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## The Collective Jewish Conversation: Its Role, Purpose and Place in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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# **The Collective Jewish Conversation: Its Role, Purpose and Place in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**



## The Purpose and Framework of the Jewish Collective Conversation

**Yossi Beilin**

The global Jewish conversation factually exists. What does not exist is any connection between that eclectic exchange and the frameworks where decisions are being made. In Israel, secular Batei Midrash are flourishing and there is an intense, practically never ending, dwelling on questions of Jewish identity. In the United States many books appear each year reflecting the Jewish intellectual debate while in other places, Europe in particular, this conversation takes place at a lower level of intensity. When I initiated Birthright-Taglit in the 90's the following was one of my goals and it was achieved: during the visit to Israel participants engage in long conversations about their Jewish identity. For them this provides a unique opportunity to address the issue between themselves and other participants, but also through their own introspection. Most Jewish organizations, in Israel and throughout the world, have lost the justification for their existence and exist by virtue of inertia, as they do not provide a framework for substantial Jewish conversation. If it exists it is despite them and not because of them.

The collective conversation should address issues which require decisions such as the recognition of Jewish religious streams, the recognition of partners who are not from Jewish origins and children who are not recognized by the Halacha. What is their status as members of the Jewish community in Israel and the world, if inclusion is their desire? The conversation needs to address the allocation of resources to Jewish education in a world where this is a very expensive commodity, or sometimes a non-existing one. It also needs to address the question of anti-semitism from various dimensions and explore new ways of treating it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The main purpose, and the framework under which the collective conversation is to take place, is ensuring Jewish continuity. It is a dialogue among those seeking Judaism and its continuity. Jews who are not interested in others defining their Judaism for them and deciding who is a Jew within their own households. Everything beyond that: Jewish contribution to Tikun Olam, taking part in the struggles for human rights or the environment - can be outcomes of that conversation and contribute to Jewish continuity. But to me, they are not the main purpose of this conversation.

In Peter Beinart's *The Crisis of Zionism* he refers to the debate taking place in the Jewish community over the educational vouchers. Those vouchers are seen by many as the end of separation of State and Church in America, a principle of the utmost importance to American Jews. Their implementation could however – according to Beinart – sustain Jewish Schools and end the situation where day school education is a luxury only rich Jews can afford.

I ask myself: Where does this debate take place today? What influential Jewish institution grapples with this highly important issue, and makes decisions? Is this an internal Jewish American issue or do Israeli Jews and I have a say in it? It seems to me that we may have something to say about such issues, but have no way of expressing our opinions, learning about the different views and taking part in the decision making process. I need to be part of this Jewish conversation and will not have us be excluded from it.

The conversation can take place at two levels: One level is that of social networks. More and more people are there, and a significant portion of them is young. It could be the natural framework for the conversation. Topics can be suggested but would be better if raised by the participants. As to the formal conversation – it needs to be built on the public conversation and to receive recommendations mostly on the allocation of resources. In the past I thought that it would be possible to hold democratic elections in the Jewish world, along the lines of the Zionist Congress. Today, I am much more skeptical regarding that possibility. Maybe the right way is to convene every year or two a gathering of Jews holding elected political positions in their countries of origin together with thought and business leaders, in order to make policy decisions. Every delegation will represent in size the community from which it came.

Maybe this forum will find a way to institutionalize and create an operational entity and raise funds that will enable it – beyond consulting – to implement decisions regarding the strengthening of Jewish communities around the world. Additionally it could stimulate new initiatives (such as a global Jewish Television channel, for example). It will be appropriate to convene the forum once in the United States and once in Israel, to avoid the futile debate on the question of centrality. It is not about a Zionist organization, even though Israel will probably be very dear to the hearts of all participants. What is important in this context is the continuity of the Jewish people wherever it lives and not the debate between the Zionists and non-Zionists, even if for many of us Israel is the optimal solution to Jewish continuity.

**Yossi Beilin served as a minister in Rabin's, Peres' and Barak's governments and other executive and parliamentary roles. In the 1990's he initiated Taglit - the Birthright Israel program.**