

Keep Dreaming: Googling for Jewish unity

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How the social network and a global consciousness have kept the Jews alive since the Exile threatened their demise.

Maybe the Jews do run the world. Go ahead, Google “GA” and see what you come up with. No. 1 is not going to be “Georgia” as I’d have expected, but “General Assembly.”

No, not the General Assembly of the United Nations or any other similarly dinky operation, but of something really big: the Jewish Federations of North America.

It’s that time of year again, and the more than 550 Jewish communities associated with JFNA are throwing their traditional pre-Thanksgiving bash, “the premier annual North American Jewish conference.”

More than 3,000 lay leaders, donors and professionals will be there, along with dozens of prominent presenters from the political, communal service, business and educational spheres. As per the invitation on the conference website, they are coming together where Hurricane Katrina blew things apart to engage in “conversations that address current and emerging Jewish issues.”

The expectation is that they will also be energized by the experience so that the federation movement will remain “among the top 10 charities on the continent” enabling it to proudly continue its work that “protects and enhances the well-being of Jews worldwide through the values of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), *tzedaka* (charity and social justice) and Torah (Jewish learning).”

ALL WELL and good, but what does this have to do with us Israelis? Not much, I assumed when I went online to register. The last time I showed up at a GA, Israel didn’t. It barely appeared in the schedule – other than in the context of “Do the Write Thing,” a special seminar for student journalists on combating anti-Israelism sponsored by the World Zionist Organization. That was eight years ago, but I had no reason to expect that the Jewish state would figure any more prominently this time round. Firstly, this gathering is dedicated to exploring challenges confronting the participants.

Secondly, here, we are bombarded daily by discouraging reports of world Jewry – including the 75 percent of it that lives in North America – abandoning us in droves, embarrassed by the imperfections of the society we have created, alienated by our disdain for the brands of Judaism they hold dear and tired of the never-ending conflict with our neighbors, which by now many are convinced must be largely our own fault.

I was surprised, then, to discover that of the some 50 sessions running side by side throughout the convention, a full third have to do with Israel. But I don't know whether to wonder or worry. Don't the Jews of North America have enough of their own problems to solve? Or are theirs so bad they prefer to deal with ours? Why would they spend more time talking about how they talk about Israel (four sessions, including online advocacy and responding to delegitimizers) than talking about the opportunity to talk to their children by ensuring affordable day school education (no session).

Why is there a panel on “Why Israeli Arabs Are a Jewish Issue and What Federations Can Do to Ensure a Secure, Jewish and Democratic State of Israel” but none on Jewish-Muslim relations in America? Surely we're not the only ones to have heard about the plans to build a mosque adjacent to Ground Zero. And they've decided to give equal time to their own poor and ours – one dedicated session for each. Particularly in the current climate, I also find it strange that “Jewish Environmental Sustainability” is only getting one hour and 15 minutes of attention, and Israel somewhere in the vicinity of 24.

I'M MOST definitely not complaining about all this, only curious. Perhaps I shouldn't be. A brand new study examining the “Generation of Change” in American Jewish life authored by Jack Wertheimer and released last month by the Avi Chai Foundation, reveals that 56% of the community's young leadership spent at least four months studying or working here. This GA might either be a natural expression of their profound commitment to the Jewish state, or a reflection of the organizers' understanding that Israel continues to be perhaps the most vital and essential component of Jewish self-identity. Whether the chicken or the egg came first, the program seems to imply that it is impossible to talk about the needs and concerns of a Diaspora Jewish community divorced from the needs and concerns of Israel.

Of course, there is also the possibility that the program is what it is simply because the American Jewish establishment really, really cares about us and appreciates the difficult times we are going through. But there is also something in the formulation of the topics that suggests that in caring for us, there is also something in it for them. But that's fine. That's called a win-win situation, and I'm looking forward to participating in such sessions as “Partnership 2000 as an International Platform for Strengthening Jewish Identity and Peoplehood,” “Israel's Economic Gap: How Investing in Social Change in Israel Can Strengthen Your Community” and “Making Partnership Bloom: How the Negev Is Transforming Israel and Its Relationship with North American Jewish Communities.”

So, with all these intriguing encounters awaiting me, I eagerly sent in the registration form. Then, still curious as to what searching the initials of other states might reveal, I tried NY. Guess what? New York. CA? California. WY? Wyoming. Wow, it was beginning to appear that the only initials to trump the state they stand for belong to us. AR? Arkansas. VT? Vermont. Was I

really going to try this 50 times? Just once more: IL.

Whoops, there we were again. Don't ask me how, but Israel's popular Walla site snuck in at first place, followed by the Wikipedia entry on Illinois – but then, ranking a very visible No. 3, a reference to “the Internet country code top-level domain of Israel,” which managed to edge out even the official website of the state of Illinois. I'm convinced that **Sergey Brin** somehow manipulated his search engines to give preference to things Jewish. If you don't know who or what I'm talking about, go ask Mark Zuckerman. He's friends with everyone. And there should be no surprise with either of them.

Never mind the monotheism and Ten Commandments we gave the world; we've also got the patents on “global” and “social network.”

It may have taken two millennia for others to fathom what these things are all about but the inventions are ours, and have been the secret of our survival ever since the Exile threatened our demise. That, and knowing we can depend on each other. Kol Yisrael *areivim zeh b'zeh*. One generation has taught the next that as Jews, with whatever problems we might have of our own, the bottom line is that we are, according to the title of another GA workshop, “Responsible for One Another: Why Overseas Giving Matters Today.”

Whatever, it's nice to feel connected and I'm glad my work is giving me the opportunity to explore what that really means next week in New Orleans.

The writer's impressions from the GA will be appearing daily in The Jerusalem Post from November 8-10, and his reflections on the conference as a whole will appear in the installment of his column Keep Dreaming to be published in the Friday Magazine on November 12.

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