

What is the matter with the Jewish Community in The Netherlands?

Every week we are faced with a stream of misery published in the Dutch Jewish Weekly or other Jewish media: conflicts between board members of Jewish organisations; possible sexual abuse; Jewish organisations taken over by general organisations; doubts about the Jewish identity of Jewish organisations and, not to be forgotten, anti-Semitic incidents. Of course it is not all misery. There are also some positive signs.

After 36 years of working in the Jewish Community in The Netherlands in positions in which I maintained contacts with almost all Jewish organisations, I would like to take a closer look at the situation in which the Jewish Community of The Netherlands finds itself at the time I retire as director of JMW (Jewish Social Services) in The Netherlands. Should we see these incidents as normal or is there a real structural change within the Community?

What we see is that only a small percentage of people with a Jewish background (with a Jewish mother and/or a Jewish father) are involved in the Jewish community. The numbers of Shoah survivors are decreasing and the Second (post-war) generation has retired or will retire soon. The future belongs to young people! Research done by JMW (Jewish Social Services) shows that these young people differ considerably from their parents. The Shoah plays a less important role, their relationship with Israel is different and they have far fewer Jewish friends in percentage terms. In summary, the Dutch Jewish identity is changing. The large number of mixed marriages certainly plays a role in this as well as the fact that a lot of Jewish youngsters are leaving the country to emigrate to other countries e.g. Israel and the USA.

Not only demographic developments but also social trends influence our lives and our identities.

The younger generation communicates differently. The need to meet and acknowledge each other is far less than that of the Shoah survivors and their children. Our thirty and forty year-olds are busy with their careers, their families and their social contacts. They are constantly busy with their WhatsApp or Twitter accounts. The way they communicate and deal with each other is different from the way older generations do. Young people are also less likely to commit themselves to organisations. Membership of political parties and Jewish communities is outdated. They have more of a Netflix mentality: 'we make use of services that interest us when we need them'.

The Shoah has become history for Dutch society. Much is still being written about it, but the feeling is not as emphatic as it used to be. There is a strong antireligious tendency in which ritual slaughter (shechita) and circumcision (b'rith mila) can be called into question.

There is an image that 'ishes' (anti-Semitism) is increasing or at least more openly displayed. That is not all, anti-Jewish terror has also become a reality in Europe in recent years.

All of this feels rather uncomfortable. Sometimes it is more than 'uncomfortable', there is fear and anxiety. These feelings are too often present in the background.

These are all issues to deal with, which influence our lives and our Jewish identity. It also ensures that young people will make different use of the Jewish infrastructure and will have a different involvement in the Jewish community.

If we want to preserve a Jewish community in the Netherlands for the future, then centuries of established Jewish institutions will have to be changed. If not, it will dissolve itself. Then the activities of Jewish organisations will be terminated one after another.

Will there be adequate leadership within the Jewish community to maintain as many activities and facilities as possible for the Shoah survivors and the second generations while at the same time making the necessary fundamental changes to the Jewish infrastructure for future generations? That is the real question.

Here, too, social trends are a factor. In recent years, members of Boards have increasingly been held personally liable for financial problems at organisations. As a result, Jewish Boards and Supervisory Boards are drawn closer to the executive work. In addition, there is another general phenomenon, possibly even stronger in the case of Jews: the 'We know better' complex as I call it.

Both trends together lead to the regular bypassing of professionals by their Boards and many personal and managerial differences of opinion. It also leads to a strong focus on financial affairs, a sound financial management. After all, that is familiar territory for most of the Board members. The problem, however, is that Jewish organisations by definition work with deficits due to their small scale or the fact that subsidies do not cover the additional Jewish costs. Unfortunately, a strict business attitude sometimes prevails over Tzedakah (care for people, justice).

All the battles within the organised Jewish community make it very unattractive for the unaffiliated to feel involved and to join a Jewish Community. Many unaffiliated Jews see the Jewish Community as a small bourgeois, closed off and quarrelsome group of people who exclude others. We push people off when there is so much to gain.

In recent years, however, there have been a number of bright spots. The outreach work of Chabad and Progressive Judaism (LJG) is special. Shul communities like Amos (the Amsterdam Modern Orthodox Shul) and Bendigamos (a new vibrant Sephardic Community in Amsterdam) attract new people. JMW (Jewish Social Services) organises activities for everyone with a Jewish background (with a Jewish mother and/or a Jewish father); Jonet, a website that aims to be the gateway to Jews in the Netherlands, is doing very well in terms of visitor numbers; the Jewish Hospice is an institution with dedicated volunteers. The Misgeret in Holland (the Jewish security organisation) attracts young people who are very committed and Maccabi is constantly organising new sports activities.

What these activities have in common is that they are innovative, inspiring, meaningful, accessible, that people receive personal attention and are taken seriously, that they are authentic and attract people from outside.

I often hear people (Board members) say that activities for the Shoah survivors and the Second generation which have deficits should be divested to ensure that there is enough money for future generations. However, there is no genuine vision on how to deal with the future of the Jewish Community. As shown before, this future will be very different from the reality of today. 'Expensive' Jewish organisations such as religious denominations, Jewish educational institutions, Jewish welfare and health care institutions will eventually no longer be able to survive in their present form. The Jewish infrastructure is not future-proof at the moment.

The current situation requires a two-fold policy. First, activities and facilities for Shoah survivors and the Second generation should be maintained for as long as possible. There still is a clear need for these activities. Second, we have to invest in the future.

For that future we have to invest in Jewish education, both in Jewish schools and educational activities outside Jewish schools. We have to create enchanting teaching tools and games that we can offer to a wide group of children with a Jewish background. They are the future! At the same

time, we should prepare ourselves for another kind of Jewish society that is designed for future Jewish generations.

As a starting point I would like to propose that each group within the Jewish community has the right to determine its own (halachic) criteria. At the same time I advocate respecting everyone's personal position within Judaism, whether orthodox, liberal, atheist or agnostic; whether young or old; whether they have a Jewish mother or only a Jewish father; whether or not they want to join a Jewish Community or organisation. Everyone has the right to be taken seriously and treated equally. Such a movement will create so much goodwill!

If we want to preserve a Jewish community in the Netherlands in the long term, we, and especially young people themselves, must start to think about how we can shape this Jewish future. What conditions should such a new Jewish community meet to motivate and enthuse younger generations? Only then, I am convinced, can a Jewish community in the Netherlands continue to exist!

This article is a summary of a speech that Hans Vuijsje delivered on February 22, 2018, at his farewell as JMW's director. It was published in the Dutch Jewish Weekly (NIW).