

# Empowering mainstream Non-Orthodox Left/Liberal American Jews to participate in Community Leadership

## Proposal by Yisrael Ne'eman

### Defining the Challenge

Today there is a crisis in the relationship between the majority in the non-Orthodox American Jewish community and the State of Israel. There is a quickly decreasing identification with the Jewish State, not only due to its governmental policies but even more deeply to what is perceived as the essence of Jewish independence and statehood. What were once considered shared or at least overlapping values are today divergent ideals and priorities. As the prevailing crisis of identity continues to intensify many young Americans of Jewish ancestry ask “Why be Jewish?” General pride in Jewish/Zionist activism continues to wane for well over a decade. Despite the decades old national, social, educational and at times religious interaction between Israeli and American Jewry at present there is a major Jewish/Zionist leadership gap in the under 50 generation. The Jewish Federations of North America are aware of this challenge and Partnership ToGether (P2G) can be an integral part of the overall solution of expanding the future leadership.

### Background

American Jewish financial and political support for the Zionist ideal and the State of Israel from 1948 onwards were crucial for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century especially during wars and mass immigration as evidenced by the Israel Emergency Fund and Israel Bonds campaigns of yesteryear. Actual partnering between the American Jewish community and Israel began over 40 years ago with Project Renewal, progressed in the 1990s to Partnership 2000 and today is expressed through Partnership ToGether (P2G). First the focus was on upgrading disadvantaged Israeli towns and neighborhoods by American Zionist activists and later there were more community involvement and delegation exchanges between the two sides. There was and is one constant – Israel and Zionism remain at the center of such activities. For the non-Orthodox and certainly non-Haredi American Jews, Zionism and Jewish State building served as “surrogate” religion and identity. Despite the usual give and take and at times serious disagreements, such an arrangement focusing on Israel as the catalyst for Jewish identity and activity at the center of World Jewry became more natural and accepted. The unspoken understanding was that the Jewish World was one unit and one of mutual responsibility. Increasingly this is no longer the case.

The American Jewish community’s younger generation and the State of Israel have grown apart over the past generation despite programs such as Birthright, MASA and other Zionist endeavors to be discussed later. The non-Orthodox American Jewish community votes overwhelmingly for the Liberal/Left leaning Democratic Party, views itself as more American than Jewish, holds dear

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liberal secular values (such as equality of all) and does not identify itself as “Jewish” thru Halacha (Jewish religious law) where one’s mother must be Jewish or be converted thru the Orthodox rabbinate. Today three-quarters of marriages amongst non-orthodox American Jews are interfaith. Some of these couples will integrate into the Jewish community and the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist synagogue structure but it is always easier to identify with the non-Jewish majority even if only by default. Many see themselves as professionally successful with an obligation to help struggling minorities such as African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and recent immigrants from developing countries. Building an alliance of minority rights over the past century is not only “progressive” but is seen as ensuring one’s safety as a Jewish minority even if there is a deep antisemitism on the “progressive” fringe.

As for Israel there is a permanent and growing shift politically and demographically among the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) and Modern Orthodox (often known as National Religious) populations. Both are messianic in outlook while Haredi Jewry follows rabbinical injunction even if in contradiction to secular law in everyday life while the latter seek full settlement throughout the entire Land of Israel (including the West Bank known as Judea and Samaria). Many adult Haredi men study Torah as a full time profession subsidized by the Israeli government, gaining much ire from secular groups in Israel. In general the modern orthodox are employed professionally, serve in the army and are fully integrated into Israeli society. Today the National Religious ideals of Torah/Jewish textual study alongside of socio-economic participation have become mainstream in Israeli society. Add to this the secular right wing nationalist values as represented by the Likud and PM Benyamin Netanyahu in particular and such an alliance is anathema to the average American Jew, even many of those who wholly support Israel but are most comfortable with a center or left coalition, the last time being twelve years ago (Kadima/Labor).

Furthermore, issues in Israel are deeply complicated as the majority Jewish society including the Center and Left views itself as fighting for its physical existence whether in conflict with the Arab World (until just recently) or when confronting the Iranian menace. There is an overall suspicion of the Muslim World especially as threats of extermination have been made clear by extremist groups and nations, most notably Iran and Hamas. This in itself leads to a fairly conservative and suspicious perspective towards one’s Middle Eastern neighbors and those in the West who demand “compromise” as concerns the Palestinian issue. Non-Orthodox American Jewry by and large believes in a comprehensive “Two-State” solution while most Israeli Jews have discounted such an arrangement after the numerous security threats posed by the Palestinians overall and the Jihadi Hamas (Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood) in particular over the years.

