



## Truth or Consequences

**Sid Schwarz**

Truth or Consequences was the first game show ever aired on commercial TV in the United States, appearing first as a pilot in 1941. It seems an apt phrase to describe the dilemma facing us today as we try to get a younger generation of Jews to have an affinity with Israel and the Jewish people. Starkly put, many Jewish-sponsored programs believe that we need to protect Jews from encountering any information that might put Israel in a less than morally righteous light. There seems to be no limit to the amount of money that can be raised for pro-Israel/hasbara organizations. While I am sympathetic to the motivations behind those organizations—creating a generation of Jews who appreciate the miracle of the state of Israel and its centrality to the Jewish people—I find the methodology to be problematic both ethically and pedagogically.

I have spent much of my career as a rabbi and educator with young people. In short, we are losing the battle for their hearts and minds because they don't believe that we—the Jewish community—is telling them the truth. The consequences for both Jewish identity in the diaspora and for support for and affinity with the state of Israel, is disastrous.

It need not be this way. For several decades I have created and run educational programs for young Jews designed to increase their social and political activism on a range of issues, including Israel and the Middle East. I have also run numerous trips to Israel to explore, not only the geo-politics of the region, but the Jewish and democratic nature of the state as well. In these efforts, I have consistently looked for people and organizations that can speak to the challenges that Israel faces on a range of issues—the peace process, relationship with the Diaspora, treatment of Palestinians in the territories, Jewish pluralism in Israel, attitudes towards and policies affecting Israeli Arabs, the income gap between various ethnic groups, etc.

With few exceptions the reactions are consistent. There is some initial shock at the extent of Israel's social and political challenges but then people realize that we are talking about a relative young country, existing in the midst of an undemocratic region of the world facing ongoing security challenges. They are impressed at the robust nature of Israeli civil society, a feature unique to democracies. They realize that Israel is not a Jewish Disneyland where everything is perfect. Most importantly, they appreciate that

they have been treated like adults, exposed to hard and often competing truths out of which they need to re-weave a narrative that makes sense to them.

Along these lines, this past year I helped to launch the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program (RCFP), a year long program on Judaism and human rights for young adults, ages 25-35, with hubs in New York, London and Jerusalem. With lead funding from the New York UJA/Federation's Commission on the Jewish People, the program includes monthly study sessions from a common syllabus, monthly chevruta discussions between and American, European and Israeli Fellows on the monthly sessions, impact projects to be implemented with specific NGO's and an Israel study tour.

Our study tour in Israel looked at some very challenging issues: the Arab minority; Bedouins; religious pluralism; security; settlements; African refugees; the nature of Zionism. Our presenters included government spokespeople, representatives from a wide array of NGOs and both Jews and Arabs. The interchange between Fellows from the three different regions was fascinating. A very politically progressive Israel found herself becoming an eloquent spokesperson for the merits of Zionism and the state of Israel despite its challenges. In turn, a very politically hawkish American Jew found herself so upset by our visit to Hebron and the treatment of Arabs there by the IDF and by Jewish settlers that politically left Israelis had to help her recover her Zionist balance.

To the extent that one of the goals of the RCFP is to strengthen the ties between young adult Jews in three centers of Jewish life (North America, Europe and Israel), it is clear that our theme of human rights created a common universe of discourse. In fact, many of the Fellows made clear that they would not have chosen to sign up for a more conventional program dealing with Israel sponsored by the Jewish community. They were drawn to the RCFP because they were convinced that the program was committed to a rigorous and critical look at international human rights, including Israel. The Fellows are among our best and brightest but many represent a constituency that most Jewish communities cannot access. The fact that the RCFP program spends considerable time helping Fellows appreciate the alignment between Jewish values and human rights values is one of many ways that gives participants a renewed sense of pride in their Jewish identities.

The responses to a variety of attitudinal questions on a questionnaire we administered on the last day of the program offers some insights into what participants took away from the program. The responses that were statistically significant included the following:



I have a better appreciation of the challenges that Israel faces in its attempt to balance its commitment to human rights with its commitment to security and the safety of its citizens.

- I feel connected to my Jewish identity as a result of this trip.
- I have a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of the term “Zionism”
- Israel is now more central to my identity as a Jew.
- I believe that Israel’s democracy is seriously at risk.

One of our European participants, who has participated in more Jewish community sponsored programs than any of the other 29 Fellows, wrote the following in his evaluation:

“This seminar reminded me what peoplehood is, or at least should be about. ...The program took ‘Israel engagement’ to a whole new level. Just as in relationships we can tell the difference between a flirt and real love – when we fall in love, it happens despite the other person’s problems, mistakes and issues. It’s the same with Israel: If we want young adults to have a strong bond and a real connection with Israel, we have to see the country without any make-up, as it is, with all its difficulties and challenges. That was the main gift given to those of us who were privileged to participate in the RCFP Israel study tour.”

The message that we were able to convey is that Israel is both a sovereign nation but that, on a larger level, it is a joint venture of the Jewish people. That sends an empowering message to young Jews that their engagement can make a difference in Israel. The lesson for those who care about strengthening the Jewish people is that we need to meet today’s young adults where they are at and help them articulate what is at the root of our collective Jewish enterprise. This is the only way to engage Next Gen Jews.

The RCFP program is charting an educational methodology that is desperately needed in the Jewish world because there are thousands of young Jewish adults who can be more deeply engaged in the Jewish peoplehood conversation with a program that resonates with their values about creating a more just and peaceful world. Unless we are prepared to engage in this conversation in a critical and truthful way, the consequences will not be pretty.

**Rabbi Sid Schwarz is the director of the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program. He founded and led PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values for 21 years. He is also the author of the recently published Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Community (Jewish Lights).**