Reflections on the 2024 Global Education Convening, January 2024

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The Global Jewish Education Leadership Solidarity Mission of 29 January to 1 February 2024 left me reflecting on the still unresolved challenge articulated more than 125 years ago by Ahad Ha’Am.  Writing soon after the First Zionist Congress (1897), Ahad Ha’Am observed that Herzl’s Zionism—born of anti-Semitism—looked to remedy the situation of individual Jews.  More organic, and more compelling, in Ahad Ha’Am’s view, was the spiritual crisis of Judaism at the close of the nineteenth century.

Living at a tipping point in the erosion of traditional Jewish norms among Eastern European Jews (including those migrating to Western countries), Ahad Ha’Am imagined that, even without a state, a “good sized settlement of Jews working without hindrance in every branch of civilization” in the land of Israel would (somehow) give expression to the “spirit of Judaism.”  That spirit would radiate from the center to the communities of the Diaspora, “to inspire them with new life and to preserve the over-all unity of our people.”[[1]](#footnote-0)  Herzl’s dream of world powers recognizing Jewish national aspirations was realized in remarkable fashion (albeit anti-Semitism has not disappeared with the establishment of a Jewish state, and October 7 and its aftermath underscore that Israel is, after seventy-five years, neither self-reliant nor entirely successful in ensuring the security of its citizens).  What, however, of Ahad Ha’Am’s vision of resolving what he saw as the spiritual crisis of Judaism?

Interestingly, one of the challenges I have regularly encountered in my education-focused visits to Israel is the quest (under one name or another), in Israel, to identify and nurture *toda’ah yehudit*.  What does “Jewish consciousness” mean, and how does one educate toward it?  What, for example, is the Jewish ethos toward which *mamlachti* schools might (could or should) educate?  Notwithstanding the revival of Hebrew and a flowering of Hebrew literature, magnificent music, and artistic creativity, the spiritual malaise to which Ahad Ha’Am pointed presents a continuing challenge.

In a variety of ways, the issue of Jewish identity and meaning for contemporary Jewry emerged in the context of the Global Education mission.  Apart from initiatives “on the ground” in Israel (from the Hebrew State Education Council, Manor Centre/The One Hundred Initiative, to Mabua and Keren Appelbaum’s “pop up” school, to the Koret Center for Jewish Civilization), reference was made to the impact on the Jewish consciousness of shlichim as they encounter other Jewish communities.  Those shlichim, in turn, provide or enrich a dimension of the Jewish consciousness of those abroad with whom they interact.  The problem to which Ahad Ha’Am pointed will not be solved in isolation, and the cure will not flow in one direction from a central address: it is a global Jewish challenge.

Micah Goodman comments that “Judaism is the Jews’ ongoing conversation.”  He observes that “one precondition for joining any conversation is a basic familiarity with its context.  If we want to engage in a political debate, we must be familiar with the political context; and if we want to engage in scientific debate, we must understand something about the science.  And in order to join the intergenerational conversation about Judaism, Jews need to be familiar with its contents.”[[2]](#footnote-1)  The starting point of Jewish cultural vitality is Jewish education (which is, itself, multi-dimensional).  Absent Jewish education, one wonders how long the sense of *areivut*, mutual responsibility – so palpable in the aftermath of October 7 – will persist.

The Global Education Convening was a reminder of the value of interaction among and between Jews living in diverse communities, in furthering the conversation to which Goodman refers.  That a gathering of Jewish educators from eleven countries outside Israel, joined by Israeli educators, was convened in Jerusalem by Israel-based educational entities to relate to contemporary questions of Jewish education and identity would surely elicit the approbation of Ahad Ha’Am.  His contribution to the conversation continues to challenge us, as we near the second quarter of the twenty-first century.

1. 1 Ahad Ha’Am: “The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem” (1897), in Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 267.  [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. 2 Micah Goodman, trans. Eylon Levy, *The Wondering Jew* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 90-91.

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