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The Israeli Community in L.A. – Focus on Assimilation

Pinhas (Pini) Sosnik, Los Angeles, California

PART 1 – Israelis and assimilation - Facts and Trends:

Assimilation figures in America keep growing: Data recently presented by MK Danny Danon at the Knesset [\(1\)](#) reveals an upsurge in intermarriages: 55% in the United States. This is up from the 51% published in the year 2000 NJPS survey [\(2\)](#). A Cohen Center Survey in 2010 [\(3\)](#) shows 57% of young adults 18-29 years old got married out of the faith.

My personal motivation in writing this paper follows a year of being invited to 4 weddings of Israeli friends - all intermarriages. This is not the end: By asking other people I learned that 50% of their children are dating non-Jews. All were raised in America by Israeli parents. As for young single Israeli newcomers- marrying out of the faith is not a taboo – actually it is considered an exotic experience [\(4\)](#). In a leadership meeting called by ILC led by Shoham Nicolet in August 2009 all participants were asked to indicate their main concerns for the community. Concern #1 for all was the assimilation problem.

I am 58, with two children: 33 (happily Jewishly married, living in Israel) and a 29 years old, single. Why am I sharing this? Readers of this document maybe 10 years younger having teenagers and wedding plans far in the future. My friends shared with me that 10 years ago they wouldn't imagine their child will soon be visiting his in-laws for Christmas. Only recently, when real wedding invitations started coming of wonderful Israeli kids who I knew – it became so real, more than any statistics on paper.

The premise is that Jewish continuity is significantly important to our existence, unity and national resilience. Our people survived pogroms, expulsion and murder for thousands of years by adhering to their Jewish faith and traditions. It is ironic and troubling to watch the alarming rate of desertion in times of prosperity.

Assimilation: Why are Israelis abroad more vulnerable to assimilation?

An Israeli immigrant finds a thriving Israeli community which offers Israeli restaurants, musical events etc. He feels at “home away from home”. Assimilation concerns for his children are not in sight... until it's too late! The children acquire a new language and bond with their classmates from public school and the neighborhood. It is mostly a lost battle to oppose your child who declares he will be marrying his beloved non-Jewish sweetheart. (“What can I do now? They dated and fell in love..”). It is the parent's responsibility to instill Jewish meaning and pride in their children through proper Jewish education and personal example. But is it happening?

Most secular Israelis were not used to attend a Synagogue in Israel perceived as a 'prayer only' venue. The children experienced the holidays at the Israeli "Mamlacht" school level only. While that might not be enough, 'Jewishness' was in the air: No work or school on holidays, the kids bring holiday songs from school, etc. Even if nothing is done, you are part of the Jewish atmosphere. **Israeli children will likely marry a Jewish person by default. They don't have to make a choice, it's natural.**

Here in L.A., Yom Kippur and Sukkot look like any other Wednesday unless something is done about it. Just a small percentage of Israelis send their kids to Jewish Day Schools (high cost, distance, lack of conviction it's necessary and quality public schools). Transportation, expenses, missing school or work on Jewish Holidays are some of the challenges and the effort facing the ones trying to maintain Jewish awareness in their family. It is noticeable that if such an effort is made along with keeping some tradition at home, the success rate in maintaining a Jewish identity is much greater.

Israelis are more vulnerable to assimilation because overnight they lost the effortless Jewish atmosphere in Israel to a new reality. They are not used to and they are not looking to belong to a membership based American temple. Just a minor percentage of Israelis go to Synagogue on Shabbat. A cultural gap develops between immigrants and their children. The kids sense their future is in the new country and will try to switch to the new identity as fast as they can. Is Judaism carried over to the new identity? It ALL depends on: 1. Their education system 2. Regular Jewish habits they see at home. **Doing nothing – willingly or neglectfully – invites intermarriage. This has become noticeable in the recent years.** People are smart enough to understand that but considering the effort and cost of the available options many will give it a low priority and subconsciously sacrifice their heritage. Assimilation is a direct result thereof.

