

VaYishlah – That Ad Campaign to Bring Jacob Home

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In the Torah reading of a few weeks ago Rebekah told her son Jacob to flee and run away because she is worried that Esau will kill him. She tells him, “Go to my brother in Haran where you will stay a few days.” Jacob stays considerably more than a few days. A few days have quickly turned into a few years, as he winds up staying for 20 years. After 20 long years, years of despair, of being deceived by his father in law Laban, Jacob realizes it is time for him to finally end his sojourn abroad and return to his homeland. He sets out on his return with his family, which is a full entourage, and prepares for the dreaded moment when he will see his brother Esau again, the brother whose birthright and blessing he has taken.

Why did Jacob stay away from home for so long, and why it is that he ultimately feels the pull to come back to the land of Israel when he does?

One commentator suggests it is because he has lost the sense of who he is. Whereas he started last week’s parasha dreaming of angels and of ladders aspiring to heaven, by the time he has been in Haran for such a long stretch of time he now dreams of sheep – and so that is why it is time to return to the land of Israel. He needs to get back his “mojo”, his inspiration so he will once again dream big dreams instead of about material matters. During the time he stayed with Lavan he was busy building a family and accumulating wealth. Having neglected his ties to his homeland and parents it was time to come home, before the detachment became permanent and irreversible.

And perhaps, maybe, just maybe he saw one of the billboards or the youtube ads produced by the Israeli Ministry of Immigration and Absorption encouraging Israelis who have left Israel to come back home to Israel. Maybe he was worried as presented in one of the ads that his children were starting to call him “Daddy” instead of “Abba.”

I am referring of course to the most recent controversy between Israel and the American Jewish community. A few months ago Israel’s Ministry of Immigration and Absorption launched a video and billboard campaign encouraging Israeli expatriates to return to Israel. The ads were in Hebrew, not English and were directed specifically to people known as yordim, those who go down, who have left the land of Israel. They were slickly produced, replete with music, and violins in the background, meant to pull at the emotions and heartstrings of Israelis living abroad.

One of them is of a young girl who returns to her apartment and whose boyfriend does not understand that she has lit a candle and turns on the computer because it is Yom HaZikaron, Israel’s Memorial Day, the day when all of Israel remembers and mourns the loss of those who died in defense of the State of Israel. The boyfriend is clueless and oblivious to why she should be so sad on this day. Another shows grandparents speaking by skype to their granddaughter. The menorah is clearly visible in the background in the apartment of the Israeli grandparents. Speaking in Hebrew, they ask if the little girl knows what holiday it is. The grandchild instinctively and proudly answers without a moment’s hesitation, to the consternation of the grandparents, “Christmas.”

Once word got around about the ads, the reaction of the American Jewish community was strong and swift. Jeffrey Goldberg wrote in the Atlantic, "These government-sponsored ads suggest that it is impossible for Jews to remain Jewish in America." He asserted that the purpose of the ads is to communicate the idea "that America is no place for a proper Jew, and that a Jew who is concerned about the Jewish future should live in Israel,.." It managed to upset some of Israel's strongest supporters and allies here. The Jewish Federations of North America took umbrage and expressed their objections to the insinuations. The ADL said the ads were demeaning. And so the campaign came to an abrupt end and the ads were stopped.

But the discussion is not over, as it has engendered an exploration of important issues that affect our community and people, on both sides of the Atlantic.

My perspective may be unique, for being married to a woman from Israel I am sensitive to the emotional issues raised by the ads.

My wife's first Tu B'Shevat in America was traumatic. That's right, Tu B'Shevat. We were living in Cincinnati at the time, where I was studying in rabbinical school. Tu B'Shevat, the holiday of trees, is a minor holiday. It certainly does not rank up there or come close to the significance of the High Holidays, or of any of our holidays for that matter, and that was the whole point. In Israel there are programs in schools, on the television, and the entire country knows it is Tu B'Shevat. Schoolchildren, politicians and businesses plant trees, and all are caught up in the songs and spirit of the day. Needless to say, this is not the case in the Diaspora. Although in Israel it is impossible to miss, my wife was sad when she realized that the holiday had come and gone and that she had missed it.

