

From Sesame Street to J Street – A Film Review of the “J Street Challenge”

Last night I went to a screening of the new documentary film, the J Street Challenge sponsored by the Speakers Action Group of Toronto and facilitated by a well-informed panel of Canadian experts (Dr. Judith Cohen, John Thompson and Irving Weisdorf) who answered questions from the audience. The film was produced by Charles Jacobs, an American from the Boston area who is well known in anti slavery activist circles in the North East and the United States. The film comprises generous clips of speeches by J Street director Jeremy Ben-Ami, his supporters and critics, most notably lawyer Alan Dershowitz and Harvard Professor Ruth Wisse, who eloquently and consistently point out what is wrong with the organization.

Like any good and engaging documentary, the film focuses on J Street and its message, and more importantly its “messaging,” a now well known public relations term that describes the manner and style in which a business or organization communicates with the outside world.

To its credit, the film shows that J Street has a growing minority of supporters from within the American Jewish community and more so from among American Jewish college youth, who are one of its chief recruiting “targets.” As the old adage goes, if you can convince ahistorical and impressionable young men and women that you are on the right side of history, they may follow you for the rest of their lives.

For those who are not familiar with the message of J Street, they say that they are a Pro Israel, Pro Peace non-profit organization. They argue that the present elected Israeli

government has the wrong foreign policy. They say that J Street will lobby the American Jewish community and especially the American Government, to force Israel to adopt J Street's foreign policy, regardless of the wishes of the Israeli electorate, who must live with it.

J Street's version of pro peace is its insistence on the immediate creation of a second Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, regardless of the behaviour of its inhabitants, the PA, Hamas and their many allies in the Arab and Islamic world, who regularly call for the destruction of the State of Israel. J Street's lack of historical and anthropological understanding is heightened by the fact that they consistently fail to mention that the state of Jordan was part of mandated Palestine and the majority of its inhabitants are Palestinians. Without its imported Bedouin "King" who the British imposed on it from Arabia in the 1920s, it has all the makings of a Palestinian State as it makes up a large part of the League of Nations Mandate of Palestine. (For those readers who find this puzzling I suggest you consult the writings of Jordanian/Palestinian politician, Mudar Zahran, who has convincingly made this point in many public forums, both in and outside of Israel.)

At the same time, J Street often cooperates with and does not publicly oppose many organizations, both Jewish and non Jewish, that call for a boycott of Israel, that is the BDS, Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement, which, despite the massive human rights violations of the PA and Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza, (let alone what is going on in Syria) singles out Israel for special, one sided, punitive isolation and treatment. Young ahistorical student members of J street are most likely unaware that the Nazis boycotted Jewish businesses in the 1930s.

At the end of the film the viewer has a clear idea that J Street's notion of pro Israel means that it will decide Israel's foreign policy, it will do so with the cooperation

and support of the present White House administration and, it will often associate itself with organizations that call for a boycott of or even the disappearance, of Israel as a Jewish State. So what is wrong with J Street?

The first thing is that they have lied about the source of their financing. Much of their core funding has come from anti-Israel activist George Soros, who has been quoted publicly as having no remorse for his collaboration with the Nazis during WWII, and which as a result, sent many Jews to the concentration camps. This is also a man who has declared that Jews cause anti-Semitism.

There are also mysterious foreign donors such as a woman with a Philipino sounding name who is resident in Hong Kong and donates hundreds of thousands to J Street. Finally, J Street's donors also include people in the West and the Muslim world who do not support the Jewish State of Israel's right to exist.

The second thing wrong with J Street is that they portray themselves as a growing vanguard of activists who want to "democratically" participate with other more mainstream Jewish organizations in the Diaspora. It is not widely understood that charities and NGOs are only able to function if they have core funding. This means that the 10-20% of J Street's funds, used to hire its key staff (such as Ben-Ami) and which provide them with their outreach and communications apparatus, is often given by one key donor, in this case George Soros and his like minded "fronts." Although J Street says that it is broad based and participatory, in truth, J Street is largely a function of the political worldview of its few key donors such as the infamous George Soros and others like him. It attempts to be grass roots, but its origins are clearly "top down."