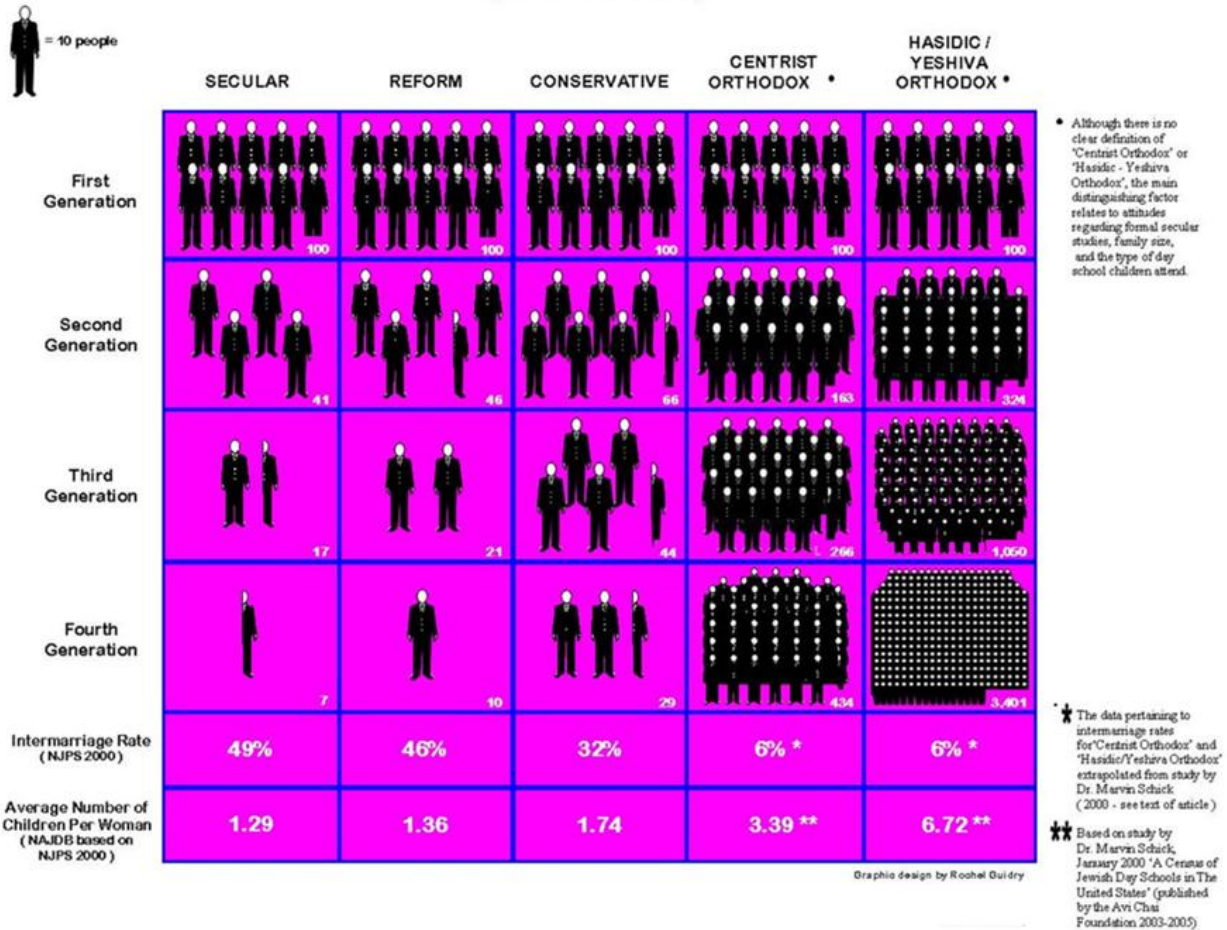
The above summarizes the phenomenon. The question is what to do about it? Normally leaders will sit down to discuss the problem and adopt an action plan. But what do we learn from past resolutions? The steep trend of assimilation did not start yesterday. It has accelerated for the last 30 years. Countless meetings at Federations and JCC's didn't reverse or stop the trend. Do we have a reason to believe that the Israeli community is immune? Will the Hebrew language we speak at home protect our 2nd generation from intermarrying? Not at all - we are more vulnerable as mentioned already. Can we avert the tide or maybe we need to realize that small steps in the right direction are not sufficient and a bolder approach needs to be considered?

