

THE CONSTITUTIONAL DOCUMENTS OF NEW ZEALAND JEWRY

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Very far removed from the rest of world Jewry, the New Zealand Jewish community is, nevertheless, one that interacts with world Jewry as best it can and whose organizational structures will be instantly recognizable to anyone active in Jewish affairs. Insights into New Zealand Jewry, its purposes and values, can be gained by examining the ways in which the community has defined itself through formal constitutional documents. As elsewhere, so too in New Zealand, those Jews taking part in communal activities have equipped themselves with constitutional reference points by which to guide their activities. While these come to the fore only at certain times — when a group is being founded; at meetings and elections of officers; in times of crisis and intragroup division — they play an important role in binding members to certain fundamental understandings about personal and group identity and objectives. Constitution-making can be an exhilarating activity, liberating the energies of those devising ways of governance and strategies for linking up with other organizations.

The structure of organized Jewish community life in New Zealand is comparable in character and design, if not in size and resources, to that found in other parts of the diaspora. Insights into New Zealand Jewry, its purposes and values, can be gained by examining the ways in which the community has defined itself through formal constitutional documents. As elsewhere, so too in

New Zealand, those Jews taking part in communal activities have equipped themselves with constitutional reference points by which to guide their activities. While these come to the fore only at certain times — when a group is being founded; at meetings and elections of officers; in times of crisis and intragroup division — they play an important role in binding members to certain fundamental understandings about personal and group identity and objectives.

That this is so should not be surprising. As Elazar has observed, “Jewish civilization, its religion and its polity, are grounded in constitutional documents and infused with the principles of constitutionalism.” This begins with the Torah itself, “properly understood as the constitution of the Jewish people, however interpreted.” Elazar has sketched the “constitutional basis” of Jewish communities, noting efforts to collect “model constitutional documents for founding and organizing communities.”¹ These were of particular importance in societies where Jewish communities were given considerable autonomy and control over their members. While group membership in New Zealand is entirely voluntary, a view that Jews have an obligation to affiliate with the community is still expressed, and has at times been a feature of Jewish constitutions. For instance, during the nineteenth century, congregations levied Jewish residents who were non-members and payment of accrued fees was expected if congregational services were desired. Even today, use of the services of a Chevra Kadisha for a non-member may be accompanied by a request for payment (from relatives or from the estate) for several years’ membership fees.

Elazar has pointed out that “for ordinary Jews, especially those engaged in establishing new communities, writing a constitution could still evoke the desire to proclaim their goals to the world and establish the rules of order necessary to achieve them.”² This has been true in New Zealand in the past and remains so today. The passion associated with the by no means infrequent attempts to revise existing constitutions represent efforts to articulate deeply held convictions about Jewish life and identity within constitutional contexts.

A framework for considering the constitutional documents of New Zealand Jewry focuses on several topics. These include:

- the structure of government — how power is organized within different organizations;
- the relationship between various Jewish organizations both within and beyond the New Zealand community;

- attitudes expressed towards traditional Jewish ideas and practices.

Elazar's study of the constitutional documents of American Jewry found that they generally adopt a fully recognizable constitutional framework: preamble, articles, and an appropriate conclusion. Some, however, were written as "articles of agreement among the founders," while others were drafted as "articles of incorporation" according to the laws of the American state in which they were incorporated.³

While it is not unexpected to find a preference for formal constitutionalism in the United States, given the preeminence of that country's written constitution and the emphasis that is given to it in politics, law and history, New Zealand is a much smaller, simpler society. It has no history of a constitutional convention; there is no federal framework (as there are no states); and, like the United Kingdom, there is no formal, written constitution with the status of supreme law.

While New Zealand's political system is able to function without a formal constitution to guide it, Jewish communal groups are all constitutionally defined and organized. The informality that in many ways pervades New Zealand society and culture does not altogether extend to the activities of New Zealanders working together around a conference table. Annual general meetings are part of the rhythm of communal life and their workings are determined according to an organizational clock imbedded in a group's constitution.

