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A NEW REPORT ON ISRAEL AND WORLD JEWRY

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Editor's note: This is the first of two Viewpoints dealing with the recent World Jewish Congress report dealing with the implications of Israel-Arab peace on world Jewry.

In early 1979 the World Jewish Congress under the initiative of its then President Philip Klutznick created an International Economic and Social Commission, a blue ribbon panel to report on "the implications of Israel-Arab peace for world Jewry." Its report, under that title, has just been published. I'm not certain about the purpose of the Commission or the Report. The nature of the Commission membership and the text of the Report suggest to me that the World Jewish Congress is seeking to restore itself to a position of prominence on the world Jewish scene.

Baron Guy de Rothschild was chairman of the 33 member Commission. I doubt that any Jewish group of similar size, at least in modern times, has ever included as distinguished a cadre of business and academic leaders. I hesitate to mention some of the members lest I omit a no less illustrious group of others. Among the seven Israelis, four were leading bankers, two heads of corporations and one a university president. Conspicuous by their absence from the Commission were Israeli political leaders and Jewish politicians from the Diaspora. I assume there was a deliberate decision to omit them. I think it was a wise one. The most prominent politicians are not always best suited for Commission work. To choose less prominent ones would have reduced the status of the Commission. More questionable, in my opinion, was the presence of so few leaders of Diaspora organizations. Some might say that, given the personal and/or corporate wealth or academic reputations of the Commission members, the absence of many Diaspora leaders in no way diminishes the potential influence of the Report. The members may be assumed to have access to any Jewish group in the world and, should they choose to exercise their influence, a significant amount of power. But given their own past histories and the demands on their time, the Commission members are unlikely to do so. These distinguished individuals made their mark in the corporate, financial and academic world because something other than Jewish public life was their primary focus of concern. It would be quite surprising if more than one or two (Edgar Bronfman may be one exception though this remains to be seen) were willing to transfer their major concerns to fields where (again with some exceptions) most have relatively little knowledge and no striking record of involvement.

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It might also be argued that because many of the Commission members are relatively uninvolved in organized Jewish life they are less sensitive to Jewish needs and interests. On the other hand, given the elitist nature of Diaspora leaders and the obviously strong role which the Commission staff played in the preparation of the Report, this may be beside the point. One might argue that the corporate and financial elite who comprised the majority of the Commission are not very different from one another or from other Diaspora organization leaders in terms of their knowledge of and sensitivity to Jewish interests and for purposes of the Commission Report are really interchangeable. In addition, the composition of the Commission may be irrelevant to the Report since it was not written by the members but by the staff director Louis Walinsky. Walinsky is a retired vice-president of the economics consulting firm of Robert R. Nathan Associates, and son of Ossip Walinsky, labor Zionist and trade union leader. He was assisted by Professor Se'ev Hirsch of Tel Aviv University. While I'm certain that all the members read the Report, a few even wrote supplementary statements, and the recommendations were discussed in the Commission, there is no effort to conceal Walinsky's central role.

Whether the World Jewish Congress was or was not well advised in choosing the Commission personnel, I do believe that its composition is very important in assessing the meaning of the Report. Precisely because so distinguished a group of people lent their names to a Report and to recommendations in an area with which they have relatively little familiarity suggests how eminently reasonable they must have believed it to be. I reject the possibility that they put their names to any document without regard to its content. That is not the way people in the kinds of positions of power and responsibility which Commission members hold, behave. Regardless of whether they are themselves leaders, I think it reasonable to conclude that the Report reflects the attitudes, one is almost tempted to say the assumptions, of that segment of Diaspora Jewry from whom its top lay leadership is drawn. The addition of seven Israelis means that the perspectives underlying the Report may well extend to the Israeli business and financial elite. Hence, I believe, the Report merits serious attention regardless of its intrinsic merits.

I want to consider three aspects of the Report: the Report as a statement on the condition of world Jewry and Israel; the perspectives that underlie the Report; and its specific recommendations. But first a few general comments.

