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# A Dream of Renaissance for Jewish Identity

Barry **Shrage**

Too often, the question of Jewish identity in the 21st century begins with the wrong questions: “How many Jews will there be?” and “Will the Jewish people survive?” In an era of choice, we need instead to talk about meaning and purpose, God and spirituality, caring communities, and a sense of peoplehood that includes a connection to a 3,500-year-old culture, civilization, and literature. We must promote a Jewish life worth living if our dreams are to have any meaning for the next generation (or even for ourselves).

To understand Jewish identity in the 21st century we must begin at the end of the 19th century. For the next half-century or so, American Jews and the federations, community institutions, and synagogues they created helped successive generations of immigrants successfully integrate into American society. This was an era of assimilation at a time when assimilation was normative for all Americans. Our story then was a tale of immigrants and shtetls and tenements, upwardly mobile peddlers and tailors, public school education and universities.

By 1965 Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was telling a new story to the federation leadership. Just as the students of the ‘60s were beginning their great march, Heschel told a story of young people troubled by the spiritual emptiness of their parents’ lives and of the Jewish institutions they had created: “Our young people are disturbed at parents who are spiritually insolvent. They seek direction, affirmation; they reject complacency and empty generosity” (Heschel, 1997).

Heschel and the student rebels who followed him at the 1969 General Assembly warned that communal priorities were misplaced and unchanging and that a system designed to care for an immigrant generation was utterly incapable of serving the spiritual yearning of a new generation. They called for a new struggle to achieve a new kind of Jewish identity, and they were largely ignored.

In 1967, the Six-Day War, and Jewish American pride in Israel’s heroism, brought the era of assimilation to a close and ushered in the era of “sacred survival”—a term coined by Jonathan Woocher (1986): a period lasting three decades focused on rescue and building the land of Israel. The book and movie that defined the new narrative was *Exodus*.

The “sacred survival” era was the high watermark for UJA-Federation of New York and for federations around the country in serving as the primary link between American Jews and Israel at a time when Israel was at the core of American Jewish concern and passion. With UJA-Federation taking a prominent lead, we helped rescue Ethiopian and Russian Jewry; we went on missions to Israel; we marched and lobbied for Israel and Soviet Jewry; and we built Holocaust memorials to remind ourselves of the terrible cost of powerlessness. Our work saved hundreds of thousands of lives, and a new Jewish identity was born as a generation of assimilating Jews came face to face with Jewish fate in the eyes of young Israeli soldiers. At the same time the cultural revolution of the late 1960s

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Barry **Shrage** is president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston.

created a new multicultural vision in which it was possible to be uniquely ourselves and fully American at the same time.

We accomplished a great deal, but 23 years later the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey revealed all that we failed to do. Although the federation system helped assure our physical survival, our survival as a people carrying a sacred message into the future was far from certain. In spite of the emphasis on ethnicity and peoplehood and on Israel, ethnic ties and our sense of peoplehood were attenuated, and many younger Jews felt only marginally connected to the Jewish state. In spite of federations' emphasis on Jewish unity and peoplehood and fundraising—what Abraham Joshua Heschel called “the empty generosity” of Jewish life—and “We Are One” slogans, the sense of connection to each other and the Jewish world was melting away for many Jews.

While federations worked to save Jews from 1967–1990, we failed to rebuild our cultural/spiritual/intellectual capital. We were proud of being Jewish but as we and our children absorbed the great literature and culture of Western civilization, we provided our children (following the tradition of the education we ourselves had received) a third-grade (and fourth-rate) Jewish education.

In the 20 years since 1990, much has been done and much has changed. Continuing declines in measures of peoplehood notwithstanding, synagogue affiliation remains strong and has been increasing along with personal spirituality, newly vibrant congregations, resurgent learning, and an increased commitment to Jewishly based social justice initiatives.

The power of this nascent Jewish renaissance owes much to pioneering philanthropists and the new organizations they created, as well as to thousands of extraordinary and ordinary Jews who struggled to create day schools, develop Israel experiences, and build synagogues and camps and seminaries and new movements that would reach out with love to interfaith households, gay and lesbian Jews, and others on the periphery of Jewish life.

