

JERUSALEM VIEWPOINTS

No. 400 29 Shevat 5759 / 15 February 1999

ARGENTINEAN JEWRY IN CRISIS: PRESSURES AND PROPOSALS

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Argentina is home to a quarter of a million Jews, the 8th largest Jewish community in the world and a particularly vibrant, Israel-oriented one. On July 18, 1994, a terrorist bombing blew apart the headquarters of the Argentinean Jewish community in Buenos Aires, killing almost 100 people. This followed the March 17, 1992, terrorist bombing which destroyed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, killing at least 5 people and wounding at least 81. Both bombings remain unsolved.

Slowly recovering from the devastating impact of these two tragedies, the Jewish community and its organizations have suffered additional blows in recent years due to a dramatic worsening of the economic situation in Argentina.

In November and December 1998, the Jewish Agency Executive organized a task force to study the current situation in Argentina in order to see how the Jewish Agency could assist the local community to deal with its problems. The delegation was headed by Daniel Liwerant, World Chairman

of Keren Hayesod, and Dr. Shimshon Shoshani, Director General of the Jewish Agency, and included senior officials of the Israeli Ministries of Education and Absorption. The study included preliminary interviews, discussions and review of material in Israel, an on-site visit to Buenos Aires, and review of supplementary material upon return to Israel. This *Jerusalem Letter* is based on the report of that task force.

Delineating the Crisis

In recent years, two large Jewish-run private banks, Patricius and Mayo, had been making major donations in support of communal activities. Their contributions had partially concealed the reality of a significant decrease in individual/local philanthropy in Argentina. Indeed, there are a number of very wealthy Jews in Argentina who do not contribute at all to the Jewish community and who are totally alienated from Judaism and Israel. The closure of these two banks in the

wake of a general countrywide economic recession meant the abrupt end of their support and has exposed the decline in local philanthropy.

In addition, recent decisions by the Argentinian government to liberalize imports as part of an inevitable process of globalization of the economy has severely affected many small Jewish entrepreneurs, merchants, and industrialists, and in more than a few cases has actually caused their impoverishment.

Intermarriage, assimilation, and emigration to the big city have hit the small communities in Argentina's interior especially hard. When all these factors are combined with the economic recession, many small communities are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain organized Jewish life. (Some 185,000 out of the country's 250,000 Jews now live in Buenos Aires.)

The Argentinian Jewish community operates a highly developed network of day schools, where nearly 40 percent of Jewish school children (about 20,000 pupils) study. The high tuition, together with the difficult economic situation confronting the middle class, threatens to considerably reduce the number of pupils in the coming year (March 1999). At present, over 35 percent of the pupils are at least partially subsidized.

The situation is particularly difficult for smaller schools and schools located outside the Buenos Aires area.

Additional financial pressures on the organized Jewish community have come in the wake of the terrorist bombings in Buenos Aires. Since those crimes have never been solved nor the perpetrators found, the security threat to the Jewish community in Argentina remains greater than in many countries. Fear of Arab terrorists and neo-Nazi groups, coupled with the relatively high number of Jewish institutions, schools, community centers, and sports clubs, has led to a dramatic increase in costs which must be borne by the community for special guards and other security measures, in addition to the services provided by the state.

In addition to mounting economic pressures, for some time a leadership crisis has been brewing in the key institutions of the Argentinean Jewish community, including a basic lack of faith in the present leadership, which exacerbates the problem

of a lack of willingness to donate, along with a lack of community solidarity. Furthermore, there is a lack of personal leadership examples of donations to the Argentinean campaign of Keren Hayesod, which should be the concrete expression of a community's relationship with Israel and the Jewish collective throughout the world.

Not an Emergency

Nevertheless, there is no sign of a deterioration of the political situation or of instability which could bring immediate danger to the Jews. In addition, despite the local Jewish perception of economic crisis, there is no significant trend toward emigration to Israel or other countries, even for those sectors of the population whose economic standard of living has significantly worsened. If the economic crisis were as severe as described by some of those with whom the task force spoke, then there is no rational explanation for the small amount of aliya and even its small decline in 1998.

How to Assist?

