

## **Sun Sets on archetypical 'Jewish mother'**

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It would be so easy for us to relegate Jewish actor Seth Rogen to the blacklist of Israel haters or, more accurately, of Jews opposed to Israel. In the wake of his recent remarks (“I was fed a huge amount of lies about Israel my entire life”... “It [Israel] makes no sense” “...for the preservation of the Jewish people”), one obvious direction would be to criticize, condemn, discredit or embargo the Canadian-born Jewish comedian. Yet, to do so would be tantamount to ignoring the fact that these sentiments are indicative of a much wider malaise. While there is a possibility the actor was being intentionally provocative in a bid to plug his latest film, where he has the title role, or that the Hollywood star was being cynical or funny, this is not necessarily so. He may well have been articulating a gut feeling and reflecting a much broader phenomenon that extends far beyond the scope of a personal statement.

Rogen’s more recent clarification, subsequent to a conversation with Jewish Agency Chairman Isaac Herzog when he stated that he had not really apologized to Israel and that “My mom made me call,” only served to complicate matters further.

Seth Regen is not alone. There is a clear, present, and potentially irreversible inter-generational divide within Diaspora Jewry’s largest community residing in North America – and particularly, in the United States - in relation to Israel. Young, secular, liberal Jews, especially in the USA, have become increasingly vociferous in their criticism of Israel’s actions and, at times, in opposition to its very existence. Today, the United States is home to the largest Jewish community outside the State of Israel, with an estimated Jewish population of approximately 5,700,000 souls. About 35% of US Jews affiliate to largest of the three major streams of Judaism, the Reform movement, while approximately 18% belong to the Conservative movement and about 10% to Orthodox Judaism. One of the major concerns for Jewish community leaders in the USA, as well as in Israel, is the decline in American Jews’ sense of affiliation to the Jewish people – and this, primarily in younger adults. Moreover, the parameters of their Jewish identity are also in a state of flux, with research indicating a

dramatic transformation within the upcoming generation of American Jewry. Indeed, only two-thirds of young people define themselves as “Jewish by religion”, while one third refer to themselves as “Jews of no religion”, preferring to define their Jewishness in terms of cultural, ethnic and family ties.

One of the manifest corollaries of this tenuous sense of connection expresses itself in terms of their relationship to Israel. The Jewish comedian’s remarks reflect rising trends within a younger generation of US Jewry that is becoming distanced from both Judaism and Israel in an exponential curve. This should be a focus of concern within both communities.

At the same time, the Jewish family framework has become more fragile. In an era where social networks have become the Z gen’s mainstream resource, the traditional home environment, with its potential to impact on them, is being steadily worn away throughout the Jewish community. For the most part, paternally-guided rituals of initiation into Jewish symbols, ceremonies and customs have long since disappeared and what we are presently witnessing is the erosion of the Jewish family’s sole remaining traditional bastion: the Jewish mother. Down the countless generations of Jewish tradition and history, irrespective of the community in question, the home – with the Jewish mother at its hub – has remained the anchor that sustained a sense of belonging. Even those growing up without a formal Jewish education imbibed their Jewishness from a predominantly maternal influence: it was the mother, grandmother and aunts who handed down the Jewish narrative, inculcating the traditional heritage via the ‘chalk and blackboard’ of their shared personal space. For lack of a scientific nomenclature, I have opted to use the term of ‘Jewish feminine responsibility’ – as, in my experience from encounters with hundreds of Jewish women during my research into women’s prayers and related travels, this ‘Jewish DNA’ is more prevalent among women. I have borne witness personally to their burning interest; observed the importance attributed to creating belonging and identity, the thirst to acquire however basic a knowledge of tradition – even among women who were not raised in a Jewishly educated environment.

In this respect, it is precisely Seth Rogen's remark, "My mom made me call Isaac Herzog" that elicits most concern. The mother - once the ultimate role model, the 'plus value' of the Jewish family until the last generation - has been transformed into payload, an object of derision and ridicule. These same young Jews no longer hesitate to offend or distress their mothers, nor to express positions diametrically opposed to those in which they were raised and educated. To say, "My mom made me call him" - is tantamount to aiming a body blow in public at the solidarity of the nuclear family that has been an intrinsic part of our lives since our formative days as a people. It implies that, despite millennia of handing over the baton of Jewish heritage within the private domain, there are possibly those who feel there is no longer a need for such transmission.

Similarly, the pillars of those institutions that once epitomized Jewish communities and were instrumental in preserving their heritage are weakening from year to year. The most acute expression of this state of affairs is that in evidence over the past six months. COVID-19 effectively shut down the JCCs, Jewish libraries and campus organizations. Even the flagship programs, such as Israel Experience, MASA [Israel Journeys] and others, have ceased operations until further notice. Programs that had been ongoing, driven by accumulated experience and a body of knowledge, will eventually need to find the impetus to restart *ab initio*.

Seth Rogen's mother belongs to a generation born into a sense of Jewish identity, one that yearned for Jerusalem and appreciated the quintessential significance of a secure Israel for the Jews. The current generation, however, is dwindling in numbers - and the fabric of Jewish solidarity has been undermined. As a cohort, liberal young adults in the United States are distancing themselves from their national identity in favor of a universalistic approach to *Tikkun Olam* (improving the world) - one that not infrequently engages in confrontational mode with the Jewish nation state.

Parallel with the ongoing process of alienation from Jewish heritage taking place in the USA, Israel is experiencing a diametrically opposite dynamic: a renaissance of people returning to traditions, customs and source texts. This revival of Jewish tradition resonates strongly in both private and public spheres of life. Rituals and traditions once forgotten have recaptured the imagination of many and regained popularity while the Jewish calendar

cycle with its symbols and celebrations forms a vibrant part of the fabric of life, even for those removed from religious observance. Essentially, the Jewish world's two largest communities are moving in completely opposing directions, with the distance between them increasing constantly.

The moment has arrived to review our duty as Jews to be responsible for one another and the deriving obligation to take appropriate action. We need to stop pointing a finger at, or (conversely) shrugging off remarks made by Rogen and his friends - and move on. Ours is not the right to slam the door or to desert those communities struggling for survival, leaving them to handle the crisis alone while we sit back on our laurels as passive observers. These are our brothers and sisters – and this is the time to act on our commitment to that shared responsibility.

When a family is in crisis, the situation needs to be resolved as a family – through talking about it, arguing points and reinstating trust among ourselves. We should aim to prove through peaceful dialogue that the State of Israel represents a home for the entire Jewish people, irrespective of our differences. We should be acting in unison to provide 'proof positive' to Rogen and friends that the State of Israel has a lot to offer: that his mother was right – as were other parents – when they spoke passionately in praise of the tiny state that came into existence miraculously, against all odds. These Jews perceived Israel as a part of *Tikkun Olam*, rather than a negative influence on the world order. They believed that, while one was not obliged to love everything, there was no call to hate Israel or doubt 'why it even needed to exist'; instead, they understood Israel as a work in progress, a shared endeavor. If we can make this happen, it would offer the potential for a return to Jewish heritage through a sense of identification with Israel.

Change presents opportunities as well as challenges. One of the most fascinating prisms to study families whose children either rejected or turned toward religion is the way they contend with that change. Some families sever all contact, whereas others continue to embrace their nearest and dearest, irrespective of the personal trauma in their lives generated by that transformation. One needs to be willing to listen to criticism, find space to ventilate on the subject of distress yet still enfold and embrace one another, if one wishes to preserve the fabric of family

structure. This holds true even when the son in question is named Seth Rogen.

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