

Securing Our Future Through Historic Jewish Communities

By DANA EVAN KAPLAN

Since becoming the first ordained rabbi in Jamaica in thirty-three years, I have been working tirelessly with my community to build a Jewish future on this tropical island. Every Jewish community wants to survive and indeed thrive, but there is a particular importance to the preservation and development of the world's small, history-rich Jewish communities.

As I see it, our collective Jewish future depends on it. Before I explain my reasoning, let's briefly review the momentous – but often overlooked – history of our community in Kingston, Jamaica.

The Jewish community of Jamaica traces its origin to Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, who came to the Caribbean in order to escape from the Inquisition. In most cases they originated from parts of Spain that bordered on Portugal. When King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella issued an expulsion decree on March 30, 1492, the Jewish community was given exactly four months to liquidate their affairs and leave the country. Those who fled to Portugal were forcibly converted in 1497. Because the Inquisition was not introduced in Portugal for several decades, many Jews in Portugal continued to practice their religion quietly.

In 1536 the Inquisition reached Portugal and Conversos began to leave. The Portuguese held their first auto-da-fé in 1540. This obviously frightened our ancestors, who made discreet attempts to plan their escape. Slowly, Portuguese Jews made their way to a number of cities that had or developed Converso communities. Amsterdam was the largest of these communities. From Amsterdam, they pursued business opportunities in the Caribbean, settling in Port Royal or later, Spanish Town and Kingston. We can trace our current community back to Neveh Shalom Synagogue, which

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was founded in 1704, but our roots go back even further.

There are similar communities throughout the Caribbean and Central America, including Willemstad, Curacao; St. Thomas, Virgin Islands; and Suriname. Each of these communities still conduct services on a regular basis. Preserving these and other historic Jewish communities is critical for a number of reasons.

First, the fact that the Jews were the original Diaspora needs to be emphasized at a time when various other communities are discovering their own Diasporas. This can help build strong bonds between various national groups, allowing us to share common experiences with those who may not have obvious connections to the Jewish people. This would, of course, promote tolerance, which is always “good news for the Jews.”

Second, the experiences of the Jewish people in virtually every corner of the globe over the course of hundreds and, in many cases, thousands of years is part of the narrative that needs to be told to those who are legitimately asking questions about Jewish existence and Jewish history.

Whether in Israel or in various parts of the Diaspora, we need to be able to explain to skeptics that we have survived seemingly unending persecution and numerous expulsions and have nevertheless maintained our commitment to our people and our religion.

This narrative needs to be preserved and enhanced in actual living terms, and not just through books and museum exhibits. We must be able to tell the story of our peoplehood and be able to demonstrate living examples of that history.

Finally, when individuals travel the world looking for adventure and existential meaning, it is important that we “surprise” them with Jewish history and living, breathing Jewish tradition. Visitors are beside themselves when they discover that the Caribbean island they are exploring not only had a historic Jewish community but has living indigenous Jews who continue to gather together for communal events.

In my short time here, I have met and interacted with numerous individuals and groups who come

searching for the Jamaican Jewish community in an effort to discover their own Jewish identities. Some of those who seek us out come away with a new perspective on life and a revitalized commitment to their Jewish observance. In a way, we are like a living exhibit from the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv.

Over the past seventy years there has been a dramatic contraction of the Jewish Diaspora. From a large and diverse population spread out among most of the countries of the world, we have concentrated ourselves in a handful of countries, living mostly in a couple of dozen large urban regions. This is quite an unfortunate demographic trend.

It is unfortunate for historical reasons – we no longer exist as living entities in most of the geographical regions where so much of our history was made – and it is unfortunate for political reasons – we need to be able to demonstrate that we are not just a marginal ethnic group living almost entirely in the United States, France, England, a handful of other Western countries and, of course, Israel.

Our strength as a people derives from our diversity. That diversity is a direct consequence of our dispersion. The tragedy of the Holocaust was not just the loss of so many millions of lives but the destruction of so much of Jewish culture. That Jewish culture was tremendously variegated, not only from country to country but even within different regions of the same national unit. Likewise, the ingathering of the exiles, a process that brought many of the Jews living in Arab countries as well as Holocaust survivors to Israel has had the unintentional result of ending magnificent cultural effervescence in countries around the world.

We need to devote more time and resources to cultivating Diaspora communities, whether in Kingston, Jamaica or other relatively obscure corners of the world. These communities are an underappreciated resource of Judaism that can serve to inspire alienated Jews today as well as help us preserve much needed cultural diversity and ensure a brighter Jewish future.

