

## World Jewish Digest

Issue Date: November 2005, Posted On: 11/1/2005

### The Greatest Threat to Jewish Survival

by George D. Hanus

Simon Wiesenthal, who died on September 20, once wrote: "Survival is a privilege which entails obligations."

Wiesenthal fulfilled those obligations, and more, for himself and the Jewish people. Not only did he never let the world forget about the Nazi murderers who attempted to extinguish an entire people, he relentlessly hunted them down and brought them to justice. His memory should be cherished.

Four millennia of history have produced many who wish the Jewish people harm. Every generation seems to produce new societal elements who preach the same rehashed antisemitic vitriol. However, the gravest threat we now face is not outside our community, but inside; our enemies are not external, but internal.

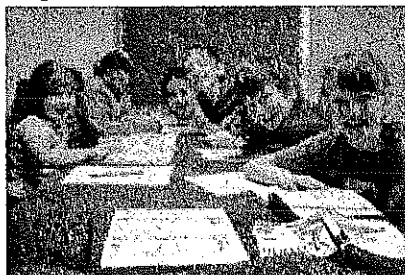
There is an apocryphal story about a conversation between the 19th-century Jewish-born British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli and the reigning monarch at the time, Queen Victoria. When Victoria asked Disraeli if there was a miracle that could prove God's existence, Disraeli is reported to have said, "The survival of the Jews."

With the exception of the ancient Judaic kingdoms, and since 1948, the Jewish people have had no state or standing armies. It is extraordinary that during these 4,000 years, empires have risen and fallen, armadas have sailed and conquered and yet the Jews, without swords, spears, cannons or armory have survived. Why?

Indeed, we Jews have survived against all odds. Not only have we survived, but we have flourished and contributed disproportionately to our adopted countries. It is no accident that prior to World War II, Europe led the world in the areas of culture, the arts, and science. This was in no small part due to Jewish contributions. After the Holocaust, once the continent was largely bereft of Jews, it was the United States that rose to world dominance. We can be proud that Jewish statesmen, scientists, artists and businessmen helped fuel that rise.

Throughout the millennia we Jews have maintained a sense of our distinctive peoplehood. But we 21st century Jews are now witnesses to the unraveling of this 4,000-year continuity. The prestigious Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (a think tank established by the Jewish Agency for Israel) has just revealed that 56 percent of those born Jewish in the United States are now intermarrying. If you live outside of New York, that figure rises to 70 percent. According to the JPPPI experts, "the trend of outmarriage is most erosive on long-term demographics, with only a minority of all the children of out-marriage identifying as Jewish."

It is so sad that it has come to this. Our children are voting with their feet. They are leaving en masse, becoming spiritual refugees. Our children are failing to find a sense of belonging in a tradition that sustained generations of our ancestors.



What study after study shows, however, is that an antidote exists. There is a clear and direct relationship between a Jewish day school education and the desire to maintain a Jewish life. According to the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey, 93 percent of Jews who obtained day school education married a Jewish spouse. In other words, assimilation seems to be a product of ignorance, rather than choice, for most young people.

Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School

So what is the organized Jewish community doing about this, the single greatest threat to Jewish survival? Notwithstanding clear statistical evidence that confirms each successive generation is affiliating less and less (and maintains weaker ties to the state of Israel), no national Jewish philanthropy has seriously reprioritized its mission, or dramatically shifted massive resources, to counter this trend. It is baffling that our national organizations don't realize that their constituent pool is shrinking. Each year, it's just getting worse.

No one disagrees: if universal, high quality, intensive and affordable Jewish education was available to all Jewish children, regardless of their religious affiliation or financial status, the challenges of assimilation, intermarriage and Jewish spirituality would largely be addressed.

Due to the high cost of tuition, currently only a minority of Jewish children can attend day schools. With tuitions ranging from \$10,000 to \$19,000 per student annually, the only families capable of giving their children an intensive Jewish education are either very wealthy or prepared to make extraordinary financial sacrifices.

It is absolutely clear that the only thing preventing affordable universal Jewish education from becoming a reality is the communal determination to pay for it. If we really cared about our children, we could mobilize the massive resources required to fund Jewish schooling for all our kids. Recognizing that the continuity of the American democratic enterprise requires an educated citizenry, each community funds all of its children's education whether the family has one or 10 kids. If we are to maintain Jewish continuity, it must be recognized that funding our schools is a community-wide responsibility of all Jews. While we live in the most prosperous Jewish community in the history of our people, we continue to do nothing and watch our children lose their Jewish futures because no one really cares about the other guy's kids.

Somehow, funding Jewish education has become the burden of individual parents, many of whom are clearly unable to pay. The existing Jewish philanthropic structure is either unable or unwilling to make Jewish education its number one priority. There have been countless blue-ribbon commissions formed to study the problem. But with the numbers of donors declining precipitously each year, no philanthropy will take away allocations from existing recipient beneficiaries.

The only way that this funding problem will be solved is by forming new local organizations dedicated solely to raising the enormous amounts of money needed for the funding of our children's education.

The Superfund for Jewish Education and Continuity is just getting started in Chicago. If this Herculean initiative is going to succeed, every concerned Jew must participate. Rich or poor, everyone should give something. This is every Jew's cause.

The operating principles of the Superfund are very simple. It is divided into two campaigns: the annual campaign and the planned giving campaign. The annual campaign will make quarterly scholarship distributions in one of two ways: either to all of the eligible day schools in the community, based on the pro-rata census of the schools' enrollment, or to a particular school or schools designated by a donor.

The planned giving initiative promotes an ongoing campaign called "Operation Jewish Education/the 5% Mandate." We ask that every Jew allocate 5 percent of his or her estate, either by will or lifetime gift, to the Jewish educational endowment fund of their choice. The principal donated should never be invaded and annual distributions will be made from interest earned in perpetuity.

The Superfund is seeking to hire personnel to recruit and energize local lay leadership to establish its own locally controlled scholarship fund throughout the Diaspora.

If every Jewish community in the Diaspora implemented its own model of the Superfund for Jewish Education, many of our communal problems could be solved.

We can no longer act like deer frozen in the headlights. There is no excuse for the wealthiest Jewish community in history to disregard the spiritual futures of our children. We are their guardians. Survival is a privilege which entails obligations. The only way to guarantee our communal future is to insure the teaching of our past and the relevance of spiritual fulfillment in the present.

*George Hanus is chairman of the Superfund for Jewish Education and Continuity and the World Jewish Digest.*