There are some distinctions which can be made, at least in principle, between the analysis of Jewish constitutions and the study of constitutions generally. The Jewish people for a long time have been preoccupied with questions of survival. It is understood, of course, in New Zealand as elsewhere, that neither buildings nor organizations can guarantee that individuals and families will adhere to the Jewish faith and its millennial traditions. Nevertheless, constitutions can play a role in formalizing a consensus, at least among those who write them and among those who accept their contents and subscribe. Constitutions will not be regarded as important to those on the fringes of Jewish identity, but more actively identifying Jews will regard constitutional issues as important in providing direction for themselves and for the community with whose fate they have elected to associate themselves. Thus, for some, questions about how "Jewish" a constitution ought to be can be important. Will the constitution employ any traditional Jewish language or motifs in defining goals

or structuring activities? Is there a place for *halakhah* in the rules? Does rabbinic leadership have a role to play? Constitutions provide answers to some of these questions and, in doing so, help to define the character of a community.

In Jewish communities, as in political systems generally, constitutions which are too rigid, and do not evolve over time, ultimately become an impediment to a group. They may collapse or they may prevent a group from adapting to changing circumstance. The earliest Jewish constitutions in New Zealand were those of the first congregations. A copy (in elegant script) of the minutes of a "special meeting held on Sunday June 10th 1877-5637," held "for the purpose of passing a code of Laws for the guidance of the Members of the Congregation," as well as the "Laws" themselves, is found in the oldest book of minutes and congregational records in the Wellington Hebrew Congregation's archives. The laws were drafted by a committee which "as far as laid in their power kept to the old Laws of the Congregation," referring to a previous document all copies of which are now apparently lost. The 1877 Laws are structured according to accepted constitutional practice: a preface; detailed provisions; and signatures (in this case, of the President and the Honorary Secretary). The preface is of five clauses: the first gives a rationale for change ("The present code of laws for the government of this congregation being found inadequate to their wants and requirements"), while the second provides legitimacy to those drafting a new code based on communal needs and democratic values ("The committee therefore, in deference to the wishes of the rest of the congregation, endeavor to revise the present code by adding thereto other Laws, and repealing such as are found inadequate to present our future wants"). The preface also states that a new code is necessary now that the congregation has reached the point in its development of being able to employ "a paid Minister"; having done so, it is necessary "to establish some regulations for his guidance," with a view to the existence of a proper understanding between the congregation and its Minister. Other reasons for a new set of laws had to do with "the better management of the Burial Ground" and "the Graves."

The fifth point in the preface, however, has little if anything to do with the reasons for drafting a new constitution, offering, instead, an argument for having a congregation in a city with a sufficient number of Jewish residents. The preface closes with what might be called a statement of faith: "It is the duty of every Israelite to attend Divine Service in the Synagogue, to repeat the

prayer with due devotion and to perform the duties with suitable reverence.”

The “Laws and Regulations” were approved at a meeting chaired by the congregation’s president and attended by thirteen other people (all of them men). The five-point preface was followed by 96 numbered provisions, beginning with the name of the congregation: “‘Beth-El’ — House of God,” and going on to state that “The Synagogue shall be opened on all proper occasions, and the form of prayers shall be the same as those read by the Jews of England termed ‘Minhag Poland,’ under the jurisdiction of the Rev. N.M. Adler, Chief Rabbi.”

Having established the religious character of the congregation, the rules provided for categories of membership, and the rights and privileges of members, before setting out (under the heading, “Government of Congregation”) rules for “the management of the affairs of the congregation.” The officers of President and Treasurer are established, as is a Committee, with broad powers to oversee congregational business. All property of the congregation was vested in the names of trustees, and requirements for the election of two auditors concluded the section of the document pertaining to governance.

The Wellington congregation’s basic laws then devote two full clauses to the appointment of “Chosan-Torah and Chosan-Berishes,” two men appointed “between the New Year and Tabernacle Festival.” The names of those appointed were to be “announced in the Synagogue on the first day of the Tabernacle Festival” and it was stipulated that “they shall at the period of their officiation be seated next to the president, where they must attend to be called to the Torah on Simchas Torah and Shabbas Berishes.”

As noted in the preface, one of the reasons for a new constitution being introduced in 1877 was that for the first time a full-time rabbi was being appointed to the congregation. In fact, Rabbi Herman Van Staveren held the position for more than 50 years, an extraordinary record which won him fame within New Zealand and within the then British Empire.⁴ The constitution sets out his duties, so that the document almost functions as a contract between the congregation and its rabbinical leader.

The constitution also provides for the duties of a Secretary, who was charged with the responsibility for keeping “a register of all Births, Marriages and Deaths in Hebrew and English, in the proper books provided for that purpose.” These books are still preserved in the congregation’s safe and are kept up-to-date to this day.