Recently there is a growth in the number of Israeli events in town. The feeling is also of a community shaping its character and reaching a unique juncture as it relates to its Israeli identity, Jewish continuity and its place within the Jewish community. The "Israeli identity" is a geographical definition- lost when leaving and regained in the airport even after 20 years in L.A. The Jewish identity travels with a person and can be inherited through generations if the right things are done. Hebrew school of one hour once a week, is a drop in the bucket in maintaining the Israeli or Jewish identity and normally stops at the Bar Mitzvah age. The kids become Americans influenced by their new language, friends and society. A blessed exception is the Tzofim which attracts and bonds kids until they finish High school.

The Following chart is pretty shocking: In America, for every 100 Jews – After four Generations, Orthodox Jews numbers grew dramatically, but only 7 remain Jewish if raised secular, 10 if raised reform, 29 if raised Conservative.

The Future of American Jewry

WILL YOUR GRANDCHILD BE JEWISH ? (REVISITED)



Based on current intermarriage rates and the average number of children per family, the chances of young, contemporary Jews having Jewish grandchildren and great-grandchildren, with the exception of the Orthodox, are increasingly remote.

This chart is part of an extensive research article conducted by Antony Gordon and Richard M. Horowitz (2003-2005). The chart and the accompanying research will be released as part of a symposium on 'The Future of American Jewry' at Harvard University in February, 2006. Reproduction for any use whatsoever is strictly prohibited unless explicit written permission is given by Antony Gordon and Richard M. Horowitz. Please contact Antony Gordon at (323) 314-1898 or gordon18@aol.com

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Jewish growth rate chart / graph

Where do the Israelis fit in the above chart?

Are Israelis in L.A. a unique group or do they fit in an existing population category?

When answering this question, If we look at their Shabbat Synagogue attendance, it is a few percent only. It points they fit in the Secular column. In comparison Shabbat attendance in Conservative/Reform Temples is also low 8% of temple's capacity [\(5\)](#), and Orthodox 75%.

A second angle of observation is affiliation: While Conservative/Reform Jews are 50% affiliated and pay an annual membership fee, Orthodox are 100% affiliated. Israelis are not affiliated. On the High Holidays most Israelis go to Orthodox Shuls mainly Chabad, which is normally free of charge. This again may point towards a Secular definition.

A third angle of observation is the Jewish tradition acquired in Israel and practiced here at home for religious or cultural reasons. Many Israelis will regularly have their entire Family sit together for Friday night's dinner, or having friends, many do Kiddush and light candles, most buy Challa bread and prepare typical Jewish food for Shabbat. Some won't eat pork and will buy/eat Kosher meat. Some will go to Synagogue (Orthodox) on Shabbat especially if there are other Israelis there. On the other hand some do work on Shabbat. Their support of Israel is almost absolute.

This is by far different from American secular Jews. The Israeli community, generally, is more "traditional". This is exactly where the definition "Masorti" comes in: In Israel 39% of the Jewish population is categorized as "Masorti" - see an excellent description in Wikipedia [\(6\)](#). The Israeli "Masorti" emanates from the Orthodox world but is not committed to a defined pattern of observance. The most visual difference is a kippa not worn daily by males. ("Masorti" is not to be confused with the Conservative Movement branch in Israel that calls itself "Yahadut Masortit"). For some, tradition is a way of connecting to their past experience with the Family in Israel. I also heard many times: "Here in America I do more Jewish things than I would do in Israel". So while not proven, I would estimate the percentage of Masortim here is somewhat higher than in Israel among first generation Israelis, roughly 50%. The percentage of Masortim is higher with Sephardim than with Ashkenazim. To conclude – In the graph, I would suggest a new column called Masorti and associate it with 50% of the Israelis. Most of the others are secular (48%), and 2% are Religious-Orthodox. Examples of public figures considered Masorti: Singers Shlomi Shabbat, David D'or, Basketball coach Pini Gershon, and late PM Menachem Begin. I consider myself Masorti. Due to privacy I wouldn't mention people in our community.

