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MICHAEL STEINHARDT IN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

Non-Orthodox Jewish education is a shandah--an abysmal failure!

Anti-Semitism in America is a "mythical" bogeyman used to raise money

January 7, 2010 (Fort Lee, NJ) -- In a rare personal television interview, Michael Steinhardt, one of world Jewry's most philanthropic benefactors and a co-founder of Birthright Israel, expresses scathing criticism of non-Orthodox Jewish life in the Diaspora (though Steinhardt sees himself as anything but an Orthodox Jew).



In conversation with Mark S. Golub, president and executive producer of Shalom TV, Steinhardt expresses his deep disappointment with the traditional Hebrew School system ("**can there be a worse term in the American Jewish lexicon than 'Hebrew School'--there were six kids in the 20th Century who liked it!**") and characterizes many of the young people he has met through Birthright Israel as "**Jewish barbarians**" who have never experienced a Shabbat dinner.

Steinhardt expresses his anger with those described as "wonderful educators" in the Reform and Conservative movements for having done "such a poor job under-educating our next generations" by failing to distinguish Jewish values from Christian values. To Steinhardt, it is virtually impossible now to identify a non-Orthodox Jewish student at any secular university from a non-Jewish student.

"I think that many of the trends that we have seen--such as the fact that 55-60% of non-Orthodox Jews are marrying 'out,' such as the fact that only 15% of total philanthropy of Jews goes to Jewish causes--are reflective of that fact that non-Orthodox Jewish education in America has been, and continues to be, a *shandah*--an abysmal failure."

Steinhardt also has some damning things to say about Jewish leadership in America, feeling that there has been much too much emphasis on the Holocaust--"an event of extraordinary enormity"--and misplaced fears about anti-Semitism in America.

"Anti-Semitism has always been far more mythical than real in America; it's as if organizations have to create the bogeyman of anti-Semitism in order to raise money." As long as the Jewish community is obsessed with the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, these concerns detract **"from our ability to think about the Jewish future--because it's hard to be focused intensively on the Holocaust and, at the same time, to think about what we want to accomplish and what we want to be in the 21st Century."**

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Steinhardt offers his assessment of Diaspora Jewry: **"It is a moribund Jewish world, continuously losing its young people, whose *tz'daka* has dramatically changed where only a small fraction of total philanthropy is going to Jewish causes; interest in Israel is declining; the number of American Jews going to Israel is not growing; where the culmination of Jewish life seems to be (for the young person) the bar mitzvah--and from there it is all downhill."**

For Steinhardt, the most effective tool in instilling a sense of Jewish identity in young people is for them to visit Israel. **"They grow up there. They feel more Jewish there."**

This is not to say that Steinhardt is without criticism of Israel. **"Its politicians are, writ large, awful; its businessmen are of less than glorious quality; and when you walk down Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv and you look around at these people and you say, 'This is who you admire?' I often say it's easier to be a Zionist in Manhattan than it is in Tel Aviv."**

But for Steinhardt, Israel has always been his great love--and his "substitute for religion."

"While the religion of Judaism is so deeply disappointing--its practice, its verbiage, its inability to reflect realistically upon our lives; I could forgive almost anything vis-à-vis Israel. Israel was and still is my Jewish miracle!"

Steinhardt also articulates his appreciation for what freedom and opportunity has afforded him as an *American Jew*.

"I love Israel--I have a wonderful house there in the middle of Jerusalem; I love Israel. I love America. And it's a complicated situation.

"I really have been fortunate having the freedom to make my own choices; to have contributed as I have contributed; to have expressed myself with the freedom to be as nasty as I am to the 'Jewish establishment'--deservedly so! And it's been a wonderful experience."

Shalom TV, America's national Jewish television cable network, provides mainstream Jewish programming through free Video On Demand service on virtually every cable system in the United States and Canada. Reaching more than 37 million homes, Shalom TV features Israeli films and Jewish documentaries, exclusive programs from the stage of the 92nd Street Y in New York, coverage of major Jewish events, programs focusing on Israel, children's shows, Jewish Studies (including Hebrew, Talmud, and Kabbalah), and interviews with the most outstanding personalities on the world Jewish scene today.

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