

## **Address at the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities Jerusalem, November 19, 2003**

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I am honored to be sharing the dais today with Shimon Peres, one of the builders of the State of Israel – and to share this room with over 3,000 representatives of Jewish communities in North America.

The term “solidarity mission” may sound stale, yet the very presence here of this formidable group attests to the continued bond between the Diaspora and Israel.

*Let it ever be so.*

There is no question that Israel faces serious problems – externally, with its seemingly intractable existential threats, and internally, with its pressing economic and social problems.

But whereas Israel captures the world’s headlines, the state of the Diaspora is a focus of relatively few, even though, in some respects, it is far more vulnerable.

In almost all countries of the Diaspora, the non-Orthodox community is at best stagnant; in many places, in decline. The decline, alas, happens almost imperceptibly, and thus eludes attention and concern. Yet the cumulative erosion has gravely weakened the vitality of Diaspora Jewry.

For the majority, the surge in assimilation is outstripping our efforts at renewal. Yes, there have been pockets of reawakening. But the recent National Jewish Population Survey, whatever its flaws, will confirm that overall, the decline continues. Indeed, if the vibrancy of our community hinges on the Jewish education of its constituents, then this part of the Diaspora community, its majority, is in crisis. Our people are adrift, their urge to live Jewishly or even to remain Jewish, enfeebled.

By the measure of devotion to Israel, the generational difference is immense. Young Jews today have a mere fraction of the attachment to Israel of my generation.

And Jewish literacy – knowledge of our books, our history, our culture – is arguably at an all-time low. Our intermarriage rates remain at record levels.

Only a vigorous new leadership can turn the tide.

If there is one Jewish value that dominates our history, it is education. Many, myself included, would attribute our achievements to this emphasis on learning.

In modern times, we focus on the general disciplines to the neglect of Jewish education. We feel it to be the highest honor when our children graduate from Harvard – but shockingly we feel no shame when our children, Harvard diplomas in hand, do not know a single word of Hebrew.

Growing up in post-World War II Brooklyn, even those of us with little formal Jewish education found it easy to remain in the fold. We were immersed in Jewish culture: the sounds of Yiddish, the aromas of Jewish cooking. There was an influx of refugees with numbers on their arms, and

awareness of the immigrant experience on the one hand and anti-Semitism on the other, served to unite the community.

Today, with the fading of this generation and the unprecedented acceptance of Jews into mainstream society, we have lost a natural connection to Jewish culture. Thus, more than ever, our survival depends on the next generation's becoming educated. We need to bring about a Jewish renaissance for our young people.

However, the institutions from which we expect leadership have not succeeded in effecting this renaissance. The bulk of community investment continues to pour into the decaying status quo, whereas innovative programs have received insufficient funding. Day Schools, while growing, have not succeeded in attracting the majority of non-Orthodox Jews; most schools remain financially frail.

Our denominational movements have failed to capture the imagination of our youth. Synagogues do not resonate for the majority. Indeed, most Jews are not affiliated with any synagogue; 49 percent consider themselves secular.

You who are gathered here – the cream of the leadership crop – represent committed Jewry. Who speaks for the unaffiliated? They are Jews without representation. If they are indeed a near-majority, why is there no one here to speak for their interests and needs?

The sad truth is that the leadership ranks of the Jewish community have become so accommodated to decline that we haven't even mentioned the absence of the very group we should be fighting to reach. We tell ourselves that this is the best we can do, while most Jews remain oblivious of anything we do.

In the climate we find ourselves, we are desperate for leadership. Who today is *Melech Yisrael* in America? Who is today's Louis Brandeis? Abba Hillel Silver? Stephen Wise? Jacob Schiff? Whenever I ask this question, the replies are scant. The problem lies not in our individuals but in our community. We are no longer bound by a sense of shared destiny – or driven by a sense of crisis – that would lead to the emergence of real leadership.

Once we were a people who lived by tzedakah. Once there were hundreds of major philanthropists active in Jewish life. That era has come to a close, for today you can count them on – maybe – two hands.

Today Jews hurry to donate to universities, museums, and hospitals, but when it comes to vitalizing our own people, we fall short. Of the amounts Jews give philanthropically, only 20 percent goes to Jewish causes whereas the post-World War II figure was 50 percent.

Of the \$5.3 billion in mega-gifts given by America's wealthiest Jews between 1995 and 2000, a mere 6 percent went to Jewish institutions. A recent concert hall cost \$55 million; of this, \$45 million was Jewish money. Our most affluent have become society's cultural financiers.

The Federations have also felt this pinch. Overall philanthropy in the United States has doubled in the past decade; donations to the Federation annual campaigns have remained flat. Only 11 percent donated more than \$1000 to Jewish causes.