Jewish Continuity options– For Individuals

If one wants to guarantee success he can:

1. Go back to Israel
2. Become an Orthodox Jew

If these are not acceptable he will have to choose:

3. Do nothing. Expect more than half of his 2nd generation children to assimilate (57% ages 18-29) [\(7\)](#) and his Jewish Family tree nearly wiped out in 4 generations. No one should feel his family has immunity.
4. Adopt a 'Masorti' plan that he will carry out on a regular basis. It will improve his Family's Jewish identity and the chances of his child to have Jewish in laws. No guarantees but better chances.

Jewish Continuity – From a community perspective

The first two options in the previous paragraph – Aliyah and organized Religion are not the responsibilities of the local community leaders. Other organizations deal with this.

The third option, sitting idle and hoping we luck out with our children, is the enemy of our collective future.

The fourth, recommended option is not ideal but it will work with people who understand the risk of doing nothing and are willing to put some effort to secure their Family's future.

There is no other option, therefore:

It will take leadership to recognize the severity of the problem and help create and support a program that makes Judaism relevant and accessible to all interested. Bringing the issue to the front stage through public discussions, newspapers, etc., will encourage many individuals to take action. In short, the negative phenomenon has to be published and a positive campaign highlighting "Why be Jewish" needs to be launched.

I am not naïve to expect an immediate or a high rate of success. We have to do our part in saving those who want to remain in the family. It may take a few years until we'll be able to measure success as children to families exposed to our campaign will testify it touched them and they married within our faith.

To shape and define a program and its needs, people of passion and experience with Israelis (local and from Israel) need to be consulted. **But first - who do we follow? Orthodox? Conservative? How to make a decision? What works?**

In the second portion of this paper I will discuss the case for each of these options from a few angles: Theological, cultural, Israel, 2nd generation and other aspects relevant to local Israelis and what's best for the integration of the Israelis with the Jewish community in L.A.

End of part 1

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Community Activist – co-founder of 'Moadon Israelim'*

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Part 2: Leading the Jewish Identity program – Orthodox or Conservative?

An article [1](#) covering the successful ILC gala caught our eye. Rabbi Feinstein of VBS (Conservative Synagogue) is quoted saying that he began speaking with ILC about working together to serve the Israeli community but no formal programming has been devised yet.

The ILC leadership undoubtedly desires to do the best for the community as already proven. That's why I believe it is important that all main movements of Judaism are heard and considered. Each movement should present its track record and offer the Israeli community a workable plan to enhance Jewish identity and fight assimilation. The question is what works? From my activities at 'Moadon Israelim' I have experience of working with local and Israeli Orthodox Rabbis in a friendly non judgmental version. Most responses we got to their lectures were 'excellent and enriching'. Coming from secular Israelis, it was an indication we were in line with our mission statement of uniting the community 'Beruach Hamasoret'.

I decided to get involved and offer my view of a possible solution because this topic is "Benafshenu". By being Masorti, attending Orthodox Synagogues, sometimes Conservative, I have a good insight of both sides. It is imperative to understand the difference between those movements and how it relates to the Israeli community. Orthodox or Conservative Rabbis: what's their movement's approach? Does it work? What is their future? What best fits the Israelis?

