

Peoplehood: What Students Can Learn and Teach

Wayne L. Firestone

It was recently my pleasure to celebrate the 13th anniversary of Hillel in the former Soviet Union (FSU) – a bar mitzvah – with students, volunteer leaders and Hillel professionals in Moscow. This journey was nothing short of miraculous for me. It seems like only yesterday that I was a Jewish student activist, as young as these students, rallying my campus on behalf of Soviet Jewry. The struggle for Soviet Jewry and their liberation was a high water mark for Jewish Peoplehood, as Jews around the world – from campuses, to Federations, to synagogues, to the halls of Congress and the Knesset – campaigned on behalf of our brethren in the USSR.

Today, Jewish students across the former Soviet Union are free, free to study Hebrew and celebrate their heritage, and free to enjoy the same pleasures and privileges as their counterparts in Israel and the Americas. Many of these young people will travel to Israel with Taglit-birthright israel or to the United States to participate in a Hillel conference, but many more will simply kick back and enjoy the life of a secular college student: like their counterparts around the world, their Jewish identity is defined by *choice* not coercion.

From Hillel's work with students in Israel, the former Soviet Union, Latin America and North America, it is clear that the barriers that once separated Jewish students – language, class, culture – have shrunk. They are one people, but not one Jewish people. The old campaigns that galvanized the global Jewish people for decades – Israel and Soviet Jewry – no longer hold the same power for them. They are united by a global secular, consumerist culture, but not by a sense of global Jewish Peoplehood. Understandably, many campus observers see the trend as a damning obstacle, a signal of civilizational decline. However, the more we learn about the Millennial Generation, the greater the opportunities we

are finding to introduce the value and values of the Jewish people, warts and all.

Our challenge as a community is the same all over the globe: to provide these young people with compelling, meaningful Jewish experiences that not only contribute to their lives but that connect them to their local community. That is why Taglit-birthright israel has proven to be such a remarkable program. Students the world over are attracted to it by its promise of a free journey in an adventurous location. While they are on the trip -- sometime between climbing Massada and exploring Tel Aviv – they connect with one another, with the Jewish community and with Israel. Studies from Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies have shown that this program enhances students' affinity to Israel and to *Klal Yisrael* weeks, months and years after their trips.

Hillel has been the beneficiary of this program as young people have returned to their homes and explored Jewish life anew as students, activists and young professionals. This is an historic achievement: young people feel closer to the Jewish people not for a negative cause – a battle against a common enemy -- but for the positive reason that they have fallen in love with Israel and are captivated by the warm feeling they get while on a Taglit-birthright israel trip.

Jewish students are at the vanguard of a new era in global Jewish Peoplehood. Not only are they visiting Israel through Taglit, they are traveling the world through semester abroad programs and through alternative breaks where they learn to repair the world with their own hands. They are part of the wave of college students who have doubled the number of U.S. students studying abroad in the last decade. Regrettably, visiting students in Spain, France, England, the Czech Republic, etc., often do not know how to connect with their

local Jewish communities. This poses a challenge and an opportunity for the Jewish world seeking to create a more cohesive global network.

In those countries where we are present, local Hillel professionals go out of their way to include foreign students in their programs. A new agreement with the World Union of Jewish Students also holds the promise of bringing local and visiting students together. Hillel offers substantive programs for only a tiny segment of these young Jewish travelers. Last year, 1,800 Jewish students representing Hillels on over 50 different campuses traveled to 12 different countries on programs organized by Hillel and co-sponsored by the American Jewish World Service and the JDC. In the future, the Jewish community could provide students traveling on secular programs with more meaningful Jewish content on these journeys, and could capitalize on their Peoplehood experiences when they return home. This would represent a return to our Abrahamic and Medieval roots when the value of welcoming travelers for business, study and pilgrimage was central to our communal priorities.

To paraphrase a sage of Boston (Tip O'Neill, not Louis Brandeis) all Peoplehood is local. We must accept, acknowledge and respect our brothers and sisters at home at the same time as we are reaching out to Jews beyond our borders. Here in the United States most campus Jewish communities today look like America at large, but even more so. This generation of Americans is the most ethnically diverse in history and Jewish students reflect diverse

backgrounds, beliefs and orientations. Unlike generations past, they hold multiple identities simultaneously. Unfortunately, too many of them feel unwelcome at Hillel and other Jewish institutions. Following the completion of our Strategic Plan, Hillel has undertaken a program of critical self-reflection and reorganization that will help us to reach out to more and more Jews on campus. If we do not embrace fellow Jews across campus, how can we embrace them across the seas?

Even Israeli students feel a lack of connection to their Jewish identity. They understand their duty to the Jewish State, but not to the Jewish people. Many of the students who are attracted to Hillel in Israel become activists to explore the meaning of their "Jewishness" from a different perspective, whether they are secular or religious, Ashkenazi or Sephardi, new immigrant or native Israeli. Through relationship-based engagements and rich offerings that draw on traditional and modern sources, many discover the Jewishness that connects them to one another, and to their cousins in the Diaspora. Of note, Chabad has had success in their outreach efforts to young Israelis on their journeys to obscure locales in Southeast Asia, teaching that Jewishness does not end at a nation's borders.

We have much to learn from our globe-trotting, Israel-visiting, diversity-celebrating young people. They are erasing the distinctions that divided our community and our world. Our challenge remains to enrich their lives so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world.

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