

## WORKING GROUP: BACK TO THE FUTURE, EUROPEAN JEWRY

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The October 2010 working group was the first gathering in a JPPI multi-year project that aims at recommending a framework for European Jewry's efforts to optimize analysis, action-oriented strategic planning and decision-making capacities. It brought together institutional leaders with academics, public intellectuals and strategy experts from varied perspectives and countries to identify priorities, draft scenarios, define further required research and recommend policies.

The preliminary paper, which served as the basis for discussion at the seminar, identified the key drivers and trends that will shape the future of Europe, and discussed their implications for local Jewry. The paper also outlined the variables of intervention and means available in Europe to promote vibrant communities. It suggested four strategies, balancing between involvement in issues of general and global interest and involvement in issues of purely Jewish interest, which organized local Jewish institutions may adopt to confront the new challenges. Policy planning, coordination, experience sharing and strategic thinking will be critical to ensure a sustainable and thriving future for European Jewish communities.

	Jewish Concerns high		
General Concerns low	<b>Hedging strategy</b> <b>High profile</b> in Jewish and Israel advocacy issues. <b>Low profile</b> in issues of general concern.	<b>Shaping strategy</b> <b>High profile</b> in Jewish and Israel advocacy issues. <b>High profile</b> in general population concerns (local hunger, illiteracy, social integration, the homeless, Tikkun Olam)	General Concerns high
	<b>Low profile strategy</b> <b>Low profile</b> in issues of Jewish concern. <b>Low profile</b> in issues of general concern.	<b>Assimilation strategy</b> <b>Low profile</b> in issues of Jewish concern. <b>High profile</b> in general concern issues.	
	Jewish Concerns low		

The workgroup sessions addressed four key dimensions of the subject:

- The major current and projected trends in Europe and their impact on European Jewry
- The main internal communal challenges of European Jewry
- Issues of coordination and cooperation between European Jewish communities
- The relationship between Israel and European Jewry

Among the major trends shaping the future of Europe, two interconnected ones, the growing Muslim population and the resurgence of nationalisms along with the rise of the extreme right, require special attention from Jewish people policy makers and strategists. Both will likely have a critical impact on the future of the Jewish communities in the old continent. The growing number of Muslims is changing the face of Europe and affects the place of Jews in the European cultural landscape. On the one hand, some see Muslim migrants as an opportunity and blessing for Europe and European Jewish communities. They believe that their integration in Europe will sustain and drive economic growth and prosperity, and favor the emergence and strengthening of a multicultural society, with larger space for the expression of singular affirmative identities, including Judaism. On the other hand, many perceive the Muslim demographic shift as a threat. It is not only the development of radical Islam, a still relatively minor but well organized trend, which raises concerns. More worrying is the political influence and weight that Muslim citizens will likely come to gain in European countries, with possibly adverse repercussions on Jewish communities and the policy toward Israel. Without resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is doubtful that better social and political integration of Muslims will decrease their hostility toward Jews and Israel. It might lessen economic and social jealousy, but it will fail to overcome the adversity to Jews embedded in Islam's theological texts and in Jewish-Muslim past history.

If the future of Europe presents some daunting prospects for European Jewry, internal communal challenges are even more urgent to address. Many small Jewish communities scattered throughout the continent risk disappearing, due to declining populations as a result, primarily, of intermarriage and assimilation. Jewish educational and youth projects must be supported and funded within these communities. Ensuring European Jewry's identity and continuity will also require closing the huge gap that prevails between the Jewish institutional leadership and the grass-roots level of Jewish communities. One issue is that Jewish institutions in Europe are overly hierarchic and not welcoming of the empowerment of young Jews and renewal of leadership. There is also a widespread perception that Jewish organizations are little relevant to address the needs and problems of individuals. Disaffiliation of Jews also comes from their lack of identification to the way institutions define and express Jewish identity. It is urgent that Jewish identity be rethought in non-religious terms, and offer more space to the expression of the historical, philosophical and cultural components of Jewish identity.