The Report is clear and readily comprehensible to the layman, though marred by an unusually large number of typographical errors. The "Summary Conclusions and Recommendations" extend over 19 pages and the body of the Report over an additional 83 pages. Hence, articles in the Israeli press which have considered the Report in terms of the page or two devoted to aliya have left their readers with a distorted view of its contents. Finally, the title of the Report, The Implications of Israel-Arab Peace for World Jewry, is a misnomer. A more accurate title might be, The Present Condition of Israel and World Jewry.

The Condition of World Jewry

The Report constitutes the best summary statement of the condition of Israel and world Jewry which I have seen. It briefly summarizes the economic, political and cultural conditions of the major Diaspora communities and some smaller ones,

emphasizing in particular the danger of assimilation. It devotes more attention to Israel, Israel's international situation, and Israeli Diaspora relations. Cultural and religious life receive relatively little attention; economic problems got the fullest treatment although Israel's present predicament may merit that attention.

Despite its brevity, the Report not only summarizes the conventional wisdom but offers a number of insights and astute observations. I believe it is a beginning text for anyone wishing to familiarize himself with world Jewry and I hope the World Jewish Congress finds it possible to translate and distribute the text, after more careful proofreading, as widely as possible. For example, I doubt that there is a better summary description of Israel's internal difficulties than the following paragraph. After reviewing Israel's problems of inflation, its balance of payments gap, its debt service problems, housing shortages, relations between western and oriental Jews and the problems of the Arab minority in Israel, the Report states:

Most of these problems are interrelated and give rise to others. Thus, in fighting inflation, cuts in government spending curtail services to the poor and assistance to already distressed municipal finances, while the withdrawal of subsidies which held certain prices below free market levels now push price indices higher. The higher taxes needed to contain budget deficits breed evasion and resentment against those who are able to escape paying them. The housing shortage creates resentment against immigrants who are favored in the distribution of the scanty supply available. Duty free imports and income tax benefits for new immigrants have the same effect. The omnipresence of government regulation and intervention throughout the economy leads inevitably to favoritism ("protektsia"), and bitter feelings among those who lack access to it. And so it goes. All this had [sic? has] led to a serious deterioration in the social fabric. In the words of a prominent Israeli sociologist, there has been "a general weakening of most of the institutional frameworks of Israel's society It is very difficult to find common norms which are accepted and upheld." Not only a high level of crime and increasing lawlessness, but also an uncommon degree of violence, in the form of strikes, sanctions, stone throwing, verbal abuse, sheer rudeness and the like are testimony to this judgment. So is the incessant and bitter competition among economic groups seeking to protect or improve their living standards without regard to its costs or effects upon others. There is a pervasive sense that the government has lost control, and is incapable of coping constructively with these problems. More significantly, from a Jewish point of view, there is a general sense that the Jewish goals and values Zionists hoped would flourish in a Jewish state are in an advanced state of erosion and are in danger of being permanently lost. (pp. 52-53)

Perspectives Underlying the Report

Assuming as I do that the Report reflects the point of view of the Jewish economic elite, what can we conclude about their perceptions, their Jewish Weltanschauung? What assumptions, explicit or implicit, lie behind the Report?

First of all, there is a commitment to Jewish spiritual and physical survival and an assumption that the State of Israel's continued existence is crucial to that survival. There is no bland assurance that the Diaspora (or for that matter Israel) will continue to exist. Indeed, the Report is very pessimistic about the future of Jewish life in the western democracies. "The better off the Jews are as individuals, the less they tend to be concerned with their Jewishness." (p. 42) But there is an assumption, contrary to the Israeli interpretation of Zionism, that the interdependence of Israel and the Diaspora is a vital factor in the survival of each. The Report suggests that there will not be any large scale aliya, and that Israel could not absorb large numbers of olim in a short time anyway. In other words, there is a strong measure of realism (Jews will not come to Israel) mixed with what I can only describe as a measure of faith (despite current tendencies, Diaspora Jewry will survive). This is a balance to the typical Israeli mixture of realism (Diaspora Jewry faces assimilation) and faith (aliya represents a real alternative to the masses of Diaspora Jews). My own sympathies are with the Report's implicit perspective. If aliya and combatting assimilation in the Diaspora are two options for Jewish survival and both seem virtually beyond achievement, we are better advised, given scarce resources, to expand our energies on behalf of the second goal than the first. Combatting assimilation can reinforce tendencies to aliya but aliya is less helpful to Diaspora efforts to combat assimilation.

