

Cultivating Greatness
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Published September 7, 2011 in "The Klal Perspectives Journal".

Together with the incredible growth that Orthodox Jewry has experienced in the last half century, a host of new challenges have developed, all of which need to be addressed with creative energy and concerted effort. I would like to focus on one such challenge, perhaps least tangible but in my view most significant and overarching. I will present the challenge first, then try to articulate how it has developed specifically as a result of this phenomenal growth, and finally suggest a framework for trying to address it.

The Challenge: A Jew whose life is defined by Torah should without a doubt be a model of goodness, responsibility, integrity and sensitivity – a great human being who is an ideal spouse, parent and child. Yet it seems to me – admittedly without empirical data to support this contention – that while we may be ahead of the larger society on these fronts, we are not as ahead as we used to be, and the plethora of individual and familial issues we face indicate that we could certainly be doing better. And we should be doing better. This is what I would like to focus on: What can we do to produce greater people and stronger families?

I would like to suggest six consequences of our community's phenomenal growth that have contributed to this challenge.

1. Trendy Religiosity: The greatness of the original Jew, Avraham, was born of him being an Ivri, someone who did his own thing, an iconoclast who did not simply go with the flow of his society. Challenge develops character. A half century ago, a Jew who chose to observe Shabbos, enroll children in a day school, cover hair, study in a Yeshiva or attend a daily shiur, was making a conscious, often heroic decision that had to overcome internal and external resistance. Today, due to our burgeoning numbers and social strength, our community is filled with people for whom such decisions follow the path of least resistance. This makes it less likely for our community to produce people of character. This trend is reminiscent of Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk's classic analysis of trends in Jewish history, where periods of destruction are followed by periods of heroic rebuilding, followed by the complacency of having "arrived" that leads in turn to another rupture (Meshech Chachma Vayikra 26:44).

2. The Insignificance of the Individual: The early history of developing Yeshivos and Day Schools in this country is replete with incidents of principals pleading with parents to allow their children to come to the school for token tuition, and of Meshulachim travelling to communities to not only raise funds but to find children that could perhaps be cajoled to pursue a yeshiva education. The students were

treasured and sought after, as a young man or woman interested in learning and living Judaism was a precious commodity. Now, with our large numbers, the tables have turned, and more often than not our educational institutions have to be convinced to accept students. This is an attitudinal shift that continues even after they have been enrolled, such that the child may not feel all that treasured by his school, nor the adult by his community. This shift has enormous impact on the level of engagement of individual Jews.

3. Communal Pressure: For all kinds of reasons, the larger the community grows the more individuality is replaced by conformity. And every segment of our community is plagued by its own particular pressures to conform. Whether in selecting a school or a home, in choosing a career or in choosing whether to pursue a career at all, in modes of dress or in the manner in which one celebrates a simcha, each segment of the Orthodox spectrum has norms that are pretty rigid and that are “religiously” adhered to by most of its members. One of the inevitable by-products of performance under pressure from others is a feeling of disconnectedness and superficial engagement (see Yeshaya 29:13). It is more than difficult to realize one’s personal potential and to experience satisfaction in an environment in which the individual’s unique strengths and circumstances are not recognized.

4. Materialism: Together with our community’s growth in numbers has come unprecedented prosperity. And while the Orthodox community now faces its own version of the economic crisis, the patterns of consumption still match those of a highly prosperous society. Every segment of the community seems to exhibit an excessive focus on beautiful homes, clothing, cars, food, and of course simchos. This focus can only come at the expense of greater pursuits.

5. Secession and Segmenting: Once upon a time, the serious question facing the small and struggling Orthodox communities was regarding the need for organizational affiliation with the non-Orthodox. Today, with our dramatic growth in numbers, our communities regularly experience further and further segmenting even amongst the Orthodox, where groups of very specific orientation and belief are strong enough to create their own institutions and infrastructure and do not need to endure the negotiation and compromise that are part of the life of broader institutions. Instead of separate institutions within a community being b’di’eved, where working together is impossible, it becomes a lechatchila, allowing the institution to present its approach in the purest form. This has produced an echo-chamber effect, where instead of our ideas being challenged by our peers and our perspectives broadened by relationships with those a bit different than us, we surround ourselves with the similar-minded, leading to a communal form of mutual reinforcement, for better and for worse.

6. The Limits of Local Leadership: As the community has grown, local leadership – of shuls, schools and yeshivos – feel increasingly frustrated at their inability to effect change. Whatever they would propose or wish to accomplish seems to clash head-on with super-strong national trends that their students or constituents feel they cannot resist. And these national trends have a life of their own that no declaration of any known body of gedolim, rabbis, principals or lay leaders could or really would alter.

I think it is self-evident how these factors combine to create a situation where it is more challenging for our community to produce greater people and stronger families. Given these significant realities, and the growing pains of our community, how can we respond and effect change?

Though there may not be an easy way to effect such change on a national scale, to coin a phrase – all change is local. We must take note that despite the disquieting broad trends, there are many shuls, classrooms and dining rooms all over the Jewish world where these challenges are being addressed.

We are blessed with scores of thoughtful and sensitive rabbis, teachers, leaders and parents who are keenly focused on the deepest values of Yiddishkeit, and who work consistently to make those in their orbit greater and deeper people. They do it by positively emphasizing our core values through inspiring and engaging teaching, by challenging their students to find their individual way and by valuing them as individuals, by turning their attention from material self-indulgence to meaningful service, and by exposing them to the different strengths of various streams within the world of Torah observance. The Torah they teach does not allow those around them to discharge their responsibility with a superficial commitment, but requires a thoughtful and meaningful engagement.

This is meaningful but can be further strengthened, both for the sake of strengthening local agents of change and with an eye to reaching a tipping point, where these values can possibly come to dominate the mainstream. By creating a national conversation on these matters, individuals focused on this type of growth can be inspired and strengthened by interacting with peers similarly motivated. Such a national conversation can then potentially create a broader response, awakening the inherent desire for meaning that we all share.

I hope and pray that Klal Perspectives will be a step in that direction.