Jewish Peoplehood Strategy? National Policy? Or Merely a Buzzword?

Ahava Zarembski

Jewish Peoplehood reflects fundamental Jewish concepts (Ahavat Yisrael, Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh la Zeh, Jewish connectedness, Jewish interdependence) and is very real both in terms of short term relations and long term strength of the Jewish collective.

Yet, why are Jewish Peoplehood issues not approached strategically….or at all? To best understand this void we need to examine two watershed events which opened Israeli policy maker's eyes to these issues and marked a transformation in the Israel-Diaspora relationship:

▪ 1994 The AMIA bombing in Argentina killed 84 people; Investigators found a direct correlation between the bombing and Israel's 1992 assassination attempt of then Chief Hezbollah leader Sayed Abbas al-Musawi. With this finding, Israeli policy makers were given a major wake-up call —realizing the extent of their decisions on Jews around the world.

▪ 1998 The creation of birthright israel; Motivated originally in North America by a 52% intermarriage rate in 1990, initiators found a new "partner" in the Israeli government. For the first time, the Israeli government invested financially in a project focusing on the well-being of Diaspora Jews. But there was also internal motivation on the Israeli side. Ariel Sharon saw the program designed to bring 18-25 year old North Americans to Israel as a sure fire way to increase his dream of aliyah from the West, which would strengthen the future of Israel. For the first time, the various elements of Jewish policy makers and influencers converged with their own resources, needs and goals to jointly address a problem in the Jewish collective.

Despite these events two factors hinder the creation of a strategic approach to Jewish Peoplehood policy making:

1. The Israeli policy structure is insufficient in dealing with issues concerning matters of Jewish Peoplehood
2. The establishment originally designed to address the Israel-Diaspora relationship has haltingly approached change.

Factor #1: The Israeli Policy Structure Remains Insufficient in Dealing with Jewish Peoplehood

Since the AMIA bombing and the creation of Birthright Israel, there has been an explosion of governmental and non-government structures established to examine the notion of Jewish Peoplehood. Yet Israeli legislators still lack 'on the ground' practical and reliable resources to become versed in Jewish Peoplehood issues in real time. For all the matters of vital importance to Members of Knesset except security, the Israeli policy system is ill-equipped to relate to most issues with clear depth and knowledge that also adapts to the fast pace of the policy world.

In fact, the number one resource utilized for Jewish Peoplehood issues by members of Knesset and their aides thus far is GOOGLE. The Knesset MMM (Merkaz Mechkar U'Meidah: The Knesset Research and Information Center) provides historical and theoretical information, similar to the Congressional Research Service in the US, yet even this was only established in 2000.

Moreover, unlike other parliamentary systems, Members of Knesset lack legislative experts on their team. For example, a member of the United States Congress has a 14 person team with 4-5 legislative experts that focus on specific topics such as domestic policy, foreign policy, economics, defense, etc. In Israel, the average members of Knesset have two aides. Those aides are responsible for scheduling, media, security, economics, school strikes, and international relations –

they are tasked with building legislation on all issues – no specification.

It is impossible to build informed, in-depth policy with such a structure.

Factor #2: The Change in the Israel-Diaspora Relationship is not Reflected Reciprocally by Change in the System

The current Israel-Diaspora relationship was based on an exchange of letters in 1950 between the UJA President Jacob Blaustein and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion. The agreement emphasized that US Jewry and Israel maintain distinct roles: the US provides financial and political support to Israel and Israel "speaks only for its citizens."

Many establishments were created at that time, "formalizing" these roles institutionally with hierarchical bureaucracies typical to both US Jewish communal organization and the governing Israeli socialist mentality.

Times have changed, yet Israel-Diaspora institutions have not adapted. The establishments are stuck in an antiquated mentality with people trying to maintain the old structure.

Then how do we change this reality? What does it take position Jewish Peoplehood as an addressed priority in the decision making process?

What is Needed

To address factor #1, Israeli policy makers should be supported by a system of "outsourced" specialized experts to provide them with real time information. Think tanks and policy papers will never substitute for the added value of face to face briefings and legislative aides. Briefings are needed that are up-to-date, based in the current reality and on Israel's overall public agenda, as well as provided in real time.

To address factor #2, we need to streamline the current establishment re-orienting them towards specialization in order to maximize efficiency.

This will take visionary leadership, guidance, and funding pressure.

The new streamlined structure also needs to emphasize communication, transparency, and partnership involving all five of today's philanthropic partners in the Jewish world: Federations, Foundations, Israeli businesses, the Israeli government (national and municipal) and businessmen and women from around the world (including Israel).

The increased involvement of Israeli businesses, businessmen and women is possible because many of the issues traditionally in the Diaspora reality are now needs in Israel –such as Jewish identity and education.

Every Diaspora project-specific investment in Israeli society should be leveraged against Israeli investments. It is also now the time, (and in fact is now possible) for funds to flow the other way – for Israeli private funds to be invested in global Jewish needs. The resources are there and an awareness of social responsibility is awakening among Israeli philanthropists.

For these reasons, The Yesod –Masad Initiative was born. The raison d'être of the Yesod-Masad Initiative is to respond to the current reality and to facilitate strategic, practical engagement in Jewish Peoplehood issues – to translate it from a buzzword to reality.

Responding to the inadequacies in the Israeli policy structure, Yesod-Masad provides real-time, in-depth information on policies impacting Jewish communities in Israel and around the world. Yesod-Masad has designed a model in which it is an "outsourced legislative expert" on Jewish Peoplehood issues, a model that can be used in other neglected fields of policy making in Israel, particularly relating to domestic affairs.

To address the aforementioned gaps and inadequacies in the traditional structure of Israel-Diaspora policy making, Yesod works with a new, broader range of policy makers and influencers – Federation and Foundation heads, Israeli businesses,

international businessmen and women, the media, etc. -- providing holistic, strategic support on Jewish Peoplehood issues.

What does that mean:

- Helping them understand one another and navigate through the different realities of various Jewish communities around the world and in Israel.

- Identifying partners with common ideas to prevent overlapping resources.

- Identifying Israeli businesses to leverage against Federation and Foundation investment.

- Providing real-time information on various communities in Israel and around the world – a type of "cultural consultancy."

Yesod in and of itself is a reflection of and a catalyst for transformation in the system: to empower policy makers and influencers to make more informed, strategic decisions on Jewish Peoplehood. And to transform Jewish Peoplehood from a buzzword into a reality.

Ahava Zarembski is Founder and President of The Yesod-Masad Initiative. Ahava can be reached at ahavaz@gmail.com.