John Ruskay came to UJA-Federation of New York in 1993 with a passion for Jewish life and an extraordinary background in Jewish education and the Jewish student movement. Through his vision and leadership, UJA-Federation moved to engage congregations, strengthen synagogue life, create a revolution in adult Jewish learning, and increase support for Jewish camping. From his experiences at the 92nd Street Y and the Jewish Theological Seminary, Ruskay understood, as few of his peers did, the importance of integrating formal and informal Jewish education and the potential of synagogues as gateways to Jewish life. He also began to struggle with how best to support day schools in New York's extremely complex environment.

A few other federations (Cleveland and Boston among them) have pioneered important new initiatives and partnerships, but federations in general have been slow to play a significant role in this great new work. It seemed as if a movement that had been enormously successful at organizing and raising funds to save Jews needed to find a new narrative to mobilize around issues of Jewish identity.

Fortunately, new leadership with new narratives is emerging at federations, at United Jewish Communities, and at the Jewish Agency for Israel, prepared to work in partnership with foundations and congregational leadership to make Jewish education, renewed congregations, and “soul-searing” experiences (a term that Ruskay was the first federation executive to use) a far higher priority. Strong congregations, expanding day schools, and renewed communities will generate

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the social capital that can restore our sense of peoplehood. Meaning and purpose and a commitment to social justice and real spirituality will mark the renaissance of 21st-century American Judaism.

Our dreams for the next generation outside our committed core—the beneficiaries of our most intensive and successful efforts to date—will be shaped by two rapidly developing phenomena: the rapid growth in the proportion of Jewish children being raised in interfaith households (now approaching 50%) and Taglit-Birthright Israel, which has the potential to touch 25–50% of the next generation, including many of our most distant and alienated young people.

The Jewish identity of the next generation will be shaped by communities in which 50% and more of Jewish households are interfaith families raising Jewish children, but in ways that are more complex than we may have guessed. An important indicator of this complexity is an astounding finding on the intensification of spirituality in the next generation, particularly among the children of interfaith families. “How Spiritual are America’s Jews?” the 2009 study by Steven M. Cohen and Lawrence M. Hoffman, suggests,

*Young Jews are more spiritually inclined on every available measure than their elders. The historic large gap in spiritual orientation between Jews and others is narrowing, especially among younger adults, those 35 and under. For Jews, younger adults are more spiritual and more religious than their elders.*

Surprisingly, Jews-by-Choice and young adults raised in interfaith households “score considerably higher on the indices of spirituality than Jews with two Jewish parents.”

Some say that the children of interfaith households may well be seeking a spiritual experience, but have little sense of peoplehood and far fewer Jewish contacts and will never truly be part of the Jewish people. But that depends at least in part on us. Expanded outreach, transformed congregational education and caring synagogues, powerful day schools, the vast expansion of Jewish camping, youth groups, vibrant adult learning, and new opportunities for Jewish service will assure the engagement of marginally affiliated in-married families and interfaith households alike. Poorly funded mediocre programs will fail with both.

Taglit-Birthright Israel is the second mega-trend that will powerfully affect the shape of Jewish identity in the next generation, particularly for the majority of Jews who are not reached by day schools and camps. Birthright provides a widespread opportunity to unite the yearning for spirituality in the next generation with a commitment to the Jewish people. Each year for the last few years, Taglit-Birthright Israel has brought between 20,000–40,000 young Jews to Israel for the ultimate experience of Jewish peoplehood: seeing their people living in the land of Israel and meeting their peers, young soldiers, who join them on the trip and who daily defend our people even at the risk of their own lives.

But the true power of Birthright goes beyond individual stories of lives changed and Jewish connections made. Serious research has shown the impact of Birthright on nearly all participants, but its impact on the *zeitgeist* is more difficult to measure.

Birthright has already touched the lives of 225,000 young Jews and has the potential to touch 40,000 more every year. This may well represent close to half of the entire next generation. Because it touches so many lives, it has the power to reshape the story of a generation and change the reality structure within which

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Jewish life and Jewish identity exist and change. It has the potential to be a “tip-ping point” experience for an entire generation.