I will touch upon the following topics:

1. Theological Differences
2. The Future of the Orthodox and Conservative movements

Outlook on the Israelis as part of the Jewish community:

3. Cultural differences
4. Political Views and Support for Israel
5. The next generation

Theological Differences

As already mentioned, a substantial portion of the Israeli community is Masorti which emanates from the Orthodox upbringing in Israel, traditional family and neighborhood. Dr. Yaacov Yadgar (Bar Ilan Univ.) wrote a book on the subject [2](#), [3](#). He says: *“The big difference between Masorti and Conservative is that the Masorti does not give legitimacy to behavior deviating from the Jewish Halacha. He’ll say he is not observing Shabbat according to the Jewish code but he does not justify that. He feels that by turning on the light on Shabbat he does not hurt his Jewish core values but admits he has no authority in saying the Halacha has to be altered. He will say he is just not doing things 100%. The Conservatives on the other hand may behave the same but claim that that’s the way it needs to be”*. This is a fundamental difference.

The Conservative movement’s Rabbinical permission to deviate from parts of the traditional Jewish code of law is the main theological difference between the Conservative and the Orthodox movement. Once the ‘fence was breached’ there seems to be no clarity and different Conservative Temples have their own laws. Examples: A Conservative Shul where electric music is okay on Friday night but not on Saturday morning and one Conservative Shul celebrates Yom Tov Sheni but the other Conservative Shul doesn't [4](#). This inconsistency has been a growing concern among Conservative Rabbis who more than ever before share their frustration in public. Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of the large Park Ave. Synagogue in N.Y. said recently: [5](#) “We have sought to make Judaism palatable to the modern Jew; in doing so, we have forgotten the very reason that people turn to religion in the first place. We have become caricatures of Groucho Marx’s quip: “Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others.” “Jews will or won’t grow Jewishly, but they are far more likely to do so if they believe that the religion being proclaimed is authentic, not some watered-down virtual reality”.

The Future of the Orthodox and Conservative movements

The Conservative movement is facing a major identity and membership crisis (see [6](#), [7](#), [8](#)). In the recent years it got substantially smaller while the Orthodox have recorded an impressive growth. Many Conservatives question if their movement is still relevant ([9](#), [10](#), [11](#), [12](#)).

On March 28, 2011 the Conservative movement held its annual convention in Las Vegas. The future of the movement was the hot topic. Here is what **their leaders** had to say:

Rabbi Ed Feinstein – VBS, Encino:

1. *"As a movement we are dying! ...We are a dysfunctional organization.... We have leaders but not leadership" (13 video clip)*
2. *"The reason why the Orthodox are doing so well is because people seek passionate authenticity and Orthodox Rabbis believe in what they're teaching and it's transparent, it's all they are.... Sometimes we come off as slightly sleek, professional and phony.... We do it well but after a while it becomes an empty gesture"(14 video)*
3. *"We are in deep trouble. There isn't a single demographic that is encouraging for the future of Conservative Judaism. Not one." (15 video)*
4. *"If we don't get this together we are going to die. If we don't integrate we're going to disintegrate" (16 video)*
5. *"The Conservative movement belongs to us, and we'll either fix it or bury it," said Rabbi Edward Feinstein of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, Calif., during a panel Monday on what Conservative Judaism will look like in 20 years. "We're the rabbis. We need to get together, stop the bullshit, and get it done, or we'll become a shrinking, dwindling, heteronomous movement with very little to say." (17 and 18)*

Rabbi Kalmanofsky -N.Y.:

1. *"In 20 years you will see a split in American Jewish life between those people who practice Judaism and those who are of Jewish ancestors. The question is whether we are on the side of those practicing Judaism..." 19*
2. *"If we are going to succeed it is not because people have Jewish ancestry but because we helped them find ways for moral and spiritual purpose"*
3. *"Our younger generation views us as monumentally un-cool"*

Why is the Conservative movement declining?

