

Q&A - May 2012 - Sinai Indaba and Generation Sinai : "Jewish Life" magazine

Last year must have been an amazing success for you to be putting on these projects again this year?

With Generation Sinai, the parent and child learning programme we had last year (this year will be happening on the 22nd May, Rosh Chodesh Sivan), we had between 8 000 and 9 000 Jewish school children participating and between 3 000 - 4 000 parents who learned with their kids. But the amazing thing about it was not just the sheer number of people learning together (even though it was probably the largest learning gathering this country has ever seen) but what I found tremendous, what caught me by surprise in such a positive way, was the energy of the buzz that went around afterwards. It struck a chord ? parents and children were deeply touched about learning with their children.

Why was this surprising?

Because it cut across all religious levels. Go look at the blog site generationsinai.com, you will see testimonials, pictures, videos, comments about the day from people of all backgrounds I found this interesting and inspiring. Everybody experienced something special. There was an electricity in the air.

Why?

On a social and psychological level there is a thirst for connection between the generations ? hence the name Generation Sinai. The word ?Sinai? refers to our spiritual legacy because I don?t think that the explanation for the success of the event can actually be found purely in the conventional, physical laws of this world or of human society.

So what is it?

We are dealing here with Torah, which comes from Hashem. It has a spiritual energy. And we have a neshoma, the soul, which does not conform to the normal laws of nature either. So what you have here is this tremendous spiritual power unleashed, where the Torah is connecting to the neshoma, and parents and children are bonding over the eternal bridge that connects all of us to Mount Sinai.

But one cannot deny the power of 10 000 people all doing it at one time -so how do we take this supernatural energy and bring it down to an everyday level going forward?

The fact that the entire community doing it together as a unity project, all the schools participating, showing the incredible unity of the South African Jewish community irrespective of the level of observance was unbelievably powerful, yes. But even when you are together with your children without thousands of others, it has this spiritual energy to it, and will unleash a spiritual energy and emotional connectedness into your life that you cannot predict ? you just have to find the right way of bringing into your everyday life learning Torah with your children. And everyone is different ? get guidance, ask your Rabbi for help, then find the things that work for you ? but find a way of doing it. It is life-changing.

How can we convince people of this?

What I would say to people is ?Just try it. I personally try to make time not only to spend time and engage with my children but to learn Torah with them as well. It is not only quality time together, but it adds something else, a different dimension, to the home. A parent obviously needs to have fun with the child and do other things, but Torah learning is crucial. It brings uniqueness to the environment of the home that isn?t within the normal realms.

Why Sinai? what's the significance?

These are twin projects linked by Shavuot - Generation Sinai taking place before Shavuot and the Sinai Indaba afterwards, with Mount Sinai - the giving of the Torah, Shavuot, in the middle. Our whole foundation - moral, spiritual, emotional, national - comes from Mount Sinai, the place where the Torah was given on Shavuot. So these projects, although very different embody the two themes of Shavuot - the unity of the community, "Like one person with one heart", and the tremendous power of Torah to uplift and inspire us all.

You say it will uplift and inspire us all - how is the Sinai Indaba going to do this for people?

Sinai Indaba is about bringing out to South Africa the Jewish world's leading thinkers and speakers, on an unprecedented scale even in the Jewish world - to have such high level speakers, and so many of them right in one venue. And what amazed me last year was the electricity in the air - it was the same as Generation Sinai in that it was much more than just a speaking event. It felt like a rally of the community, there was an energy and a buzz, which came from the unity of the people who once again came from all different parts of the community at different levels of observance - the tremendous South African Jewish unity came out in a very powerful way.

Is it only about unity?

Its power is also in the inspiration and vibrancy of original Torah thinking from a dazzling array of Torah personalities. It isn't just information, it is relevant, and applies to everyday life - issues of family, spirituality, religion, politics - everything. And it touches people. And this year we are featuring another incredible line-up of speakers! The scale of Sinai Indaba, with 12 international speakers, attended by many thousands of people, and held in four cities across the country, is unprecedented here in South Africa, and probably even internationally. So many community organisations and shuls have become partners in Sinai Indaba by sharing in the costs and benefits of all these speakers, with all the speakers joining different shuls on the Shabbos before. Due to the overwhelming response last year, we've had to move it this year to the much bigger venue of the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg but still make sure to book to secure your place.

How would you sum up the Sinai projects?

The Sinai Indaba by-line is "Unite. Inspire. Discover?". That sums it up. For me, what Sinai Indaba is about is unifying the community, definitely, and it is inspiration for all as we discover new Torah insights for life. Think about the fact that we will be gathered together as community, that we have these top-class world renowned speakers coming, seeing and hearing new ideas from all dimensions - it is the whole experience of it that is far more profound than just the intellectual aspect of it, although intellectually it is fascinating. It is experiential - there is something spiritual and emotional about it. And it is like this because the Torah itself is not just about intellectual wisdom - it is wisdom for life, there to uplift and inspire us as a total human being, and being relevant and dynamic, impacting on every aspect of life.