Since 2009 and the rise of the Likud led right wing, National Religious/Ultra-Orthodox coalitions the vast majority of American Jews and in particular the younger generation find it increasingly difficult to identify with the Jewish State and its policies. PM Netanyahu vociferously supports Republicans over Democrats and in particular was close to former president Donald Trump, a persona quite reviled by many American Jews. On the other hand former president Obama was seen to embody the very values held by most American Jews while most Jews in Israel found him to be overly supportive of political Islam, the Palestinian cause and completely naïve at best when negotiating the Iran nuclear deal (2015) deemed an “existential threat” of destruction by most Israelis.

Religious issues are fraught with no less conflict. Israel is perceived as religiously coercive because personal law (marriages, divorces and the like) is directed by Halacha, as decided upon by Israel’s parliament the Knesset (the result of coalition politics) and not secular law. The Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements have no standing in Israel while some 90% of American Jewry are members of one of these synagogues or are unaffiliated. Most known and painful are issues raised by “Women at the Wall” and the fact that the Ne’eman Committee recommendations (1998) for conversions into Judaism were rejected by the Haredim and the right wing National Religious. The overall concept guiding the Committee was to be inclusive of all streams of Judaism in the conversion process as a coalition in building and administering the program, thereby advocating global unity in this critical aspect of Jewish understanding. In the end the status quo was upheld and the Haredi/Orthodox monopoly on conversions was maintained. Non-Orthodox American Jews understood this as a stain of illegitimacy painted on their religious institutions by the Israeli Haredi/Orthodox religious establishment.

While Israeli Jewry pulls further to the right nationalist and religious direction American Jewry is not only less involved in the Jewish community itself but have less affinity to Israel and Jewish national cultural objectives as they move further secular liberal left. American Jews as regards Israel are feeling increasingly alienated from Judaism and Zionism. They feel a lack of belonging and rejection while Israelis in general expect full American Jewish support for government policies, invoking the argument of a “democratically elected government” and “we are all Jewish” although these same Israelis often do not consider American Jews to be “really Jewish” because of a lack of Halachic approval. Even the more involved older generation of American Jews support for Israel as an integral part of their identity are known to live with the uneasy feeling of official “illegitimacy” for their religious practices in the eyes of the Israeli religious and political establishment.

There are different definitions concerning “What is Jewish?” The greatest paradox arises when secular Israelis (generally the more right leaning) who have no synagogue affiliation and whose “Jewish Knowledge” is limited will only accept Orthodoxy as the true Judaism even though they are non-practicing and have only stepped into a synagogue for an abbreviated bar mitzvah ceremony or when taking a tour of Jerusalem or Tzfat. The more left leaning Israelis may appear to be sympathetic in general but often reveal their perspective by explaining their dismissal of Orthodoxy “which IS the true Judaism” yet fully rejected. However most do not believe in any religious practice be it Reform, Conservative, or any other semblance of Jewish belief. Mainstream American Jewish practices receive a sympathetic hearing from relatively few Israelis. Israelis can be religious or secular or even the amusing term “non-practicing Orthodox” – and all are acceptable. Areas for overlap and dialogue are becoming increasingly limited.

So where is American Jewry? What are the existential issues and how does one ensure Jewish continuity? The general policy has been to bring Diaspora Jews to Israel and we will teach/convince them with the understanding that “We” (meaning Israelis and certainly Anglo-Israelis) will fill in their education gap and the Americans will re-identify as Jews and Israel supporters.

Jewish philanthropists, especially by the 2000s were magnanimous in funding introductory youth programs such as Birthright (free 10 day student/young adult programs) and the follow-up more intensive MASA project (more in depth for several months to half a year) for the relatively uninvolved and unaffiliated. The overall consideration was to bring masses of students to Israel for short term, fun filled, entry level Jewish/Zionist educational experiences with expectations of Jewish activism. No doubt this was and is a very commendable venture.

There is also Hasbara (with Ultra-Orthodox Misnaged backing) and Habad (Hassidic) programs over the years. Add to this AIPAC, Jewish National Fund (JNF) missions, Stand With US and Honest Reporting as activist programs both for students and adults. Over the years there have been questions arising as to the depth of knowledge and experience presented in these projects. However assuming all is well the message projected by these organizations is one of full identity with Israel and Orthodoxy as the preferred direction of Jewish religious expression.

