

## Dear Israelis, America is not Israel

Israeli Zionist identity is essentially no different from any other national identity, such as those of the Irish, Italian or German immigrants who assimilated into .the US melting pot

7/18/2018 ,ו' באב תשע"ח, Rabbi Menachem Levine



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I traveled to Israel earlier this year with American Jewish leaders as part of the Am Echad mission. We spoke with the Prime Minister, the President, Members of Knesset and Cabinet Members about the future of Judaism in America and in Israel. In one discussion, Cabinet Member Yariv Levine spoke to us candidly and stated his opinion that “in Chutz L’aretz only .religious Jews and Zionist Jews will not assimilate.” Zionist Jews include expatriate Israelis

.I wish he were correct

.Alas, the fact on the ground is that Israelis in America will and do assimilate

As a rabbi in Silicon Valley, I interact with a sizeable number of the tens of thousands of Israelis who live here. They are proud of their country and Zionistic in their beliefs, yet those .beliefs do not provide protection against the tide of assimilation that surrounds them

Professor Lilach Lev Ari and Professor Uzi Rebhun, describe in Israeli Americans: Migration, Transnationalism and Diasporic Identity (Mossad Bialik) that secular Israelis living abroad find it difficult to pass on their specifically Israeli identity to their children. They discover that their secular "Israeliness" is not resilient to the dangers of assimilation in the

## .Diaspora

I see this on a regular basis when I am approached by yet another Israeli who is married to or dating a non-Jew. Many of them are even traditional Jews who would never have dated a non-Jew when in Israel. Yet, in America, without the strong Jewish culture and environment to support them, this conviction dissipates, and they do intermarry



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An Israeli lawyer who is an acquaintance of mine expressed this when he told me that he recently attended the weddings of Israeli friends' children. All three were intermarriages: one to a Chinese individual, another to a Filipino individual and a third to a white Christian. Unfortunately, his experience is not exceptional. This is what is happening here

In light of this reality, and as this is a situation that I see tragically getting worse over the past decade, I'd like to take the liberty of openly sharing my thoughts with Israelis who live here or who are considering a move here to the USA

As Israelis, you are used to having many Jewish aspects of your identity taken care of by simply living in the State of Israel. The spoken language is Hebrew and Jewish holidays are national holidays, communally celebrated in schools and public places. Kosher food is readily available. Batei Knesset are in every neighborhood

America is not Israel. In America, support for a Jewish identity is hard to come by. The national holidays are not Jewish holidays. Public school education encourages integration and assimilation

Nevertheless, I see that when you relocate to America you remain largely passive. You think that if you speak Hebrew in the home you can instill in your children an Israeli identity. You hope that having Israeli friends will provide a support group

.Living here in the Bay Area, I can tell you from experience that it does not work

Unless speaking Hebrew and having Israeli friends are combined with more meaningful Jewish connection, as Israeli expatriates your children are unlikely to maintain their Jewish identity for even two generations. They will keep the traditions to make you happy, but if they do not understand why they are doing so, it will not be a compelling reason not to assimilate

The Israeli Zionist identity is essentially no different from any other national identity, such as the Irish, Italian or German. Within a generation or two, these nations assimilate into American society, keeping some aspects of their culture with them. That is what happened to liberal American Jews in America. And Israelis who come to America are now assimilating as well

The renowned Babylonian sage, Rav Saadia Gaon wrote in his "Emunoth ve-Deoth" almost eleven centuries ago regarding Jewish identity that "our nation is a nation only by virtue of the Torah." It is the Torah which enabled us to retain our peoplehood and identity since the time of the destruction of the Temple until today

If you find yourself needing to move to America and you want to have a Jewish identity that will withstand assimilation, it is imperative that you take action to connect to Torah - to

Judaism. Enroll your child in a school where he will receive a Jewish education. Join a .Torah class yourself. Attend a Beit Knesset where Torah is taught and lived

Make these decisions now while you have the opportunity. Just this week, a Jewish father spoke to me about his intermarried daughter. With a sigh he stated, "Looking back I ".probably should have done something differently, but it's too late now

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