A smorgasbord of Jewish ideas

Israelis must be taught about Jewish culture, says Daniel Posen

• BY STEVE LINDE

Daniel Posen genuinely cares about Israel and the Jewish people. As CEO of the Posen Foundation, which he founded three decades ago with his father, Felix, the cosmopolitan entrepreneur and philanthropist strongly advocates spreading the values of Judaism as a culture, making Jewish heritage accessible to all.

To Posen, lack of Jewish knowledge is a pervasive problem in the Jewish world. Ironically, the problem is greatest in the Jewish state itself, where, he said, most secular Israelis know little or nothing about Judaism.

“The majority of Jews here are missing part of their identity,” Posen told The Jerusalem Post – “the part that comes through their culture and their own Jewishness.

“I think the government has woefully failed to serve the majority of Jews in this country,” he went on. “Secular Israeli Jews are much more Jewishly impoverished than their Diaspora counterparts,” Posen added. “So Israeli Jews – even though they speak Hebrew and live according to the Jewish calendar – actually face a much bigger challenge, I think.”

Relaxed in a dark suit without a tie, Posen quietly contemplates his foundation’s work while sipping coffee at a Jerusalem hotel during a visit in January.

“The majority of Jews here and around the world view themselves as secular,” he said. “We believe that Judaism is first and foremost a culture. What do we do with the Jew who says, ‘There’s nothing really for me because Judaism is for religious Jews, or haredi Jews’? I think that’s a needless tragedy and something we should try to do something about, even in a small measure.”

Posen’s remedy?

“Educate people, give them a smorgasbord of Jewish ideas. But you have to let them pick, not tell
Born in Berlin, Felix Posen fled to the US with his family in 1938. Both father and son became highly successful commodity traders, dealing in oil, metal, and minerals. Daniel later became a founding member of Trafigura Beheer BV, a Dutch multinational commodity trading company founded in 1993.

After retiring, Felix Posen established himself as a leading figure in the world of Jewish culture and education. Daniel has devoted his energy and talents to supporting Jewish studies in Israel.

“My father came from a typical modern German Jewish home, left before the war with his immediate family, settled in the United States, in Washington Heights, which they jokingly called ‘the fourth reich,’” he recalled. “Many of the German Jews ended up there, and quite a few led a very cold yekkeshe life, without a lot of passion,” Daniel recalls, smiling.

“His father was the religious one in the family, although it turned out he didn’t even understand Hebrew, even though he knew all the prayers. I think that really freaked my father out, to imagine praying and not knowing what you’re saying. On the other hand, his mother was a pianist and well read – which is probably where my father got his interest and love of culture. So his culture really came from his mother, religion from the father, and I think that fused his notion that something was missing.”

Daniel credits his father with the idea of establishing the Posen Foundation in order to offer secular Jews an entrée into Jewish life and learning.

“My father was yearning to fill the void, but he never knew how, and in the ’60s and ’70s you didn’t have many opportunities to figure out what Judaism was. He spent his whole life working, and I think he was in a way a closet academic,” Posen said. “As a typical yekke, he took time to survey what ails the world in terms of Jewish topics, and came across the question of why so many Jews are Jewishly uneducated, and who eschewed religion. I think that troubled him, coming from a religious home. He was also trying to understand the bridge between Judaism as religion and Judaism as a culture.”

As for himself, Posen said he too came late to Judaism and Israel.

“I was very Jewishly uneducated in a way, and still am, to a large degree. Growing up in Japan and in England and other places, the only way to learn about Judaism was by taking classes from a religious person. I learned to read and write Hebrew, but I never learned what it all meant. Today I can read Hebrew, but I have no idea what I’m reading, and that’s the coined phrase of ‘pediatric Judaism.’ I think it was very empty, the famous empty part of the cart, and it was meaningless.”

What, then, led him to become involved in this field?

“It really started when my father started to take an interest in the subject matter we’re involved with, and so we started the Posen Foundation together. While I still had my main job, my father – who had just retired – started to get a sense of what was going on in the world of Judaism of culture, and the issues surrounding it, and that’s how I really got plugged in.

“I worked one summer – in 1974 or 1975 – on a moshav here, and spent my weekends in Nuweiba, so I started late in life; I would say properly not until 2003 or 2004.”

What is the philosophy behind the Posen Foundation?

“The aim of the Foundation hasn’t changed. We’ve modernized it because obviously I’m another generation and I have a different background than my father. I guess the bottom line is that notion of Judaism as a culture should be in everybody’s bookshelf, whether you’re religious or not. What you do with it is another thing.

“We have thousands of years of history that people understand has been co-opted by the religious,
and it is the fault of us, the non-religious, who have done nothing about it.”

