How do you teach the story of Hanukkah to the children of the Jewish Community of Greece? Smadar Bar-Akiva

Before scrolling down to the bottom of this article to find the answer, I want to share with you what we learned on a recent World Confederation of JCCs Study Seminar to the Jewish Community of Greece.

While focusing our visit on what it means to be a young Jew in Greece today, one cannot ignore the exchange of philosophical, theological, social, cultural and economic ties between Jews and Greeks, dating back some 2500 years.

True, the interaction between the cultures was not always fortunate. While the Maccabees revolt followed the occupation of the land of Israel, the elite of the Jewish population had become Hellenized. Greek philosophy, aesthetics and language permeated the intricate web of Jewish life, causing part of the population to accuse the other part of abandoning their faith. This conflict, sometimes armed, other times verbal, continued well into the Middle Ages, when Christianity, the successor to Hellenism, took over.

The golden age of Greek Jews began at the end of the 15th century, when a great influx of Jewish Sephardic refugees from the expulsion of the Spanish Inquisition of 1492 started settling in the same towns where Jewish congregations existed. They concentrated in Salonika and its surroundings. Salonika was coined “Jerusalem of the Balkans” where the city port was closed on Shabbat due to the large number of Jewish fishermen. It also became an international center of Jewish printing where the famous Soncino Talmud was printed.
In the following years there was an ebb and flow of Jewish life depending on current events.

But the biggest disaster was Nazi occupation during World War II. A vibrant community almost vanished when some 70,000 Greek Jews perished in the Holocaust- 80% of the total Jewish population and 97% of the Jews of Salonika alone. Only very few managed to survive by hiding in the mountains with the Greek resistance, or in houses in the islands and faraway places that Christian friends provided. When the war ended, coming out of the ashes, survivors built their life afresh. Today they number in total some 5000.

We were therefore so moved when Julia Sasson, a young adult from Salonika, told us that she feels lucky and proud. “Proud of a glorious Jewish past, while also remembering its tragic times. My friends tease me when I get so passionate about Salonika and they don’t understand why. But when you are a Jew and you have grown up in Salonika you can only be proud and happy about that.” These sentiments drive her to build a bright future. Julia was honest about describing the present economic situation and the unemployment problems that force many to leave and look for job opportunities elsewhere- to Israel and other countries. But she strongly feels that those who do stay try to do their best in order to maintain-and even improve- the Jewish community that they know and love. Julia believes that this can be achieved only if they will be open-minded and sensible to the new reality and adapt themselves and the community.

So what does adaptation entail?

Minos Moissis, the recently elected President of the Jewish Community of Athens, tells us that it means first and foremost dealing with diminishing resources. As Greece is undergoing the most severe recession in Europe in times of peace, the community is suffering from a 40% decline in income from real estate (the main source of the communities’ income.) Unemployment reaches sky rocket rates and on top of it, there is a resurgence of anti-Semitism and political tensions due to the rise of the Golden Dawn extremist party.

For the Athens Jewish Community this means first and foremost continuing to invest in Jewish education- formal and informal. A state of the art Jewish school continues to provide Jewish education to elementary school children, the Jewish camp organized by the
The Jewish Community of Saloniki is thriving and the JCC is preparing for a whole set of new programs and activates for the coming year.

Perhaps Minos is inspired by his own personal story. Born in Larissa, Greece, his house was demolished in the severe earthquake in the 50’s. At that time, JDC helped rebuild his family house where they still live today. Fast forward to recent times, JDC, once again, helped the Jewish community by providing loans that enable the doors of the Jewish institutions to remain open.

Visiting Jewish institutions in both Salonika and Athens, we met dedicated leaders - most of them volunteers - who are channeling their efforts to ensure not only the mere survival of the community but also its growth.

We were deeply moved when we found out that not only did we learn a lot during our seminar but we also made a difference. Monis Halegua, the President of the JCC of Athens, writes to us upon our return:

“Thank you so much for your visit. It really touched our hearts. Your warm feelings made us understand that we are not alone in this world. Let’s promise, that this was your first visit to Greece of many others to come. Let’s promise that we will be in touch and get inspired from each other. Let’s promise that we will go on against all odds. You must know, we feel much stronger after your visit to our small community.”

I would therefore like to claim that continuing the flame of Jewish life in Greece, is a modern day miracle of Hanukkah.

