particularly in the United States, as “a second Holocaust,” noting that “we lost six million Jews in that way [ie due to assimilation] since the Holocaust.”

Why the controversy? Because Holocaust remembrance has, for many, become the way that they observe and connect to Judaism, almost a religion in its own right, complete with its own oft-repeated creeds of “Never Again!” and “Never Forget!”, as

well as rituals: “In many ways, the understanding of the Holocaust inspired by the March [of the Living] is more like the understanding of the Exodus inspired by the Passover story; it is one guided by ritual, collective re-enactment, and an imperative to identify oneself with those who ‘had come out of Egypt.’”² In this context, such comparisons like Peretz’ amount to sacrilege.

The irony is that it’s arguably the overemphasis on Holocaust education and its remembrance that’s helping to drive young Jews away from Judaism, as it promotes a “Jewish identity rooted in Jewish suffering.”³

As an unobservant Jewish child growing up in the USA, the Holocaust loomed large in my Jewish “education” and identity, exposed to countless videos and photos – piles of eyeglasses, shoes, rings, bodies, and skeletal figures; of mass extermination; of concentration camp after concentration camp – making one numb to the whole thing after a while. Did it inspire me to a great love of Yiddishkeit or of Jews? Did it give me a strong Jewish identity and make me a proud Jew? No. In fact, just the opposite; it inspired me to distance myself as much as possible from anyone and everything Jewish. The hyper focus on tragedy and horrible, unspeakable torture, suffering, and death made me question why I would even want to be a member of a group that seemed to be the world’s lightning rod for such things!

And, yet, Jewish education – especially among denominations that are not Orthodox, which very tellingly was where all of the criticism against Peretz came from – focuses largely upon Holocaust remembrance – with the pinnacle being participation in the March, an annual pilgrimage to concentration camps in order to see and experience firsthand and retrace the footsteps of those who died *al kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying G-d’s name), “a Jewish identity-building program, intended to inspire Jewish affiliation and commitment in its young participants.”⁴

But, if we mourn and remember the Holocaust because of the devastating number of Jewish lives that were lost in it, *Hashem yikom damam* (may Hashem avenge their blood), then shouldn’t it matter just as much that so many Jewish lives have been willingly sacrificed at our own hands? If the “Final Solution to the Jewish Problem” is the destruction of Jewry – then what does it matter how that solution is brought about? Large segments of the Jewish people are literally vanishing before our eyes. So where are all of the buildings and educational efforts dedicated to stopping the current holocaust?

Although difficult, we can do something to stem the tide. The key to Jewish survival is, and always has been, education. As surveys clearly show, there is a strong correlation between the amount of Jewish education that a person receives and the chances that he will later intermarry: “Marriage to a non-Jew is rare among those who attended a Jewish day school or yeshiva, more common among those who attended a part-time program that met more than once a week, and higher still among those who attended one-day-a-week programs. In short, the more intensive the Jewish schooling, the lower the rate of intermarriage, reflecting both the types of people who obtain more intensive Jewish schooling and, quite possibly, the direct impact of Jewish education on later marital decisions.”⁵

Where our efforts need to be directed is towards Jewish education – an education that has served us for thousands of years. As I have asked before in these pages: in the absence of the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, and, along with it, the modern Hebrew language (Ivrit), what would Jewish education look like? And, what would Jewish identity look like for most people? What did Jewish education and identity look like 100 years ago, 1 000 years ago, even 2 000 years ago?

It’s time for a new March of the Living – one actually focused on Jewish life.

ROBERT SUSSMAN,
EDITOR

¹www.jta.org/2013/10/01/united-states/pew-survey-u-s-jewish-intermarriage-rates-rises-to-58-percent

²The March of the Living: Where is it Now? Rona Sheramy (2009)

³Id.

⁴Id. (American spelling)

⁵The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 – Strength, Challenge, and Diversity in the American Jewish Population (Updated 2004), page 18. (www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf) (American spelling)

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