Poll: Israel as Unpopular as Terror States Iran, North Korea

By BRUCE BAWER

Among the findings of a new international survey, commissioned by the BBC and performed by an outfit called Globescan, is that the four least popular countries in the world, or at least in the 22 countries surveyed, are Pakistan, Iran, North Korea – and Israel.

Polling residents of the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Chile, Peru, Brazil, Britain, Germany, France, Spain, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Pakistan, Australia, Indonesia, Kenya, Egypt, Ghana, and Nigeria, Globescan found that only 21 percent of respondents had a positive impression of Israel, and that the only one of the Western countries surveyed whose residents have an overall positive view of Israel is the U.S.

Looking at the study in its entirety, one discovers that while 50 percent of Americans took a positive view of Israel and 35 percent were negative, the breakdown in Canada was a very different 25-59.

While French attitudes toward Israel split 20-65, British 16-68, Germans 16-69, and Spaniards 12-74, the Russians broke almost even, 25-26. Indeed, Nigerians (54-29) and Kenyans (45-31) were far friendlier to Israel than any of the Western European countries.

The report only confirms what many of us already know: that with the exception of the U.S., the countries of the West are today no friends of the Jewish state.

Mountains of anecdotal evidence, moreover, make it clear that it is impossible to separate this antagonism from pure and simple anti-Semitism.

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American Jews should be aware of what is going on in the minds of many of the people they encounter when they travel to places like Paris or London. They should recognize that the relative lack of Jew-hatred that they experience in the U.S. is an outright aberration – an aberration, moreover, that, as rhetoric emanating from the Occupy Wall Street movement has suggested, may not persist for much longer.

Clearly, the main reason for the widespread enmity toward Israel in Western Europe is that left-leaning individuals in positions of influence – from politicians and journalists to schoolteachers and professors – have been engaged for quite a long time in a relentless campaign of disinformation and demonization directed against Israel and, frankly, Jews generally.

“I am so tired,” complained Søren Espersen of the Danish Folkeparti on his *Jyllands-Posten* blog, “of all the lies about Israel.” He elaborated: “I am often invited to high schools, where both teachers and students get such a very special masochistic thrill out of seeing and meeting someone like me – the very epitome of Danish political evil ...! It is, of course, [my] foreign policy they most want to be outraged by, but the second most important topic at Danish schools is actually the Middle East. The relationship between Israelis and Arabs, between Jews and Muslims.

“And time after time it has struck me that even in a situation where the interest in the Middle East conflict is burning hot, for the most part neither the teachers nor the students are aware of the historical background.”

Esperson notes that at school after school, “talented and obviously articulate” kids explain to him the history of Israel as it’s been taught to them. After the Holocaust, they inform him, the Western countries, led by the U.S. and Britain, flew “massive numbers of American and English and German and Polish Jews” to Palestine, where “they chased all the

Palestinians out of their houses with gunpowder and cannons and other modern weapons, helped by the British and Americans, and sent them to refugee camps, where they have been ever since.”

This twisted version of history, Esperson explains, is so ubiquitous in Danish schools that he’s begun passing out a “fact list” in which he seeks to correct all the lies these kids have been fed about the history of Jewish settlement in Palestine, the events of 1947-48, the current situation in Gaza, the rights of Israeli Arabs, and so on.

Recently a 17-year-old Norwegian Jew whose byline identified him only as “Daniel” wrote a piece in *Aftenposten* headlined “Universally Accepted Anti-Semitism.” “Why,” he asks, “should I, as a Jew, feel insecure in Norway at times? Because there are many who say they want to kill me.” He tells an anecdote: “I’m sitting at the library playing an Internet game that involves shooting the greatest possible number of people with bows and arrows when a kid walks in.... ‘Pretend you’re shooting a Jew,’ he comments enthusiastically.”

Daniel recalls that during his school years, “the epithet ‘you Jew’” has been “as common as *faen*” (Norway’s F-word). He eventually learned that “you Jew” was only the tip of the iceberg: “During the Gaza demonstrations, people went around with posters in Arabic saying ‘Kill all Jews.’ I have been asked if I support Israel, and after saying yes, I get immediate follow-up questions about whether I support child murderers.”

None of what Esperson and Daniel describe is confined to Denmark and Norway. This, alas, is Western Europe today: a part of the world that was once the very definition of civilization and enlightenment, but that, having exposed in the last century its capacity for irrational, murderous barbarism, now seems inexorably drawn, like an addict unable to resist his drug, back into that vile darkness.