There are also the less known left wing programs critical of Israel such as J-Street and educational projects showing “both sides” of the story as concerns Israeli-Palestinian relations and the development of Arab-Israeli society which goes well beyond having lunch at a Bedouin village. Here we often have a more secular universalist approach with much condemnation of Israeli policies and at times discounting much of the Israeli narrative. Such projects are not known for developing a deep Israel/Jewish love and activism.

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An overview of adult and family programming includes Federation missions and delegations, synagogue trips and bar/bat mitzvah tours. These are socially bonding which in itself helps strengthen the organizations and communities involved similar to all those mentioned above. Nowadays most programs have their social content of mixing between Israelis and Americans making such experiences more positive and personal. No doubt there is an enhancement of the “Israel Connection” but generally deep roots are not sunk.

Although a sideline to this discussion we must mention the Orthodox and Haredi yeshiva programs. Two comments – the Modern Orthodox are hard line Zionist and support the right religious Israeli policies over the past twelve years, especially settlement. The Ultra-Orthodox Haredi are not necessarily Zionist but receive major government funding for their ventures and although distanced from mainstream Jews and Israelis themselves, they support right/religious administrations and particularly Netanyahu. Contact with the mainstream Jewish community is limited at best, especially as concerns the self-contained Ultra-Orthodox.

Most necessary is a general word about American Jewry. Liberal democracies are overall wonderful societies but they by nature are assimilatory and most notably America where the overriding concept for many years was the “melting pot.” Today there is more ethnicity but Jewish identity, often associated with Israel may not always be a positive factor. Interfaith marriages have risen dramatically since the late 1960s (17%) despite attempts at Jewish and Zionist education thru Hebrew School programs, Jewish day schools, synagogue youth movements whether Reform, Conservative or others avenues represented by Young Judaea or any group missed in this review.

Yet the major question still remains. Why has Jewish/Zionist community activism and leadership in the below 50 generation declined so drastically in the non-Orthodox communities? And can it be revived?

We are at a turning point and must meet much of the non-Orthodox American Jewish community on its own terms and not those conditions being pursued by the traditional Jewish/Zionist advocates and educators (Note: the author of this document works for over 30 years as a Jewish/Zionist lecturer, educator and tour guide). All the above mentioned programs and initiatives should be continued and strengthened but they address only a minority of American Jewish concerns and identity.

## Addressing Jewish American Concerns on Their Terms

The attitude in partnership with American Jewry must change and can begin with the P2G funding and programming. American Jews must be met on their own grounds and conditions where we underline their values, beliefs, concerns and identity. Israel can remain a component but need not be the main focus. The answer to the question “Why be Jewish?” cannot be answered by invoking the Covenant between God and Abraham or even when explaining the Sinai Motif (Exodus 19:3-8). A deep religious national explanation is not the answer nor is the invocation of the fear of antisemitism even though there is a rise in anti-Jewish activity as of late. The vast majority of American Jews feel physically secure.

Liberal universalist values and beliefs are part of the Jewish ethos. The greatest challenge is to get the under fifty generation to participate in Jewish knowledge based projects rooted in such concepts. The topics for discussion must match the values and identity of those mainstream Jews, most of whom are well educated, seek a cultural milieu of “belonging” and would like to feel pride in their ethnic (or even “religious”) heritage but feel alienated as of late. Many are latently pro-Israel but are estranged. Their commitment may end with donating \$180 a year to the JNF or to any other Zionist organization. They would like to be counted in but feel left out.

Racism is a major concern of Jews in America. Racism has existed in American society since its inception, whether directed against Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants in general or as antisemitism against Jews. This is a major issue among Left/Liberal Jews and accounts for much of the emphasis on minority coalitions as expressed through the Democratic Party over the past century. Especially nowadays Republicans (and conservatives in general) are seen at best as apathetic towards such behavior or at worst in support of these prejudices. But racism’s most powerful roots have their inception and most destructive implementation in Europe as witnessed by the Holocaust. Already during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Czarist antisemitism drove Eastern European Jewish communities to decide on whether to seek a Utopian society in Russia (Socialism/Communism), emigrate to democratic lands – especially the US or consider Jewish national revival in what would become the modern Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel. The vast majority of American Jews are not familiar with this modern crisis which determined Jewish history prior to the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s.