Thirdly, despite some of its rhetoric, the Report takes Israel's centrality in Jewish life for granted. There is a great deal of carping about Israeli arrogance, lack of sympathy and understanding for Diaspora Jewry and Israeli efforts to dominate the concerns and decisions of Diaspora organizations. Israel is called upon to cooperate meaningfully with Diaspora leaders in true partnership and Diaspora Jews are called upon to express their criticism of Israel much more openly and directly. But Israel's centrality is reflected in two ways. First, in the acknowledgement that commitment to Israel has become the primary expression of Jewish identity for many Diaspora Jews. Secondly, Israel's centrality is reflected in the expression of disappointment with Israeli culture and quality of life which do not serve as an inspiration for Diaspora Jewry. The Report is quite Israel-centered in this respect. I am tempted to call its perspective radical Ahad Ha'amism. This may reflect the tenuousness of the Jewish cultural commitments and self-confidence of the authors and Commission members, but in this respect they are typical Diaspora Jews. The Report assumes that cultural and spiritual guidance and direction for world Jewry ought to come from Israel, that, by implication, Diaspora Jewry lacks the will, or the capacity to develop a meaningful Jewish culture and spiritual life independently of Israel. I think there is some truth to this perspective but I would put the matter quite differently.

Israel is not only a state whose majority is composed of Jews but it is a Jewish state. That means a state where resources are distributed and governmental power exercised in a manner that is related in some way to the Jewish tradition and traditional Jewish conceptions of right and wrong, good and evil,

morality and immorality. This, in turn, not only means distributing resources and exercising power on behalf of Jewish interests (which must first be defined) but distributing resources and exercising power in a Jewish manner (which also requires definition). It is not absolutely certain that one can provide a meaningful and operative vision of what a Jewish state ought to be or, having provided such a vision, that Israel will live up to it. But only Israel faces the test because only Israel is a Jewish state. Diaspora Jewry, on the other hand, is properly concerned with the outcome of the test. It will answer the question of whether Judaism has a meaningful public dimension or whether the sum total of Jewish politics is the protection of Jews and Jewish interests.

On the other hand, it would be tragic if Diaspora Jewry looked exclusively to Israel to provide examples of responses to problems of personal and spiritual meaning. If Diaspora Jewry fails to produce its own spiritual and cultural leadership and its own pattern of Jewish living, it is indeed doomed to assimilation.

The fourth point with respect to the world view which underlies the Report is that its general political perspective is virtually identical to that of Israeli leaders in two very important respects. The Report sees the threats of: a a

the oil and energy crisis, unrelenting Soviet expansionism aggressiveness, the conflict of East-West interests and values, regional enmities, Third World frustration, envy and anti-Western feelings, resurgent and radical Islam, and Western disarray . . . (p. 35)

contributing to the world's Middle East problems but, the Report stresses, settlement of the Arab-Israel conflict would by no means remove these threats. Hence, it is futile to believe that pressuring Israel to further compromises would, for example, resolve the oil crisis. The second important perspective which the authors of the Report share with Israeli leaders is that the world "is in grave danger." (p. 36) It is:

troubled by internal doubts, fears, self-imposed inhibitions, mistrust and guilt, fearful of offending the oil and other raw materials producers, desirous of protecting and expanding established markets, and unable or unwilling to recognize, behind the spurious rhetoric of its adversaries, their malevolence and true objectives . . . (p. 36)

Western perspectives of these dangers, the Report argues, must be sharpened and western resolve to confront and repel them must be strengthened.