It is not a “magic bullet,” but it is a brand new platform, a door opener for hundreds of thousands, including the most alienated and unreachable of their generation. We have never seen anything like it before, and we are unlikely to have an opportunity this important again. It is our last best chance to engage a generation in the great task of redefining Jewish identity. If we do our jobs right the Birthright returnees and their children will one day transform our federations and synagogues and fill our camps, day schools, and adult learning classes.

Yet, for Birthright to reach its full potential, follow-up is essential and will need to take many forms—from a significant expansion of campus activism and learning to a wide range of post-campus experiences. Jewish identity for the post-Birthright generation begins with a “soul-searing” ten-day experience, but in the end it must transcend the experience itself.

Back in 1990 in spite of a real-estate-fueled collapse in the annual campaign in Boston and many other cities, the American Jewish community raised hundreds of millions for Operation Exodus through the federation system. And now, in the midst of another economic crisis we may be confronting our last best chance to become relevant again to Jewish history and to the Jewish future by challenging our contributors to make the most of these extraordinary opportunities.

Birthright and Birthright follow-up, including the development of volunteer service opportunities, need to move to the center of our campaigns and our consciousness along with our other Jewish educational priorities, which must continue to expand. UJA-Federation of New York provides \$1.5 million annually to support Birthright, and Ruskay has been one of the program’s most ardent supporters. But far more needs to be done collectively through the federation system to make the most of this extraordinary opportunity.

Of course we must still bear our traditional responsibility for those in need, especially during this economic crisis. Great ideas will generate new revenue even in difficult times, but we must also be prepared to reduce or eliminate those traditional local agency investments that are no longer as relevant as they once were. We must be prepared to change our narrative and our priorities to take advantage of paradigm-changing events in the world around us or else risk being judged irrelevant to Jewish history and the Jewish future.

When our children ask why Jewish identity is important, we must be able to say that we are the representatives of a 3,500-year-old religious civilization that can provide spiritual meaning and purpose. We are part of intimate, face-to-face Jewish communities through which this religious civilization is transmitted. The point of our religious civilization is the perfection of our communities and our ultimate responsibility for the betterment of humankind in the name of the God whose story is at the heart of our existence. Jewish identity without vision will fail to attract the loyalty of a new generation that is seeking meaning and purpose.

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A Jewish academic who claimed the University and College Union's policy on Palestine constituted harassment has been rebuked by an employment tribunal for misusing the legal process. Ronnie Fraser, a further education lecturer and founding director of Academic Friends of Israel, argued that the UCU [University and College Union] was institutionally anti-Semitic owing to motions passed in favour of a boycott of Israel. Like Denis MacShane and Anthony Julius, he's a Jewish supremacist and wants Europe to be run by Jews for the benefit of Jews. This means destroying free speech and promoting great art. Well, Kantor thinks it's art, at least. Jewish Renaissance. 1,085 likes · 19 talking about this. Jewish Renaissance is a quarterly magazine which presents Jewish culture in a radically new... Jewish Renaissance presents the best of Jewish culture in a vibrant, intelligent and accessible way. See More. CommunitySee All. Once the Jewish people begin to rise to a higher level of human connection, a new Renaissance will emerge " in Europe and across the world. The Brexit is yet another jolt to the common market, which joins the decline in political stability, the loss of European identity, the rise of the extreme right and the waves of mass immigration, all threatening to sink the European ship. Thus, the human culture that formed in Europe over two millennia, the culture that became rooted in humanity's DNA and shaped the patterns of thinking that characterize modern society, is now disintegrating. And while it is not yet clear how the future will play out, through the prism of Kabbalah one thing is certain: Once again, the world will set its sight "œWhen I founded Jewish Renaissance in 2001 I was told it wouldn't last two issues, let alone two years, but here we still are. Before the first issue came together I was running my own market research consultancy. That's when the seed of an idea for a new magazine had been planted. The Jewish Chronicle had been one of my research clients, so I knew a fair bit about the needs of Jewish readers, and realised there was a gap in the market among those who, like me, wanted to keep in touch with their Jewish identity. Some 25 years before, while my children were young, I had been involved in foundin