We have to understand the history of the movement and its early success: Generally speaking, it gave an answer for Jews who wanted to continue to observe Judaism but looked for an updated American version and a different "look" than the European Jews. What happened in the last 20 years is the rise of modern Orthodoxy and Chabad. Their non judgmental, authentic approach without pressuring anyone to adopt dress code or Mitzvot – "don't ask don't tell" policy- rejuvenated traditional Judaism 20 . It left the Conservative movement tangled in a constant debate on what to allow or disallow. As Rabbi Cosgrove (Conservative) said: 21 "We should spend less time explaining why swordfish is kosher and more time explaining what kashrut is" and "Conservative Judaism has been set back on its heels for far too long. It is passion, not accommodation, that Jews want, ritual not reason, authenticity not excuses".

By trying to look 'cool' and trendy, Conservative Rabbis will sometimes conduct themselves in a manner diminishing the stature of the Rabbi, their movement and Judaism. Events like the recent **"Dancing with the Rabbis"** [22](#) for example may cause long term damage. The dismay from their severe lack of judgment triggered strong reactions from Conservative [23](#) and Reform Rabbis as well as the general public [24](#).

Conservative Judaism is NOT the middle road of Judaism.

The Orthodox world is comprised of tens of factions, Big hats to small Kippas, some are strict some considered lenient but all consider the Jewish code "Halacha" as the principal line to follow. Later I will mention some of the organizations, foundations and movements that are involved with Israelis in preserving Jewish identity.

Considering the fore mentioned I can summarize and say that what works to inspire people is passion, authenticity and Rabbis that believe in what they are teaching. That is why I recommend finding and consulting with the right people and organizations in the Orthodox world that can connect to Israelis in an authentic, non judgmental way. This is also the natural path for the large Masorti sector.

Part 3: Israelis as part of the Jewish Community

To discuss the relationship between Israelis and the local Jewry it is important to characterize the Israeli immigrant and look for similarities and differences from a local American Jew.

Cultural differences

Regretfully, most Israeli immigrants don't make personal friends with people from the Jewish community. Israelis have a **distinctive mentality and language**. Most don't attend Synagogues which seems to be the only other commonality with other Jews. Israeli school teachers and other employees of Jewish institutions are more likely to befriend other Jews. Israelis attending Synagogues are likely to invite or be invited to Shabbat meals by other Jews.

Quotes by a few local prominent Israelis: [25](#) Dan Katzir, Film producer says: "Israelis understand the world differently... Some Israelis want to integrate into American society, many are "just Israelis living in America and they don't care a great deal about the 'Jewish' connection to the established community". Haim Linder comments on the community's independence "We live in a self contained community with its own stores, doctors, entertainment and newspapers. We can sustain ourselves (independently)"

The above applies to the immigrant's generation only. The 2nd generation is a different story. See 'The next generation' later.

Synagogue life: Israelis unlike their American brethren are not used to pay for religious services or belong to a membership based synagogue. (Voluntary, unsolicited donations are more acceptable). The perception is that the Synagogue is a prayer only venue, not a social center thus minimizing the chances to meet with each other.

Charitable contributions:

Recent patterns of philanthropic gifts show that Jews have been favoring universal causes over Israel and Jewish causes. "Tikkun olam", repairing the world has become an important part of the American Jewish agenda. Jewish charities have been hurting because many Jews no longer feel that their primary allegiance should be to Israel and the Jewish community but rather to the world and humanity at large [26](#). 90% of Jewish charity funds go to non Jewish or Israeli causes. A mini survey of my Israeli friends showed they allocate their donations to Israeli and local charities with exceptions of donations made to disaster areas (Japan, Haiti, etc).

Political Views and Support for Israel

Political Views:

American Jews- In 2008, 78% of American Jews voted for Obama & the Democratic party [27](#).

Israelis - No official data. It is believed that more than 50% of first generation Israelis voted (or sided if not citizens) with the Republicans.