Fifth, differences with Israeli leaders over foreign policy are relatively minor. There is some criticism of Israeli settlement policy though it concentrates more on the public relations message than the policy itself. I think it would be fair to categorize the policy outlook of the Report with respect to Israeli settlement on the West Bank as a centrist Labor Party position. On the Palestinian question, the Report hedges a bit. There are four magnificent pages of historical background which those responsible for Israeli foreign relations would do well to disseminate as widely as possible. The section concludes that:

differences between Israel's security needs and Palestinian desires can be reconciled only if Palestinian representatives and the confrontationist Arab states agree:

- 1) to Israel's right to live at peace within recognized and secure borders;
- 2) to demilitarization of all returned territories, and to other essential security measures; and
- 3) to the normalization of diplomatic, trade and other relations with Israel. (p. 92)

These requirements, the Report states, "are in no way incompatible with the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people." (p. 92) It seems to me that the Report suggests the acceptability of a demilitarized Palestinian state within the framework of a comprehensive Israel-Arab peace settlement-- a proposal which the vast majority of Israelis and virtually all Arabs reject. I believe that if the Arabs would offer such a proposal, leaving the question of Jerusalem aside, most Israelis would rather quickly change their minds and accept it. I would not be surprised if a majority of Israel's Labor Party leaders, in their hearts, would welcome such a proposal. But, for the present, the proposal reflects a difference, however subtly phrased, between the position of many Diaspora Jews and the overwhelming consensus of Israelis.

The Recommendations

The final aspect of the Report which I want to address are the specific recommendations. I cannot mention all of them. Most are neither terribly startling or particularly helpful given the scope of the problems which the Report addresses. Does any reader expect to find a solution to Israel's economic, political and social problems or to Diaspora Jewry's growing rate of assimilation? I find it quite enough that problems are analyzed in so clear, intelligent and honest a fashion. This is surely the first step in their resolution. Nor are most Israelis offended by a recommendation that Diaspora Jews speak frankly and critically to them. What they fear is frank and critical discussions in the non-Jewish communication media. The Report is silent about this. The prosaic quality of most of the specific recommendations leads, I suppose, to a concentration on the more controversial ones. Israel is told, in fact, to make her peace with the absence of aliya and continuing yerida. Since she has "a small economy with an extraordinarily high percentage of university graduates, she cannot offer suitable career opportunities to all of them at home." (p. 11) She is advised to develop programs involving yordim "which could be productive of positive benefits for Israel." (p. 11) These include utilizing yordim as representatives for Israeli firms abroad, as fund-raisers and teachers.

The recommendations hedge two issues. They present both sides of the question of Diaspora aid for noshrim without adopting a clear stand. However sympathy for efforts to direct Soviet Jews to Israel is clear. Secondly, the question of educating Diaspora children in Jewish day schools rather than public schools is left undecided. It is to the Commission's credit that the issue was even raised and the statement "there is a strong body of opinion . . . that Jewish survival in the Diaspora depends on the development of a wide network of Jewish day schools in which all Jewish children could obtain a genuine

and meaningful Jewish education" included. (p. 19) Considering the likelihood that none of the 20 Commission members from the United States, England or France sent their own children to day schools, they deserve credit for confronting the charge that they themselves may not have behaved as exemplary Jewish leaders.

Finally, the recommendations with respect to Israel-Diaspora relations reflect elitist perspectives and interests (which do not necessarily make them right or wrong, good or bad). For example, recognition of the diminishing importance of Diaspora monetary contributions to Israel and the search for new channels to engage Diaspora Jews on behalf of Israel is really an elitist concern. The call for creation of "an appropriate forum for genuine dialogue" (p. 70) or joint economic planning or more outspoken criticism in meetings of Israel and Diaspora leaders speaks only to the concerns of very select groups. A "Shalom Corps" proposal for Israeli and Diaspora Jews "whose members would spend a year or two abroad in response to requests from weaker communities for teachers, rabbis and other essential Jewish services" (p. 14) smacks of possibilities for engaging a broader spectrum of the population until one realizes how few individuals would be qualified to serve in such a corps.

In summary, one need not agree with all the analyses and prescriptions in order to applaud the overall excellence of the Report. I think the attribution of Israeli political weakness and governmental indecisiveness to the system of proportional representation is incorrect. I have a quarrel with other aspects of the Report. But the Report constitutes a major contribution in its effort to grasp world Jewry as a totality, the importance it attributes to strengthening Israel-Diaspora relations, the analysis of the weakness of Israel's political and economic condition and the dire consequences that flow from this weakness, and in tracing the roots of many of Israel's internal problems to the ideology of its founding fathers and the needs of a previous period rather than to neglect, corruption and bad faith alone.

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