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EDUCATION

THE  
VIABILITY OF A  
STUDENT JEWISH  
ORGANISATION



SHLOMO PERLA

**THE VIABILITY OF a Jewish student movement in the Diaspora depends ultimately on the level of Jewish identity in the wider Jewish community. I will argue that this falls far short of what I, as a traditional Jew, would deem sufficient. Consequently, not only does the student movement lack vitality, but so do other Jewish organisations. Moreover, world Jewry is today fragmented into a multitude of organisations that compete with each other, rather than operate in concert.**

These competing movements are, however, virtually almost the only vehicles by which the majority of Diaspora Jewry expresses their Jewish identity. An authentic Jewish trait can hardly be traced in the private life of the individual Jew. A majority of our co-religionists don't stick to the Torah, neither do they observe its Mitzvot which are, in fact, the distinctive features of traditional Judaism. Consequently, in his private daily life, the Jew does not differ much, if at all, from his Gentile neighbour.

This situation which is a major factor in the background of the identity crisis of young Jews is consciously or subconsciously realized by the Jews who can't help seeing its problematic nature. It is clear that if traditional expressions of Jewishness which generally impose on the individual the burden of personal responsibility, have been neglected by a considerable majority of Jews, a substitute had to be created.

New expressions had to make their way to the stage of contemporary Jewish existence. The sense of responsibility moved from the individual domain to the public one. The former tendency of achieving eminence in the Jewish sphere has been replaced by a somewhat keener desire to establish powerful Jewish organisations with the aim to control and protect and fight for what is widely known to be as 'Jewish Interests' (a very vague term). There are no doubt other factors, both internal and external that have contributed towards the formation of this type of 'organisational Judaism' but they are beyond the preview of this paper. My aim is simply to point out the artificial and hence unhealthy and shaky foundation of this "organisational" system by referring particularly to Jewish students organisations.

Two conditions are essential for the formation and successful and sound maintenance of any (youth) movement or association. The one is that the body has clear objectives to fulfil and targets to meet, the other is that those objectives and targets are of a unique character as much as possible, namely that they be clearly distinguished from those underlying other existing bodies and organisations.

A natural formation and growth of any movement presupposes the existence of some common interests and ambitions amongst its members. When some people want to advance a

certain common purpose they form an association whose aim it is to facilitate this. The association as such is then only a tool. It has an instrumental value whose formation is a necessary expression of a common tendency of its members who, while trying to advance their social, spiritual or political desires, create a constructive atmosphere of a dynamism without which no viable movement can exist. The very wish of the members to create a new social, spiritual or political order is a precondition for interesting and attractive activities in the movement as no programme of activities would appeal to people if it does not possess such elements. They must also be directly associated with the members' spiritual and intellectual background.

An association of students or a youth movement that is not based on the common will of their members to actualize any of these moral desires, will inevitably have to institute artificial attracting factors merely to create some minimum conditions for keeping their members in a slight form of contact with one another on various occasions, which then become the only aim of these bodies. Hence, the organization does not have a merely instrumental function, but, rather becomes the end itself. Jews, therefore, become members of Jewish organisations not because they wish to advance any Jewish values, but merely because they feel that being together from time to time with their co-religionists is an adequate



with any great intensity, since its objectives are so superficial or transitory. Further, people in general, and youngsters in particular, hate routine and try to run away from the common routine of daily events. This is perhaps an expression of the power of creativity that youngsters possess and it is very prominent especially with intelligent students, as the drive for creativity is a direct function of one's intellectual endowments. The attempts to create and to set up new objectives for achievements reflect a dissatisfaction with the present order. Students in whom the state of dissatisfaction and the tendency to criticise are very high and whose potential of creativity is ripe, can never be satisfied with having to fulfil something that is not imbued with freshness and novelty. Only such challenges can serve to attract students' interest and dedication to their organisations.

Studying the history of the Jewish student association in Europe in the pre World War II period, we see that they were viable as they were on the basis of desires for self-realization as well as an awareness of the urgent necessity to bring about meaningful changes in the political, social and spiritual future of the Jewish people.

In short, only those student organisations that create fields of serious activities of an unparalleled nature for their members can be attractive and then viable.