Support for Israel:

Israelis - The vast majority of Israelis support Israel, Tzahal, the government and its actions. Most criticism of Israel's operational mistakes, poor Hasbara etc. is kept to private discussions. Israelis expect American Jews and their organizations to show unconditional solidarity with Israel as Linder said:[28](#) *"(we) expect them to back Israeli government policy fully and uncritically, at least in public"*

American Jews - Most if not all of Orthodox constituency supports Israel and Tzahal's actions as evidenced by their publications, sermons, etc.

A major point of concern is the shift in the automatic stand of support for Israel by the Jewish community at large (Conservative, Reform and secular). Some continue their support while others switched their natural brotherly love with criticism that matches their liberal political beliefs. In his new book [29](#) Shmuel Rozner describes the recent decade as the 'departure decade' of the American Jewry from their historical, common fate partnership with Israel. Their support of the Jewish state is now optional. It is also well defined by the Reut Institute in Israel as a "Relevance gap" between Israel and the Jews in the Diaspora.

This relevance gap and the criticism of Israel may in times of crisis ^(a) hinder the efforts to unite the local Israeli and Jewish community. Israelis back Israel unconditionally because they know firsthand of the challenges Israel is facing. As an Israeli it is hard when local Rabbis do certain things known to hurt Israel in the name of pluralism and free speech. Examples:

1. L.A. Clergy (Conservative and Reform) signs open letter to end Gaza blockade [30](#)
2. VBS (Rabbi Feinstein) was the first Synagogue to invite J-Street on 11/9/10 to speak to his congregation when they opened their office in L.A. [31](#) J-Street is the leftist lobby that supported the Goldstone report, opposed Iran sanctions and opposed the US veto of the UN Security Council condemnation of Israel!!
3. Rabbi Feinstein is praised on J-Street's web site [32](#) and he lately co-sponsored another Jeremy Ben Ami (J-Street founder) public meeting at Temple Israel (4/11/11). It was difficult for me and a few other Israelis in the audience to witness how many of our brothers to the left cheer Mr. Ben Ami's hostile positions towards Israel. I value free speech and differences of opinion but when it comes to Israel at this critical time, the last thing we need is endorsing a Trojan horse like J-Street. No Orthodox Synagogue would invite Ben Ami to speak there.

Summary:

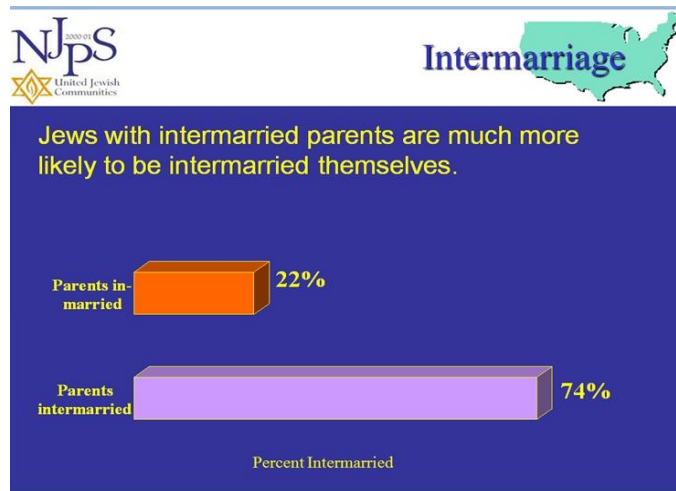
There are visible differences between the Israeli immigrants and their Jewish brothers: Mentality, Language, Synagogue, Independent services, Political views and unconditional support for Israel. The Israeli community is a unique group within the local Jewish landscape. The first generation doesn't seem to integrate or participate in Jewish organized activities and fundraisers. It is therefore imperative to provide the children with solid reasons to prefer social ties with Jewish children based on common interest and activities. The natural solution is to strengthen their Jewish identity and pride.

(a) Ex.: Town Hall meeting, Temple Aliyah w/Congressman Sherman called regarding an unsupportive stand towards Israel by President Obama, split audience.