Furthermore, of those who do give to Jewish causes, many ignore programs of Jewish education and culture, and focus rather on yesterday's preoccupations. In North America, the greatest threat to the

Jewish people is not the external force of anti-Semitism, but the internal forces of apathy, inertia, and ignorance of our own heritage.

Birthright Israel is a case in point. Birthright has been nothing less than a transformation in Jewish life. Instead of tapping people's souls through guilt and fear, Birthright Israel – or “Taglit” – creates a bond with Israel and captures our young people through the beauty and glory of their heritage.

And yet, in spite of Birthright's success – it has brought 49,000 young Jews for first-time educational experiences in Israel, and follow-up studies have shown quantifiable increases in intensity of Jewish identity, in participation in Shabbat dinners, etc. – the future of the program is tenuous.

Not because there are no young people who want to partake of this venture – even during the 3 years of the intifada, it was Birthright participants who filled Israel's empty hotels – but simply because there is not enough money to pay for it. And this when the world Jewish community almost universally recognizes the value of Birthright. So how does one understand the difficulty to secure support? The amounts needed are not colossal.

Even the Federation community, which last year raised over \$300 million for Israel's emergency needs, finds it arduous to provide a small fraction of that amount for Birthright. If we lose Birthright, we shall lose more than free trips to Israel for young Jews. We will lose the power of the Jewish people – educators, philanthropists, Federations, the State of Israel – acting in unison to secure the Jewish future.

Birthright Israel should be viewed by each Federation as not merely a national initiative, but also a local Jewish identity-building program.

Gathered today are some of the world's most devoted Jewish lay-leaders and professionals. You came to Jerusalem to show solidarity with Israel and to contemplate our collective future. If we now return home without significant changes, are we not presiding – with good will and good intentions – over the inexorable decline of our community?

I find myself returning again and again to the question of leadership. In the past, the notion of Jews' creating kibbutzim to work the land was a bold new idea for the revival of pre-State Zionism. We too must seek such new ideas for the Jewish future. Birthright was but one.

Consider how little many of us know about our history, our culture, our language. We do not know enough about our religion to take true pride in it. We remain Jewish on the vapors of cultural memory.

I ask: Does anyone wake with a start in the middle of the night and say: “Our children know little about their people. They do not know why being Jewish should be important to them. What are we going to do about this?”

I don't think we are seriously considering this question at all, certainly not in a challenging and sustained manner.

When we speak of new leadership, it is important to distinguish between the Orthodox and the majority of Jews. Their insularity has them often living in segregated neighborhoods, and nearly 100 percent of their children attend their own day schools or Yeshivot. Their demography is

excellent: they marry largely amongst themselves and have high birthrates, and thus experience substantial growth. They do more outreach to the non-Orthodox than anyone else. And we have become two distinct peoples – so much so that, tragically, we non-Orthodox marry far more Christians than we marry Orthodox Jews.

The non-Orthodox denominations have lost their rigor. They produce generation after generation of under-educated Jews. Initially these systems of belief were relevant by showing us how to be modern. But today this focus does not successfully transmit a vision of the Jewish future. Those liberal rabbis and congregations who are resonant, vibrant and inspirational must be encouraged. Personally I believe that the future is beyond all denominations.

It takes wisdom greater than mine to anticipate what will resonate spiritually for our future generations. But I feel it is time to articulate a vision of a Common Judaism which will speak to all Jews, regardless of geography, ideology, or level of observance.

We can identify several key concepts:

- the pre-eminence of Jewish peoplehood as a unifying ideal;
- the centrality of the State of Israel to the Jewish soul;
- the imperative of Jewish education to maintain and reinforce Jewish life;
- tzedakah as the life spring of our community; and
- a keen respect for meritocracy.

Perhaps for the contemporary Jew, theology is less important than the Jewish values that have persisted for three to four thousand years.

We should listen to our children who have been alienated.

They yearn for a Judaism which will emphasize Jewish joy so that all, regardless of background, can take part in the simcha and revelry of Shabbat and Passover and Sukkot.

They yearn for a Judaism which will be a viable alternative to the competing ideas swirling around them: Eastern cults, New Age movements, Christianity and, above all, the secularism that pervades all aspects of society.

To meet this competition in the free marketplace of ideas in an open society, Jewish offerings will have to be far more resonant. Our people will no longer determine Jewishness by lineality but by choice. Whether they lay Tefillin or keep kosher will matter less than whether they throw their lot in with the Jewish people.

Jewish education is the only way to pave this yellow brick road – and we must ensure that this education be far more comprehensive than it is today – at *all* levels: preschools and elementary schools and high schools.

Most non-Orthodox children receive but a token dose of Judaism, and do not even feel it inadequate.

A consequential minority receives no Jewish education at all. Great thought has to be given to upgrading their Jewish knowledge.

We must make a quantum leap in the quality of day school education. It has to rival the finest secular private schools. We must seek the best and brightest to be our teachers. And pay them exorbitantly – yes, *exorbitantly*.