As committed as we American Jews may be to Israel's survival and safe-being, as passionate as we may be in our defense of the Jewish state, the simple truth is that it is difficult for us American Jews to truly understand what Yom HaZikaron means for Israeli Jews. The national day of remembrance, when a two minute siren is sounded and the entire country comes to a stand-still, when all bars, movie theaters, discotheques, and places of entertainment are closed, when the only programs on radio or television are somber ones dedicated to remembering the fallen is an emotional day that consumes the entire country. Every Israeli, regardless of their political or religious affiliation feels the loss in a personal way. There is no way the intensity and emotions that are felt on a national scale can be replicated in America. It stands in stark contrast to our Memorial Day, which is marked by sales, barbecues, and other frivolous activities.

So while I may be a lonely voice on this in the American Jewish community, I was not offended by the ads. I am secure enough in my Jewishness and in my identity as a Jew not to feel that it was an attack on me or on my way of life, as so many American Jews felt. In many respects, it did not say anything or raise any concerns that we do not already worry about. Combatting assimilation and preserving our identity are concerns of the American Jewish community and the focus of much of our work and programs. It is somewhat ironic that so many American Jews who are quick to critique and criticize Israel are so sensitive when they feel American Jewish life is being criticized.

Granted, the ads could have been framed in a positive rather than a negative way, but the ad campaign was not inconsistent with previous utterances by David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, or of Yitzhak Rabin who in the 1970's referred to the expats as "cowards." The liberal writer and thinker A.B. Yehoshua stirred up a hornet's nest a few years ago in a speech at a convention of the American Jewish

Committee when he asserted that his identity as a Jew, even a non-practicing one is on firmer ground than of Jews who do not live in Israel.

The unfortunate truth is that when they first encounter the vibrant American Jewish community is when many Israelis discover their Judaism for the first time. The monopoly of the ultra-Orthodox on the religious institutions and the stranglehold they exert is unfortunate and tragic for the lack of options and the absence of pluralism in Israel leads to alienation from Judaism for too many Israelis. Just as we are enriched by all that Israel offers Jewish life today, so too, can Israel learn and benefit from the experience and vitality of Jewish life in America.

I think the ads touched a raw nerve because they were pointing out harsh truth and uncomfortable realities for us. The Christmas ad, for example does not imply that the family will now begin to celebrate Christmas. Rather it is merely reflecting the reality that if you live in a society which is predominantly Christian, the point of reference is different. In Israel at this time of year, menorahs adorn the rooftops of almost every building, while a Christmas tree, wreath or decoration will be hard to find. At this time of year, many of us will be attending office holiday parties here in America -- not so in Israel. This particular ad was reminding Israelis who live here of this fact of life.

In regard to the ad about the child calling the father "Daddy" rather than "Abba" I think the point was another obvious one. Immigrant children begin to speak the language of the country and not of the parents. How many of our grandparents or great grandparents spoke Yiddish, and how many of us do today? I remember after a few years of living in Cincinnati a time when I came home from class and my wife was sitting with a bunch of songbooks singing Hebrew, Israeli songs out loud to herself. This concern about preserving language and identity should not offend us. When I was studying last week at the Kellogg Business School a Sikh teacher originally from India, speaking to a group of rabbis and synagogue executive directors lamented that his child did not like coming to Temple, and did not understand the language of the prayers and that he spoke.

There are challenges facing the American Jewish community. There are challenges facing Israel, and there are challenges facing Israelis who live in the United States. Some of these challenges are shared and confront all of us, and some are unique to the specific segment of the Jewish population affected. I find it interesting that when I googled "Ministry of Immigration," several countries came up. But when I googled "immigration and absorption", the only country that appears to have such a government office dedicated to integrating and absorbing immigrants, to welcoming them and whose purpose is to facilitate their integration into society. Israel remains a country that aspires to fulfill its mission of "ingathering the exiles." By now we should be used to Israelis calling upon us to make aliyah. When they stop asking us to come to live in Israel is when we should start to worry.

As our Torah portion this week reminds us, "God said to Jacob, the land that I gave to Abraham and to Isaac, I give to you and to your offspring after you..." Then, as now, the invitation to come was extended to Jews to come home-- only God seems to have had a better copy editor.

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