

Discussion Guide for “There Are Jews Here”

AUDIENCE

7-12, College, Synagogue Groups, Religious Conferences/Retreats, Seniors

SUBJECT AREAS

Social Studies, Sociology, History, Comparative Religion, Rabbinical Studies

PURPOSE OF LESSON

The discussion should encourage viewers to consider the overall situation of declining Jewish populations especially in small towns; to think about what has led to this predicament; and what might be done to assist communities experiencing similar circumstances. Similarly, the “human” issues need to be explored — relationships among residents as the population continues to decline; the impact of an aging Jewish community (what responsibility, if any, does the younger generation have?); the stresses resulting from intermarriage; and the changing roles of women as the community gets smaller and smaller. Also, the concept of legacy should be explored — how are holy books, buildings, and cemeteries to be preserved, and how is the memory of a Jewish community preserved?

OVERALL FILM ISSUES

- What would your advice be to the people of each community?
- How important is maintaining a Jewish (or non-Jewish) legacy once the Jewish community has disappeared? How can this be done?
- Synagogues in large Jewish communities are also shrinking for a variety of reasons. How do the issues facing these synagogues differ from the issues facing the synagogues in the film? Are the problems basically the same?

IMPACT OF DECLINING JEWISH POPULATIONS

- Why do you think that people move away from small towns? In addition to the Dothan model, what else might be done to keep them there?
- What kinds of compromises might be suggested in Jewish rituals to keep small town communities alive (i.e. counting women in minyans where they hadn't been before)?
- Compare the four communities. What do they have in common, and where are they different? What might these similarities and differences indicate about their futures?
- If you lived in one of these communities, how would you make the decision about whether or not to continue maintaining a synagogue, etc.? What factors would you consider?

- The leaders of the Latrobe Jewish community were determined to allow Ellie to experience her Bat Mitzvah at the synagogue before it closed. Are such lifecycle events important enough to maintain the community on their own?
- Uri and Susan's family seem to be the only young family in Laredo. What would you say to convince them to stay especially since the draw of nearby San Antonio is so strong?
- Imagine you lived in Butte. Would an online synagogue presence be enough to keep you there? If not, what kinds of changes might you suggest?
- The Latrobe residents eventually decided to sell their synagogue. What factors contributed to that decision?

THE FUTURE OF SMALL TOWN JEWRY

- How important is maintaining a Jewish (or non-Jewish) legacy once the Jewish community has disappeared? How can this be done?
- Can you think of ways that the legacies of small town Jewish communities might be preserved?

IMPACT OF DECLINING JEWISH POPULATIONS

- What would your advice be to the people of each community?
- Should disappearing Jewish communities try the "Dothan" method as a possibility to grow themselves? Are there drawbacks to this solution?
- How can larger geographically close communities help declining Jewish communities in small towns? Should this be a priority? What should their goals be?
- How can national Jewish organizations assist small town Jewish communities?

For more information, please contact:

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