Inevitably, we cannot avoid the issue of funding. If we are to achieve, in a relatively short period, upgraded Jewish education, it will be costly. Admittedly, it is easy to speak about new funds, but tough to envision their source.

How do we motivate people to give more to Jewish causes, no, to Jewish education? I would like to propose that we consider the creation of a Fund for Our Jewish Future, devoted entirely to our next generation – and thereby to generations to come. It would invigorate the most important outlets of Jewish identity-formation, from early childhood to day schools, camps, and college programs.

At best the real needs will exceed our fund-raising capacity. We must employ our greatest thinkers to allocate these resources wisely.

The Fund for Our Jewish Future can succeed only as a partnership of our Federations and our most dedicated philanthropists who would be asked to contribute mightily, reflecting the centrality of this mission.

I am prepared to start with a gift of \$10 million whose only condition is that it be no more than ten percent of the Fund.<sup>1</sup>

I feel that others would be prepared to make comparable gifts if this were part of a broad-based national community effort, hopefully raising hundreds of millions of dollars.

The Federations could participate with donor-advised funds, helping persuade donors to allocate a portion of these public Jewish funds to this effort. It is estimated that there is between 3-4 billion dollars in these funds; even a fraction would be consequential.

I know many have their own priorities, but nothing seems to me as urgent.

I have no illusions about this challenge and would welcome other and even better ideas. But if we can create a fund of unprecedented scope, we will be able to effect true, paradigm-shifting changes in our community.

Strangely enough, it has been the four years of the Birthright experience with young people which led me to believe that it is the Jewish preschool which offers the most “leverage” for revitalization.

And the excellence of our preschool programs is a *sine qua non*. Present facilities are a mixed bag.

The nursery in New York’s 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y is harder to get into than most prestigious universities, but, generally, preschools have poorly-trained teachers and weak programming.

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<sup>1</sup> To make a serious impact on day schools, Jewish early childhood centers, college programs, camps, Israel travel and study and adult retreats, the Fund for Our Jewish Future would need a minimum of \$100 million. Frankly, \$100 million would only cover, at most, one of the critical areas of Jewish education, but hopefully, once we succeed in one area, the Fund will grow and eventually dwarf anything that currently exists.

At this moment, however, there is an intensive, unique effort underway to create a model preschool that we hope will be a light unto our nation.

An excellent Jewish preschool experience is not only a remarkable incubator of identity, but a gateway for the entire family to increased involvement. Perhaps at no other time do children have such power to influence their parents' way of life. When a young couple has a child, they become more receptive to community and to heritage.

Especially among parents with little Jewish background, the education of their children can have an exciting, spiraling effect.

A child who makes Shabbat in preschool, with challah, candles and grape juice, may inspire his parents, even teach his parents, to do the same. Purim's "shalach mones" could become as common as Halloween's "trick or treats."

Let's envision the creation of a "Newborn Gift" of the Jewish People.

This would be a voucher given to all Jewish families upon the birth or adoption of a child to be used towards early childhood education and towards a Birthright trip to Israel. This could be a symbolic revolution in Federation life. People all too often associate the Jewish community with obligations and quid pro quo payments. Jewish organizations are constantly soliciting funds, seeking volunteers and stressing what we owe the community.

This is legitimate. But in a family, from time to time, one must give a gift of love.

An important benefit of the Newborn Gift will be its emphasis on community networking. In order to identify newborn Jewish children, the entire community will have to upgrade its outreach efforts. But this will restore community building, truly the nucleus of Federation work, to the fore.

Today, only 15-20 percent of American Jews have any Federation involvement. The Newborn gift has the capacity to increase substantially the numbers of families which the Federations reach.

Imagine the following scenario. A young Jewish couple assumes the profound responsibility of parenthood. And a representative of the Jewish community approaches them with the Newborn Gift.

Not a baby blanket or a state-of-the art stroller, but the crucial elements in the formation of identity: a gift towards early childhood education. The young couple will thereby gain the sense of a peoplehood bound by a common destiny and an emotional commitment to one another.

The Newborn Gift becomes a very real symbol of our love for *clal yisrael*, our joy in being Jewish. Parents who might not have considered raising their child in a Jewish way may be catalyzed to explore their identity.

The Fund for Our Jewish Future and the Newborn Gift are parts of a dream. It will need great resolve to mobilize.

But we are at a point where the reward for taking chances is far greater than the risks. And while collective responsibility seems out of fashion, there are times we must come together for a goal that transcends individual interests.

We did it for the crisis of rescuing Soviet Jewry. It is time to invest the same dedicated efforts and resources to rescuing American Jewry.

I urge all of us to coalesce around the single mission we have in common: the Jewish future of our children.

We who have inherited the mantle of Jewish peoplehood cannot shirk this responsibility.

*We owe our children nothing less.*