The third thing wrong with the organization is that by focusing on American Jewish college students, J Street reinforces everything that these young impressionable students

are learning at today's American and Canadian institutions of higher learning. By joining J Street, Jewish students can, in good conscience, implement what their professors have been teaching them: that the Arab states are doing just fine and it is Israel that is an obstacle to peace. Professor Wisse has recently written about this phenomenon in the Wall Street Journal:

This antipathy to Israel grows from a campus culture that is selectively repressive. All the while that students, in the spirit of diversity, are actively discouraged from making pejorative comments about other vulnerable minorities, some Arab and Muslim students have been actively fomenting hatred of Israel as an expression of their "identity." On campuses with a large Arab presence, such as Wayne State in Detroit, this has resulted in a palpable threat to Jewish students, and outbreaks of physical violence have actually occurred at San Francisco State and Concordia University in Montreal. Since Arab and Muslim students are currently the only ones who exuberantly defame another group, and who blame that group rather than Arab and Muslim governments for the failings of their own anti-democratic societies, it is hardly surprising that they should be joined by others looking for a villain or scapegoat. Anti-Semitism thrives because slandering Israel is the only aggression against a minority that is encouraged by the rules of political correctness.

Sadly, the fourth thing wrong with J Street is that it is a symptom of a much deeper malaise. That is the malaise of the North American Jewish community and its intellectual inability to successfully promote the value of Jewish civilization to those over twenty.

Since 1945 the Jewish communities of Canada and the United States have had more freedom, opportunity and resources to pass on the richness of Jewish civilization to their children, than at any time in Jewish history. They have also been assisted by the presence and partnership of the dynamic

political and cultural home of the Jewish people in Israel.

Despite these resources and intentions, a majority of Americans born to Jewish parents, are intermarrying and raising their children in a variety of faiths (Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, New Age etc.) This is correlated with a disinterest in things Jewish and Israeli. Most American Jews have not read the Bible, they have not read Jewish history, they know little about Jewish religion, have not read Jewish novelists, do not listen to Jewish music and do not celebrate Jewish festivals.

Few American Jews have studied Hebrew and even fewer, can speak and understand it in all of its beauty and literary expressiveness, for a nation is so often embodied in its language, as is the case of Hebrew in the modern State of Israel.

At the same time, American and now Canadian Jewish baby boomers are extremely concerned about making sure that their children go to Ivy League colleges and universities, where anti Israel sentiment is now at fever pitch as Professor Wisse clearly points out. Less than twenty per cent of American Jews have ever visited Israel, and no doubt less will visit in the years to come.

Bearing this in mind it is worth noting that part of Jeremy Ben-Ami's problem with Israel is related to the fact that he never properly learned Hebrew and, he never made the effort to master Israeli culture. As anthropologists would put it, he is the classic cross-cultural failure. But in classic J Street style, he blames his own linguistic failure and cultural ineptitude, on Israel and Israelis.

Writer Mandy Katz of the Foundation for Middle East Peace has good insight into Ben Ami's cultural and social resentment of Israel and Israelis, which is partly a function of his failure to stay in Israel and master the language and culture there.

Katz has interviewed Ben Ami and writes:

Personally, though, Ben-Ami found Israeli society harder to penetrate. He pauses uncharacteristically to shape his phrasing before plunging into an explanation: "If you didn't grow up in Israel, and you're making aliyah, and you don't speak Hebrew fluently, and you didn't serve in the army, in terms of professional opportunities and full acceptance into the society, there were some barriers to coming in at 35." Despite his sabra ties and professional success, he concluded, "I didn't think I could ever be 100-percent fully accepted as an Israeli."

American Jews have raised their children in an amoral environment of cultural relativism, which is supported by the public school system, the mainstream media, pop music and Hollywood films. It is best exemplified in the children's TV show Sesame Street, where everyone and all cultures are equally good, and where there is never a choice between God and evil, right or wrong. In this coddled, spoiled and unreal environment, it is a natural step for young people to move from the culturally naïve world of Sesame Street, to the politically naïve world of J Street.

What I ask is, why is anyone surprised?

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