The question remains for Liberal/Universalist Jews as to, “Why be Jewish?” A deep rootedness in Jewish values, heritage and understanding leads many to work for social justice and the good of humankind. For example Moses Hess (socialist humanism as opposed to Marxism), Einstein or Freud are examples of those who sought a better world for all but did not concede their Jewish identity and connection to Jewish national being.

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More specifically the American Jewish experience must be emphasized. Workers rights and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century labor unions were heavily influenced by Jewish activism in the urban immigrant strongholds. For example programming can be developed tracing American Jewish support for African Americans through the civil rights movement and the story of the Freedom Riders, the relationship between Martin Luther King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the major role played by Jews in the development of the NAACP. There is similar involvement with other ethnic minorities and liberal causes.

In Jewish/Zionist terms it was the Left/Liberal Jewish students who not only aligned with the New Left on campuses in the 1960s supporting civil rights and demonstrating against the Vietnam War, but these same students became the vanguard of Jewish values and identity on campus. Often they were forced to face down vicious antisemitism originating on the extreme Left. As staunch Liberals a double pillar was developed, one of pride in Jewish/Zionist commitment while aiding universalist causes but not at the expense of one's identity. In those days the Right/Religious barely existed in the American Jewish mainstream and certainly not on the average campus.

This leads to a fair amount of questioning. How do American Jews deal with racism in general and antisemitism in particular? Where can one learn/experience the most on these topics in order to counter such vile world views? Expanding on the topic – Why are American Jews or non-Israeli Jewish communities Liberal in their values and political outlook? Many of the answers are found in the Eastern European Jewish past especially in the relationships with the authorities and attempts at acceptance by the populace whether in Russia, Poland, Hungary or elsewhere.

## Proposed Solutions for Engagement of Left/Liberal Jews

For those Left/Liberal Jews who care about the Jewish People world-wide and in their home societies an integrated program inclusive of the American Jewish experience, Eastern European visitation/mission and acquaintance with Zionism/Israel as an aspect of the Jewish uniqueness (without regard to specific politics) will prove instructive and aid in strengthening Jewish identity and at least allow for “understanding” of the predicaments faced by Israel. This group always supported the continued existence of Jewish People/ State of Israel but is known to be in favor of the Two-State solution advocating for mutual recognition between Israel and a Palestinian Arab State to be. (Here we exclude self denying/self hating/anti-Israel/pro-Palestinian Jewish individuals or organizations).

Overall trips, missions and educational experiences need fundamental changes to reflect the guiding values and principles of Jewish existence in the US. The previous template of a trip or even educational mission to Israel as a first step to “convince” participants of the necessity of their Jewish commitments are passé for most Left/Liberal Jews. Call it a “non-starter.” Their

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view of Israel contradicts their way of life and can boomerang into a “turn-off.” Devoid of historical background and personal experiences, this group views Israel stereotypically (and often incorrectly) as a distinctly conservative, religious society frequently discriminating against the minority Arab society in its midst and negating Jewish American values in the main. As we know, Israeli society is more right wing nationalist/religious as represented by a duly elected government. Arabs have equal rights on a personal level, vote, get elected and are in their professions of choice but unfortunately the Israeli Arab issue is often framed by the media and academia as one of “discrimination” although the issue is far more complex. That is not to claim no issues exist, especially as concerns past wrongs or for example today’s Nationality Law debate. As noted personally over the past few years my students (including Jews) at the University of Haifa International School frequently pre-empt discussions or questions on this topic with “As Palestinian Arabs with Israeli citizenship are second class citizens...” it is clear that no full picture is being provided. But first how does one get this Liberal/Left group to engage?

Furthermore thirty years ago over 80% of students coming from abroad to Haifa programming were Jewish; today 85-90% are non-Jewish. Alienated Jewish students become young adults and may possibly engage Jewishly but Israel is not the conduit for identity.

Hence a **three pronged approach** may be considered when engaging Left/Liberal non-orthodox Jews on their own terms with the objective of a rounded Jewish understanding including an open mindedness and appreciation for the Zionist/Israel epic despite their criticisms. Utilization of the Eastern European connection developed by P2G (Warsaw, Budapest, Prague) will help facilitate a deeper understanding of the common American and Israeli Jewish roots (Many Israelis and a minority of American Jews are of a Sephardi/Mizrachi or Eastern background and hence nowadays some might also consider Morocco as an alternative).