Posen said he and his father were motivated by the Shenhar Report two decades ago. It persuaded them to focus their initial energies on the Israeli educational system.

“Professor Aliza Shenhar was hired by the government of Israel at the time to look at what ails education generally,” Posen recalled. “You know, math was No. 1, compared to most countries. What was the last thing on her list? It was Judaism. In a way, that was a terrible embarrassment to this country.

“How could it be that the Jewish nation didn’t know how to teach Judaism in the secular school system? That got us thinking, how is this possible, and what is missing in the antiquated way of teaching? What came as a reaction to the Shenhar Report was how to teach Judaism as a culture, a wondrous thing. And it’s working.

“At Ofakim, we graduate 10-15 students a year. It’s wildly expensive and not supported by many because they think it’s the job of the government to worry about things like that, but I don’t think you can wait too long in any country.”

While Ofakim is their flagship program, the Posen foundation funds a wide variety of programs.

“I come to Israel probably every month and a half,” said Posen. “We have 30-odd projects going on at any one time, and we’re quite involved in our projects. We’re more entrepreneurial philanthropy where we’re keen to be involved in the correct sense. We like people to have their independence, but we’re very keen on making sure people are doing what they’re meant to be doing.

“We need to learn too, and learning is by making errors and adjusting the ways we make our philanthropy. I enjoy my visits, usually two or three days at a time, and I always visit my customers, if you’d like to call it that, and we’re always looking for new opportunities.”

Posen notes that there are American Jewish schools now interested in Ofakim teachers, which “is very interesting, because clearly the parents are fed up in some way with the way they are teaching Jewish children in American schools.”

He relates a story about how he and
his father had visited a very “open religious school run by an articulate rabbi in California.” During morning prayers, “the children who were not interested in saying the Shema were given the option of going to the gym to work out or practice yoga.”

“And my father said, pointing at his head: ‘What about something for their “toches?”’ It wasn’t the fault of the rabbi, but where is the learning for Jews if this is the way they are brought up? We have always said that to be an educated Jew, you have to know something about your religious brethren, but you also have to respond to the Jewish way of life, and I think the Americans have yet to embrace that.”

How does Posen assess the impact the Foundation is having?

“It’s a good question and it’s something we grapple with all the time,” he said. “We are a private Swiss foundation, although we do spend our time looking at results, we’re impatient not to spend years looking at results and we’re always trying new things. I think the answer to what is our success is some of the programs we fund, and seeing the kids get it. I see it in the schools where our teachers teach when the kids understand the wondrous world of our culture and they see where they fit into this continuum rather than saying, what’s theirs and not mine, they see what is theirs and they can understand what they want, pick what they want, study what they want and behave the way they want,”

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as long as it’s tolerant to all. I think those are successes. Certainly we are affecting thousands of kids in their classes. To what degree is very hard to assess.”

He adds that there is a big request for Ofakim teachers all across Israel—even the Education Ministry has acknowledged that there aren’t enough. In addition, the number of people signing up for courses in the Jewish renewal organizations is increasing every year, and the IDF is keen to work with Posen organizations to facilitate more Jewish content that is not religious.

In addition, Tarbut.IL (tarbutil. cet.ac.il), which the foundation established with the Avi Chai Foundation, the Shalom Hartman Institute, and the Center for Educational Technology, is becoming the official Education Ministry website on the topic of Jewish culture.

“We’ve had successes, but we are one foundation, and it’s not a wildly attractive topic for some foundations because it’s slow going,” Posen said. “My father, who is 88 this year, talks about doing things that take 15 to 20 years. He understands that this is a slow creep. If you want your headlights in the press the next day, this is not the business for you.”

Posen insists that this has to be a joint project between the Israeli government and private foundations such as his own.

“We’re only one foundation so we decided that we would spend our remaining years in Israel,” he said. “Where the government money goes is not per capita and not democratic, we know that, but Panim and other organizations are fighting for the government to be more democratic in their education budget. We believe in an education to be proud of your culture, understand where you fit into the system, and also be equal to your religious brethren, and I think this is something that is woefully short on funding in this country. I think it has to be through formal and informal forms of education. I’m convinced of this.

“Clearly the government should be doing much more, but I don’t believe you can do that without the assistance from private foundations. Firstly, because foundations are much nimbler and fast-moving than governments, by definition. Plenty of good ideas will come from the private sector, but we believe in working with the government. We work with the Education Ministry on many fronts, to the extent that we can, but it’s missing a lot more government support and hopefully more private support.

“Education is a slow process and a lot of foundations are impatient to see results. This is not results-driven quickly; you have to believe in it for the long term and there’s no other way around it. There are no short cuts.”