In light of the local community's problems, some local leaders had expected the Jewish Agency task force to "bring money" with them. However, the task force believes that communal or educational activity in Argentina should not be subsidized. According to Jewish Agency policy, each Western diaspora Jewish community must maintain itself and its communal and educational services according to its means, and according to the willingness of its members to assume the financial burden.

According to the most conservative estimates, the total outlay for Jewish activity in Argentina currently amounts to over \$200 million. This not only points to an actually high level of vitality, even in difficult economic times, but also to large amounts presently spent on membership fees, school tuition, and private donations on the part of tens of thousands of Jews in the community.

Any attempt, even partial, to "bail out" the community by external sources would simply impede the healthy and inevitable process of matching expenditures to income, as well as the necessary reorganization of local philanthropy

accompanied by a leadership which will be accepted both by donors and Jewish activists.

However, the position of the Jewish Agency is that concrete steps should be taken to assist the community. Despite reservations about offering subsidies, the task force could not remain indifferent to the real financial difficulties or the internal organizational-communal crisis taking place in the Jewish communities of Argentina. The local community had made an honest appeal for solidarity and concern from the Jewish Agency and from Israel, and this from a community in which Israel, from its inception, has played a central and real part.

The question was how to assist. We decided on recommendations that would provide a genuine response to justified expectations for cooperation and involvement on our part, within the scope of the Jewish Agency's mandate, and based on the guiding principle of all Jewish Agency activities and its limited budgets abroad: The catalyst principle, that is, using small and focused resources to generate a large effect on the community. We chose those areas where the Agency felt the need was greatest and had the most chance of making a difference in furthering the mission areas of the Jewish Agency: Jewish-Zionist education and aliyah.

Catalyzing Jewish-Zionist Education

Attendance at Jewish day schools is vitally important because it acts as a real barrier to assimilation and the concomitant drop-out of Jewish youth from the community. Beyond the economic problems of Jewish schools, their survival and attractiveness will be determined by their success in competing with other private schools. To this end, it was recommended to expand and deepen the "Project Excellence" program, an educational enrichment program introduced into nine Buenos Aires schools three years ago, for an additional three years. Project Excellence was begun as a three-year pilot project with the cooperation and support of the Jewish Agency, JDC, the Rich Foundation, and AMIA (Argentinean Jewish Mutual Aid Association).

Now, however, new schools will be added, changes and improvements adopted over the years

will be instituted, criteria as to core curriculum, etc., will be insisted upon, Zionist or community youth movements will operate on school premises, and a school's acceptance into the program will be dependent upon the setting up of a local parents' campaign for Keren Hayesod.

To further assist in the need to pool resources, to streamline activity, to integrate formal and informal education, to develop complementary education, in short, to catalyze the educational system, a strong recommendation was made -- enthusiastically supported by local educational professionals and volunteer activists alike -- to send a special educational administrator from Israel, someone who understands the Jewish education system in Argentina and who could serve as a figure of authority to implement necessary changes.

A groundbreaking recommendation endorsed by the representative of the Ministry of Education called for the inclusion of three to four schools in Argentina for support from the Wolfson Fund, administered by the Israeli government.

Another recommendation called for the earmarking of \$200,000 in the 1999 budget of the Argentinean campaign of Keren Hayesod to strengthen Israel-centered programs and activities in the formal and informal education system in the outskirts of Buenos Aires and the country's interior.

Teacher-soldiers from the Israel Defense Forces have been utilized with success in informal educational activities among Jewish youth in the CIS and South Africa. It was recommended that Spanish-speaking teacher-soldiers with suitable backgrounds be recruited to perform similar duties in Argentina.

Strengthening Youth Movements

While the Zionist youth movements have succeeded in recruiting the majority of Jewish young people in Argentina's interior, they have not managed to attract a sizeable number of members in Buenos Aires itself. The few Buenos Aires members that they do attract are drawn from a population stratum which has no other Jewish educational or communal outlet, and which occupies a relatively low socio-economic stratum.

It was suggested that the economic recession may be expanding this socio-economic niche, which in turn could actually lead to a realistic increase in the ranks of the youth movements. In order to test this theory and to give an opportunity to the Zionist youth movements to enlarge their ranks, an immediate allocation of \$20,000 was recommended to establish a fund for subsidizing enrollment of new members in summer camps, held in Argentina in January and February.