1. A course of study bringing an understanding of the Jewish experience/identity in America thru the social, religious and political development/examination of the community
2. Study accompanied by trips/missions to Eastern Europe
3. Trips/missions continuing to Israel after Eastern Europe (but these would need to be at least ten days to be effective – often too long for most) OR

First an educational mission to Eastern Europe and only afterwards a secondary venture to Israel (together more expensive and demands more commitment)

Israel excursions would have a shift in emphasis to Left/Liberal/Secular aspects of Israeli society in addition to the usual (but now scaled down) itineraries, meetings and discussions. Israeli global contributions to hi-tech and medical advances would also be highlighted

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## Expanding Leadership/Filling the Gap

A further suggestion here is to begin a more intense process as mentioned above for a cadre of **Young Leadership/Educators** to fill the growing American Jewish Leadership gap. Such programming would need to be heavily subsidized with a promise of future employment by the different American Jewish communities. This is a serious long term financial undertaking but whose value will go well beyond the investment. This means an American partial re-allocation of funds while the P2G Israeli and European partners will be involved in educational activism to provide as much content as possible where relevant.

A partial reallocation of funds from P2G budgets originating in the American home communities (or supplementary support) would be in order for the 11-12 Day deep educational experiences to both Eastern Europe and Israel or even more so should there be a full program in Eastern Europe and another later on in Israel.

Constructing a professional **Jewish Educator** program leading to professional employment (either full or part time with the accompanying commitment by participants) is another expense. P2G for sure could be involved in the Eastern European heritage and Zionist/Israel aspects of such a venture. Scholarships and participant commitment to work in local Jewish communities are the keys to success.

In essence what is being suggested here is not new. Let us recall that the Jewish Agency was established (1929) to expand support for the Zionist ideal by bringing in Jews who were non-Zionist affiliated. When Jewish nationalism appears too narrowly focused the umbrella is expanded to include as much of World Jewry as possible as positively identifying Jews are interdependent. The State of Israel is a focus but for most outside of Israel not “The” focus.

## Educational Construct/Topics: Classes, Seminars and Missions (Suggestions in Part)

- Educational emphasis on Diaspora Jewish contribution to Humanity, America and Israel
- How do American Jewish liberal values overlap and influence Israeli society? Shared values?
- Emphasis on the secular, national, cultural Israel
- Jewish heritage – Diaspora Communities and Israel
- Religion as cultural understanding and/or belief system (non-orthodox) but not necessarily “Halachic”
- European roots of Jewish Identity and Perspectives
- Open discussion of major issues in America (see above) and Israel
  - State and Religion
  - Israel –Palestinian Relations – One/Two State Solution, etc.

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- Jews and Arabs in Israel proper (as opposed to those in the West Bank (Judea/Samaria and Gaza)
- Security Threats in Israel (to Jews in America as well?)
- Class gaps and social justice in Israel/America
- Racism and Antisemitism

At the moment there are serious surpluses left from the 2020-21 budgets as a result of the Covid 19 crisis. The suggestion here is to consider this shift in priorities as funding is now available.

## Summary/Conclusion

The strength of Partnership is the empowering of all members whether one resides in Israel or abroad. The American Jewish community has a leadership deficit in the 25-50 year old generation range. To rectify the situation we must all (Israelis in particular) join hands and meet on a platform of overall Jewish concerns for our own continuity as a People. Most American Jews lead non-orthodox lifestyles and whose Left/Liberal/Universalist values outweigh Jewish particularistic, national or parochial perspectives. American Jews must be met on their terms. Most are not right wing nor do they hold Zionism overly dear.

Traditional Zionist intensive programming should not be disturbed but does not address the concerns of the majority of Left/Liberal American Jews. Such Israel programming is dwindling when compared to its heyday.

A strong Jewish education/identity enhancement thru the re-discovery of our European roots is imperative to rebuild the connection to Jewish heritage as a conduit to American Jewish values/principles and Zionism/Israel. Integrating Eastern European heritage and experiences (well beyond the Holocaust) to facilitate deeper Jewish commitment will bring a partial shift in emphasis and become more inclusive for the average Jew in America. P2G could certainly take the lead in a partial reallocation of funding and educational resources (manpower). In parallel it appears necessary to initiate priority funding (subsidized by Federations and in part by P2G) for commencement with a Jewish educators' project. This is an immediate concern.

It will take several years before the results of expanded Jewish community leadership will be noticed. The study of Jewish heritage in its more Liberal/Left aspects in addition to visitation both to Eastern Europe and Israel will enhance Jewish identity, aid in filling the leadership gap and strengthen the three way partnership of America, Europe and Israel.