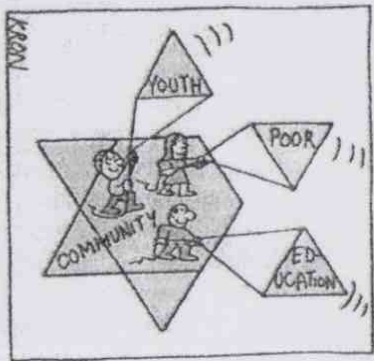


Fostering social cohesion: a Jewish agenda

The fostering of social cohesion is and always has been a core Jewish value. Continuing this agenda will benefit both the Jewish and wider Australian community.

THE Rudd Government has embarked upon implementing its policy commitments to the social cohesion of Australia. Senator Ursula Stevens pointed out on ABC Radio last week, that the agenda is not only about redressing the gap between the “haves” and “have nots”, but it is about re-knitting the social fabric of Australia so that we can truly stand up proud as a nation that cares. This social cohesion agenda is an agenda to which the Jewish community can



VIEWPOINT

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make a significant contribution.

We, as Jews, understand that social exclusion may emanate from a number of factors, including lack of educational or vocational opportunities; low levels of income; mental or physical disability; mental illness; or immigration without social support. Such exclusion most often results in individuals being prevented, through no fault of their own, from building a better future for themselves and their families.

In our own community, when the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies focused a plenum on the issue of poverty in our community, we learned of the many Jews who could not afford even the most basic participation in our community, and we heard that many felt uncomfortable admitting to the disadvantage they suffer.

JewishCare, Centre On Ageing and other organisations in our community reach out to help those in need. We never know whether enough is being done.

Social cohesion will also involve eradicating the scourge of racism. Across Australia today, racist speech has again become acceptable speech. Education against racism has diminished in both volume and frequency. For that and other reasons, the Jewish community in 2007 experienced the highest number of anti-Semitic incidents ever recorded in this country.

[Social cohesion] is about re-knitting the social fabric of Australia so that we can truly stand up proud as a nation that cares.

Yet, we do not react by adopting a purely defensive agenda. We understand that human rights are best preserved in nations where the rule of law is sacrosanct. And in an age of terrorism, one of the most basic of human rights is the right to live without fear, especially the fear of terrorism.

Jewish advocacy for the equal dignity of all humankind pre-existed the Magna Carta and pre-existed both the French and American commitments to human rights. It was Rabbi

Menachem Ben Solomon Hameiri, a 13th century scholar, in his commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, who said: “That the fundamental dignity of all creation is very precious to God. There is no value more precious than it” (Berachot 19B).

Our social cohesion agenda inevitably goes beyond self interest. One amazing story is that of legendary activist Saul Alinsky. Born in 1909 to Orthodox Jewish parents and educated in a yeshivah, he experienced the vicious gang wars on the street of suburban Chicago between Polish and Jewish teenagers.

Alinsky organised Jewish gangs to defend Jews against attacks from Polish immigrants who had brought their anti-Semitism from Europe with them. He also took his Jewish learning and his street-smarts to develop grassroots, people-power strategies to achieve change and social justice in urban areas.

Alinsky taught that one could best affect social cohesion by mobilising people in their own communities to act on the issues that most directly affected their quality of life.

Not everyone can have the energy of a Saul Alinsky. I am convinced that when our young adults tell us that they want to work and interact with other Jewish young adults, they want to make their mark on and in society.

In saying that they do not want to identify with institutional Jewry, they are expressing views similar to those expressed by American young Jewish adults over the past 30 years – with one major difference.

A majority of our young adults have had the benefit of a Jewish education. What these young Jews are expressing is all about standing at Sinai.

They are committed and passionate, but they do not relate to a defensive, insular Jewish agenda.

A Jewish agenda for social cohesion will harness the language of Sinai that our young adults understand and will commit resources to social action. There is every likelihood that many who are marginally affiliated will respond.

Increased Jewish commitment to social cohesion in the Australian context will not be at the expense of standing up for Israel, opposing terrorism and insisting that anti-Semitism is socially unacceptable.

Arguably, social cohesion is just as much a Jewish issue as these more defensive objectives. We need both agendas. They began with Abraham, and they must continue today.

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