Encouraging Aliyah

A number of important recommendations were made to encourage aliyah to Israel. These include occupational-based projects aimed especially at Argentina within the framework of the Aliyah 2000 program; training and retraining courses specifically directed at Argentinean Jews; a special, limited "Second Chance" program aimed at the relatively large population of Argentinean Jews who have come to Israel in the past through various frameworks and then returned to Argentina after a relatively short period; and a more aggressive marketing of programs for young people, in particular the option of university studies under the auspices of the Student Authority.

Postscript: Seagulls in Concepcion

Behind the administrative programs, policy recommendations, and statistics are real-live Jews struggling to maintain their own Jewish identities and that of their youth, particularly in remote corners of Argentina. On a Saturday night in late November 1998, I found myself in one such place, Concepcion de Uruguay, a small Argentinean town 300 km. north of Buenos Aires.

Most of the 150 Jewish families had turned out at the small Jewish community center/shul/afternoon school/youth center for the year-end party of the town's Zionist youth movement, Noar Hatzioni.

"There were three times as many families 20 years ago," whispered a disgruntled community member. Concepcion and its neighboring communities of Concordia and Paranga ironically do figure in Zionist history. They were the beachheads of Baron de Hirsh's Jewish

colonization efforts in Argentina over 100 years ago, impelled by the Baron's assessment that Palestine was a dead-end. Meanwhile, assimilation and internal migration to the big city has decimated these small communities and the end, lamentably, seems to be in sight.

But on this night, here in Concepcion, there were 30 Jewish kids from 10 to 17, very much alive and very much engaged in deep identification with Jewish continuity.

The excitement and the limelight was accentuated by the fact that this ordinarily totally local event was being attended by three Israelis: "Paisa," the almost legendary youth movement emissary, a former Argentinean, a kibbutznik with an M.A. in education who runs a string of such youth groups up and down the interior of Argentina; Dr. Uri Cohen, chief Jewish Agency education emissary to South America, Israeli-born and owing his Spanish to a Ladino-speaking, Greek-born father; and myself, with Spanish learned in an Ontario high school.

First there had been a meeting with local leaders, filled with the frustrations of fighting a rearguard action against the dying of the light. Then came the obligatory, fulsome speeches to those in the audience. Finally the youth took the stage with skits reflecting day-to-day life, Hebrew songs with local lyrics, and Israeli dances.

Then members of the local group carrying seagull placards told the following poignant story of Jewish life in the Argentinean diaspora:

"All the seagulls here are called Sebastian and all fly the same way, except for one seagull called Moshe Sebastian. He wants to be like all the other Sebastian seagulls, but his name is different, and he doesn't quite fly the same way. Of course, all the Sebastian seagulls feel the difference. They are not cruel to Moshe Sebastian, but the difference remains."

Then one day a different seagull appeared. "What is your name?" asks Moshe Sebastian. "My name is Moshe." "Moshe what?" "Just plain Moshe." "And where do you come from?" "I come from very far away." "And why do you fly so differently?" "In my country, that is the way we seagulls fly."

"Why do we have the same name?" "Because you are part of our family." "Can you teach me to fly like you?" "Yes I can, and you can be proud of your name and of your flight." And Moshe Sebastian learned to fly like Moshe. And, ends the skit, some day he may change his name to just plain Moshe.

There was not a dry eye in the hall. We cried for loss, we cried for the travails of the diaspora, we cried for visceral love of being Jewish, and wanting our children and our children's children to want to feel "just plain Moshe."

Sometimes in our ongoing dialogue about Israel-diaspora relations we forget the incredible revolution that Zionism has brought and continues to bring to those Jewish people in existential need, and our ongoing responsibility to the flickering remnants in Concepcions all over the world.

"He who saves the life of a single Jew, it is as if he saved the entire world," say our sages. Saving means reaching out, at uneconomically justified expense, to those who have forgotten the prayer, forgotten the place in the woods, forgotten the method of preparing the fire, but still remember the story, and still want to be part of our ongoing saga. That is the lesson of the seagulls of Concepcion.

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