And as for the answer to the question. Sensitive to the general community they live in; the Jews in Greece prefer to speak about enemies- in general- when they teach their children the story of Hanukkah and make a clear distinction between ancient Greeks to those of today.

Smadar Bar-Akiva, Executive Director, JCC Global.

[Historical background based, in part, on an article written by Yaacov Ben Mayor.]
The Ties That Bind / Taly Mair

In late 2012 I participated with 3 other lay leaders of my community at the EAJCC (European Association of Jewish Community Centers) Conference in Marseille. By chance, I was walking next to Ishie Gitlin, from Mexico City, chair of JCC global (formerly World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers.) I had no idea who he was but he asked me how are things in Athens, Greece, and I told him. I told him that we have a very warm and cozy community of 3000 members but with many problems due to the big financial crisis that Greece is facing. I told him that unemployment in Greece is 28% and in the young adult population (18-30) 68%. I told him that the community’s income has dropped by more than 50% since the main income from donations of our members and real estate rentals dropped dramatically. Many donors have gone bankrupt or are in very difficult financial situation. Rentals, a main source of income for the Jewish community, are not paid for over a year or are evacuated. Taxes rise all the time. Parents cannot pay tuitions at our small but successful Jewish kindergarten and primary school of 140 kids; resulting in growing requests, amounting to 45% of the parents, for partial or total subsidy from the community. Welfare requests rose from 120 in 2011 to 212 in 2012 and 413 in 2013. These are parents who are engineers, architects, shop owners and once were prominent members of our community. On top of that, the extreme right wing party, Golden Dawn, for the first time in Greek history, received 7% of the peoples’ vote in the recent elections holding 18 seats in the parliament. In recent poles their popularity has reached 11%.

The Jewish Community Board of Directors had to face very difficult decisions. How to sustain the one and only Jewish day school? How to solicit more funds for growing social welfare needs? At some point, closing the one and only JCC was also under consideration. Luckily JDC, along with an anonymous donor, came forth with providing economic assistance for 2012 and 2013 and literally saved our Community.

After listening to me, Ishie said “We, at JCC Global, need to come to Athens to understand what is happening, get to know your community, visit the JCC and see the situation with our own eyes”. I was sure he is one of many who have shown sympathy to our situation, after all, Mexico is so far. Lo and behold, after a few short weeks I received word that a JCC Global delegation will visit us in November 2013. Coming from Mexico, Israel, USA and France, the
20 delegates indeed arrived with a great eagerness to learn and to connect with us. It was an amazing experience of exchanging knowledge, opening hearts, meeting great friends for life and more importantly making us, in the Athens Jewish Community, feel part of a much bigger world. We felt that although these are difficult times, we are not alone. But this was not the end of the story. The leaders of JCC Global then asked me to come to Mexico and get to know the Jewish community and more specifically the Sephardi Jewish Community that has many roots in the Balkan countries and in Greece. They wanted me to tell the story of our community to the Jews in Mexico and this is what I did. A few weeks ago, I travelled to Mexico City meeting brothers and sisters who received me with open arms. I had the privilege of staying at the home of Bahie and Carlos Sandoval, esteemed leaders of the Sephardi Community in Mexico, who made me feel at home. I visited schools, synagogues and CDI- one of the largest JCCs in the world with some 20,000 members operating in an 80,000 square meter campus. Every day 3000 children attend their facility- the number of our total Jewish community. While there was no way to compare the resources and strengths of the two communities, we found common ground. We found that we were all working for the same goal- strengthening and sustaining the Jewish People.

A story that I heard in Mexico gave me a lot of hope. Marcos Metta, one of the prominent leaders in the community, told us that in searching the archives of Monte Sinai Congregation, he stumbled across a letter almost a 100 years old, where the amount of 50 pesos is granted to a poor person in the community. That person was named Marcos Metta and was the grandfather of Marcos. That 50 pesos, a small amount for the community, made a big difference to the grandfather. Years later, the grandson, became successful and is now able to give back to the community.

I believe that the Athens Jewish Community, my community, is now at the grandfather’s position. We need the help of others to survive and make it through the crisis. Someday, hopefully, we will give back the help that is now given to us as the known saying: “All Israel are responsible for each other- Kol Israel Arevim Ze Laze”.

Taly Mair

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