

# Jews Talk

We all know Jews love talking, and there's no better place to talk till you drop than a conference. Israel has been organizing conferences forever. It's not just for tourist bucks.

When I was a student, the Jewish Agency in Israel arranged conferences practically all year round. I'm not sure it actually did anything else. I used to go to the conferences, for several reasons. Firstly, it was subsidized. Almost every term break I could get an all-expense-paid trip to Jerusalem. What cash-strapped student wouldn't have wanted to? Secondly, I was a student activist and I did believe in trying to find out as much as I could about the Jewish world and its principal components and ingredients. Thirdly, it was a wonderful opportunity to meet other young Jews from all round the world.

But my experience was so frustrating and depressing that it almost obliterated the positive ancillary benefits. The price of our free trips was that we had to sit through boring hours of lectures by pompous pen pushers and political has-beens who had been kicked upstairs into meaningless bureaucratic posts that sounded important but were in reality totally empty. Each one held forth about his own experiences and opinions and tried to impress us youngsters with his wisdom and the correctness of his position, when in fact it was such manifest rubbish that one did not know whether to laugh or cry. Important politicians and public figures were rolled out to give us the benefit of their wisdom, which was usually banal self-justification. It reached the point where a group of us used to make clucking chicken noises while yet another worthy was telling us all what the answer to life was. I know, not very mature, but we were bored!

Each one had the solution to the future of the Jewish people. Left-wing secular Zionists said that they were the future. Right-wing secular Zionists said they were so did Religious Zionists. Americans said they were the future. Jewish philosophers, theologians, and rabbis of nearly all description and hue all said they were the future. Israelis said the Diaspora was doomed. There was no real discussion, just set positions haranguing each other. It was boring and meaningless it all was!

This was all why, long ago, I decided to give up going to conferences and indeed not to play the "communal masher" game of deluding myself that importance amounts to achievement, though I confess I have on one rare occasion indulged mainly to confirm my judgment.

Now, forty years on, it is clear that, for whatever other problems they may have, and believe me they have plenty, both social and ideological, the only group that is expanding numerically and is not beset by crises of confidence is the ultra-Orthodox. Yet they weren't invited then and they are still not invited today. The reason, of course, is that no one really wants to hear what one doesn't want to hear.

Nothing has changed over the years. Every now and again the great and the good of world Jewry are invited to yet another meaningful conference that will deal with and solve the future of the Jewish People. Some well meaning sucker is persuaded to cough up sums of money that could be better used elsewhere. Not to mention the money we give to supporting Israel that simply gets swallowed up by placemen and functionaries on all-expense-paid junkets. Yet more speeches are given and resolutions are made, and sometimes the speeches are even published. And then? Nada. It all disappears back into the hot air it came from. Meanwhile, we all get on with our lives and Judaism manages to survive; at least the religiously committed part does. The rest seem to find the future of Katmandu or LA more attractive.

So, wonder of wonders, there has just been another "very important, meaningful gathering" of the great and the good in Jerusalem. Guess who organized it? The Jewish Agency, of course, under its plaything the JPPPI, which stands, dear ones, for the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute. No seriously! It's not a laughing matter. The Chairman was Dennis Ross. Now, Dennis Ross may be a great negotiator and a nice guy and even, a Jew. But he is hardly an expert on Jewish survival. Surprised they didn't invite Bill Clinton.

According to the *The Jerusalem Post*, many attendees at this three day conference worried about what it would achieve. Mazal tov. Someone was quoted as saying the conference was nothing but hot air unless something was done as a result. Done? Like what? So the conference instructed the new President Shimon Peres (of all people, another expert on Judaism I suppose) to do something! What exactly do they have in mind? Another conference? I'll tell you one thing. We can all think of far, far better things the money could go to, to help the Jewish people, than another talking shop!

Typical of the great and the good who are invited to come and speak are magnates who give lots of money for what they see as their favorite great "fix" for the Jewish People, like giving them free holidays in Israel. That will make them Jews (even if it fails to do that for Israelis) I suppose. What exactly are the qualifications, the expertise or the experience of grown-up trust fund kids or successful traders? So to salve their consciences they throw money at the holy grail of Jewish Survival. All the Jewish "Knights Templar" are busy running around looking into graves and catacombs, when the answer is clear as daylight. If you lead and live a committed Jewish life, of any degree, in your home, you'll have something Jewish to hand on. And if you don't, you won't.

An Israeli American journalist, Jonathan Rosenblum, wrote a telling article in the Orthodox journal *Mishpacha* in which he pointed out how consistently the Charedi world gets ignored in these ventures. He asked why not one Charedi person was asked to speak. Not one. There were plenty of rabbis there, from all other denominations, but not one major Talmid Chacham of the old school. What a crushing indictment. It doesn't matter if one agrees with them or not. It doesn't matter if their world is intellectually limited. Just look at the facts, numbers on the ground; bottom line, guys. They must be doing something right! At least let their voice be heard. But no, a billionaire fund manager knows more about Judaism than a Talmid Chacham does.

Perhaps we should blame the Israeli organizers for being so anti religious they cannot see beyond their own antipathies. But then bless them Israelis are not very good when it comes to dealing with "others". Do you remember Silvan Shalom, the ex-Israeli foreign minister? He took his wife on an official visit to Egypt and she arrogantly chose to wear the most immodest clothes she could find this side of nudity offending everyone in sight.

Last week Israel was visited by two representatives of the Arab league for the first time. What a fantastic opportunity to reach out to an Arab audience. Al Jazeera gave the meeting lots of prominence. Do you think the Foreign Minister even thought to dress modestly for a Muslim audience (forget about Orthodox Jews)? There she was on Al Jazeera, smiling above her tight fitting trousers that showed more of her crotch than Her Majesty's Lord Chamberlain would have allowed on the English stage. That's how to win religious friends? Of course you won't want to hear what the Charedis have to say about continuity.

Talk by all means. But don't forget, it's action that counts and that's where the money should be going—to doing, not spouting.

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