The Next Generation

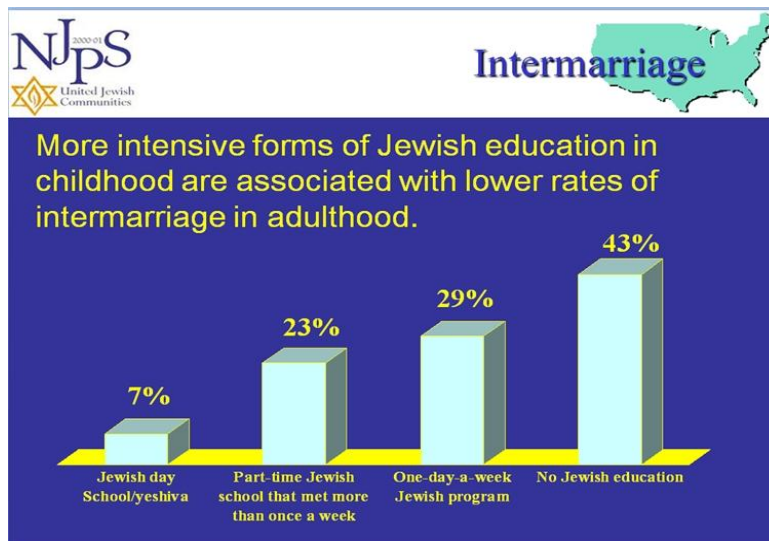
What if just one of the children married a non Jew?

The following chart shows that his children are also 74% likely to intermarry. Intermarriage is **irreversible**. The trend continues in the family, The Offspring are lost to the Jewish family.



Jewish Education and Intermarriage:

The following graph shows the direct link between Jewish education and intermarriage.



The greatest success seems to be by way of full time, Jewish day school. Any partial program, even once a week, shows much better results than doing nothing.

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper by no means comes as a final solution but is rather meant to provoke discussion that will help us achieve our goals of Jewish continuity.

Goal:

Jewish Continuity. In faith marriages.

How? STUDY, PUBLICIZE, ACTION

STUDY

Leadership meeting to learn the facts and possible ways of action.
Include experts if needed (many available).

Do a Public Community Survey to verify and publicize our concerns: (1) Do you know of intermarried Israelis? How many? (2) Is it important for you or for your children to marry Jewish?

PUBLICIZE

Create a positive campaign (e.g. "Let's continue the journey together"), unique slogan and logo. Use professional marketers. Publicize the survey findings. Repeat as needed.

Assemble community leaders of all areas (Journalists, Consuls, DJ's, Entertainers, Business & Community Leaders, etc.) Many will identify and agree to endorse and market the message and the program in the media and in their events.

Ask Israeli celebrity figures to be taped on a video clip (Pres. Shimon Peres, Rav Israel Lau, Singer Ehud Banai). Their message is how they miss us (as opposed to "Nefolet shel nemushot") and while you are abroad stay on the Jewish wagon...We are family.

ACTION

The action plan is to be publicized as part of the campaign and promoted as the suggested solution.

After consulting with all Leaders, Rabbis, Teachers and Advisors - develop a program that will be suited to all age groups. (I have some ideas not mentioned here as I believe it has to be developed at joint meetings).

Draft mission and vision statements for the campaign.(*)

(* I hope my recommendation to go with authentic, non judgmental Orthodox Rabbis as our guides will be accepted as a general rule. Which Rabbis and movements to consider?

Some of the organizations I got to know: Chabad [33](#) and Tzohar [34](#) are very successful in dealing with Israelis. Consultation: The Avi-Chai foundation [35](#), Geshar Foundation [36](#) and Doron Kornbluth [37](#) – an Israeli/American lecturer and author ("Why be Jewish").

Why?

If the leaders won't pick up the challenge of saving our collective future, who will?

A campaign to promote our heritage in a non judgmental way is challenging. It is unknown how many will act upon our call **but doing nothing is worse.**

Our local success may become a model sought by the State of Israel and other communities as an example to follow for Jewish unity and pride.

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