The present situation of the Jewish people raises issues that may provide for meaningful discussions and

them nowhere. These may be a solution to their recreational needs but they do not provide them with any challenges to meet.

They have no opportunities to contribute, nothing to sacrifice, and nothing to work for, with the result that they themselves don't hold their organization in high esteem. They cannot devote themselves to a body that does not demand anything of them, either spiritually or ideologically. They may use it, at best for entertainment and relate to it accordingly, but they cannot cling to it

As such, this situation makes the Jewish student association excessively fragile.

Youngsters are energetic and dynamic, they want to create and to meet challenges; they wish to attain ideals and to bring about new social orders. They feel that programmes and activities should be meaningful and should lead to the fulfilment of clearly stated objectives, they realize, at least subconsciously, that brains and movies, and balls lead

Expression of their Jewishness. They want to remind Jews, for some reason or other, yet the meaning of Judaism is very obscure to them in the present day, and since Judaism is inherently communal, their only way to express their Judaism is through forming various organisations whose members are only Jews.

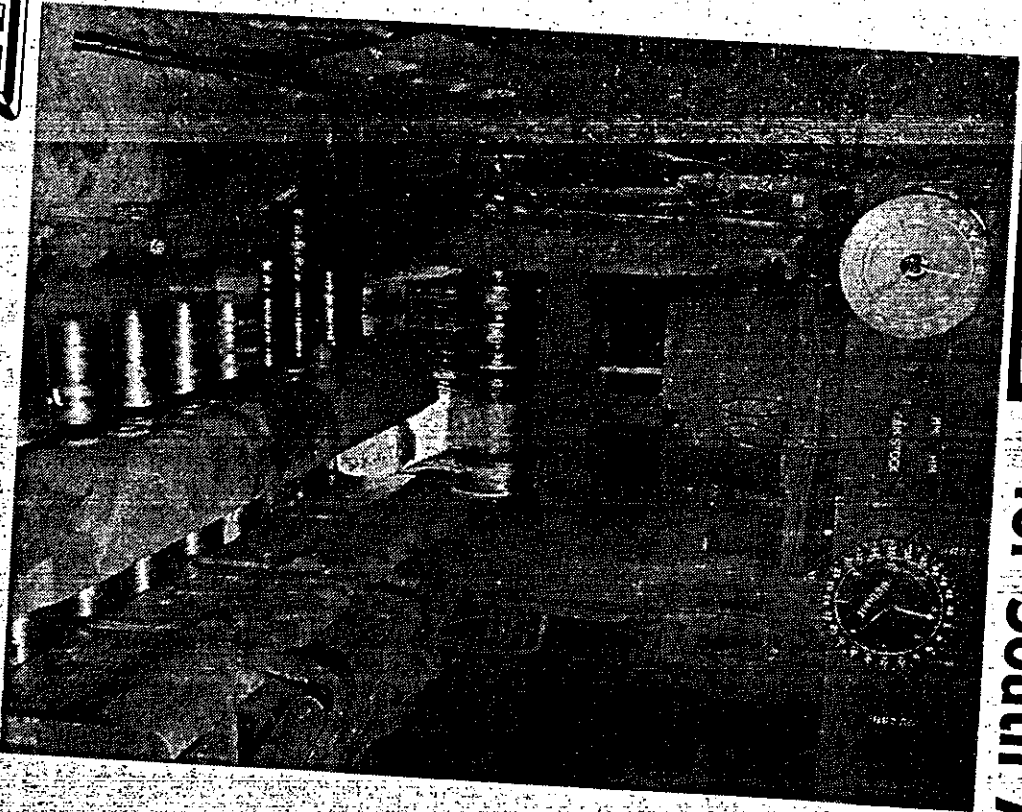
It is surely obvious that organisations formed on such a low common denominator, cannot provide very stimulating activities.

They exist merely as meeting places and so the activities which they offer may be of any kind, even of such that is to be found in non-Jewish organisations. Jewish students might then attend 'Hillel House functions not because these certain conscious desired spiritual, ideological or political order, but simply because they provide an opportunity to be together. (Which in itself is not negative yet also not enough).

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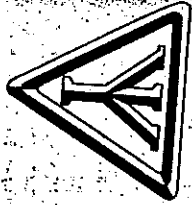
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