While the threats confronting Jewish communities throughout Europe vary according to the specific national context, European Jewish communities share common challenges, ranging from the EU regulations on *shechita* to issues related to Jewish identity, education and culture. If a number of European Jewish organizations have offices in Brussels, the EU political capital, coordination and cooperation between these European Jewish organizations is severely lacking. There is currently no appropriate framework or strategy for conducting relations with the European Union and defending Jewish causes and interests in Europe.

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If only the Israeli government operated a historical reversal of its attitude and relationship toward European Jewry, European Jewish leaders and communities would welcome Israeli help to address internal and external challenges, whether in the form of funding, human resources or strategic thinking contributions. European Jews have for long criticized Israel for seeing the Diaspora only as a source of *aliyah*, political and financial support. The time has come for Israel to give back and support European Jewry. People-to-people contacts will also prove crucial to sustain a strong relationship between Israel and the European Diaspora. Opportunities for young European Jews to experience life in Israel must be expanded, concurrently to reciprocal initiatives to expose Israelis to the richness of the Diaspora. Efforts should also be undertaken to reach out to the thousands of Israelis already living in Europe and who for the most part have no links with local Jewish communities. It is interesting to underline that for European participants, Israel is the major pole of identity reference – which is less the case for American participants. European Jews are identified by others and identify themselves as connected to Israel. Even if Israel's bad image was occasionally presented as a burden for Jewish identity thriving, there is thus little doubt that the future of European Jews future is linked to the future of the Jewish state.

The first major conclusion and recommendation of the brainstorming workshop is related to the critical need to increase professionalization of Jewish leadership and identify a new young Jewish leadership. British participants suggested that we be in touch with the Center for Professional Jewish Leadership which will become operational in 2011.

On the communal level, we observed that European Jewries, with maybe the prominent exception of UK Jewry, are unable to implement by themselves a major Jewish continuity program. We recommend that Israel provide funding to support small Jewish communities throughout Europe and invest in Jewish educational and cultural programs for the young generation. It is also in Israel's interest to reinforce the attachment and engagement of young European Jews to the Jewish state, via, for instance, the expansion of Taglit-Birthright and MASA programs, which are not currently run in France and in other European countries.

On the political European-wide level, we identified the need to establish an umbrella European Jewish organization perhaps, as some have suggested, modeled on the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in the US. Whether or not this model is feasible in Europe, we must set up a convening body, which meets once or twice a year, to bring all European Jewish institutions and leaders together and share experiences and political and communal best practices. Such a body will primarily aim at enhancing cooperation on communal issues, encouraging the sharing of best practices, and identifying and investigating the major needs of European Jewish communities. Cooperation may also be advanced on European-wide common political issues to protect the Jewish communities' interests in front of EU authorities. It has been proposed that the JPPI serve as the convening framework, with meetings taking place either in Israel or in Europe.

The brainstorming seminar was the occasion to officially launch a process of vision development for a thriving Jewish future in Europe. To address the specific local needs and national dynamics that were raised in this first meeting, participants agreed that the reflective process has to be continued with separate brainstorming seminars on a national basis. The JPPI will articulate an integrative vision for a thriving "European Jewry in 2030" and draft recommendations on the basis of the perspectives and conclusions developed by the different national groups.

In order to allow for fresh bold thinking while at the same time ensuring that new ideas and propositions are taken on by existing institutions, the following scheme of further steps has been suggested:

1. *January-March 2011* – Brainstorming groups with young thinkers and activists in Paris, Budapest, Brussels, Berlin (maybe also in other European capitals) to define critical needs and develop a vision.

2. *April 2011* – Presentation and discussion of the brainstorming groups' conclusions in a top level national group of Jewish intellectuals and institutional leaders.
3. *April-May 2011* – Media plan to open the proposed vision to public discussion in the Jewish community's media outlets.
4. *June 2011* – Presentation of the conclusions of the brainstorming groups at the Israeli Presidential Conference in Jerusalem in June 21-23, 2011.
5. *December 2011* – Gathering of institutional leaders, intellectuals and youngsters from different brainstorming groups in Toledo, Spain. At this gathering, European thinkers and leaders will join non-European ones to weave integrated strategies for a thriving Jewish future in Europe.

To read the background paper prepared in advance of the working discussions click [here](#)