The constitution continues to move beyond setting out the powers of the governing body, and the duties of its officers, by, in effect, enumerating the expectations and requirements of Jewish people at important milestones in their lives. Thus, four clauses deal with marriages, pertaining to "all persons of the Jewish faith who may be desirous of marrying." Marriages were to be "solemnized in the synagogue unless application be made to have the ceremony performed at a private residence." This was subject to approval from the president, and there was a special fee ("two guineas") charged for permission. However, Jews who had not been "a resident member for six months" and who wished to be married by the congregation were to "pay such a sum as the committee may determine." Other paragraphs specify procedures in the event of births (naming of children in the Synagogue) and deaths (including the digging of graves and the erection of grave stones). While burials were not authorized "unless all arrears are previously paid" (at the discretion of the president and the committee), there were provisions for the indigent consistent with Jewish values: "When any poor co-religionist shall depart this life his funeral expenses shall be defrayed out of the funds of this congregation."

Other provisions deal with the order of persons to be called to the Torah. This section begins with a reference to the Bar Mitzvah, which was permitted to take place "only on condition [the Bar Mitzvah boy] produce a certificate from the Minister to the Board of Management certifying his ability."

The remaining provisions of the constitution concerned itself with seating arrangements and miscellaneous provisions. Even these, however, tended to be specific to Jewish (rather than strictly constitutional) requirements. One clause, for instance, relates to "any member wishing to hold an anniversary of death in the Synagogue," a *yahrzeit*. Finally, the idea of Jewish voluntarism had not taken root at this stage. Thus clause 93 declared: "All recognised Hebrew residents, who may have been in Wellington not less than twelve months, shall be requested in writing to subscribe to the support of the Synagogue and should they refuse to do so, or ignore such request, shall be rated in the books of this congregation in the sum of three pounds (3) annually."

In the nineteenth century, the once thriving Dunedin Jewish congregation produced a little booklet for the edification of its members, giving the names of past Presidents, and the incumbent President, Treasurer, Honorary Secretary, and Minister, before setting forth the "Bye-Laws of the Beis Yisroel Jewish congregation of Dunedin." The constitution is similar in language and

structure to the Wellington document discussed above. It, too, dedicates itself to “the form of prayers” of “the Jews of England,” which are here termed “Minig Ashkenasim,” and also placed itself under “the jurisdiction of the Rev. the Chief Rabbi.” It includes sections on membership, governance, seating arrangements, marriages, births, and deaths. The booklet also included a seating plan in the synagogue, giving the places for the men, for the “ladies,” and also for the choir. Thus, the structure of congregational government, the relationship between an organization and the wider Jewish world, the attitudes expressed towards traditional Jewish ideas and practices are all engaged in various ways in this document.

The congregation is open to membership from all Jews resident in Dunedin. Governance is by officers elected by and accountable to the congregation’s membership. The idea of an informed electorate, central in democratic thought, is honored in the clause requiring the Secretary to “furnish each member with a copy of these laws.” The community positions itself within the Jewish world in much the same way as did secular New Zealand — self-governing in all respects, but subordinate to the authority of leadership in London. Traditional Jewish values and practices are alluded to at various points (requests for Yahrzeit, for instance). It might also be noted that members “shall be disqualified from becoming or remaining a member” if “marrying contrary to the Judaical [rites].”

The rules of the “Beth Israel” congregation of Auckland, adopted in 1929, deviate little from the above pattern. The “order of service” is according to European Jewry (“Minhag Poland”) and the congregation “recognises the authority and jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire.” Here, too, there is a rejection of the idea that joining the congregation is a matter for individuals to take up or decline. As in Dunedin, the Auckland Jewish community chose to invite membership from Jews in the Auckland area and to debit them for membership if they declined to take up the offer. Governance was by an elected board and the constitution specifies the duties of various officers, including “the beadle” (whose job description included the requirement to “prepare everything requisite for the service in the Synagogue”).

Some provisions focused on new issues — *shechita*, looked after by a special Board empowered to “deal with all matters relating to Kosher meat”; and “disturbing [the] congregation,” in which those found to be “disturbing the performance of Divine Service, or refusing a Mitzvah or a call to the Torah, shall be treated in such manner as the Board may think fit.”

The Wellington Hebrew Congregation has revised its rules on several occasions, printing and distributing new booklets for the members. New rules were adopted on 6 September 1932 (the Hebrew year, 5692, was also noted) and 5 December 1963. Many of the changes were cosmetic: by 1963, for instance, the congregation was accepting the jurisdiction of "the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth" rather than "the Chief Rabbi of England," who was, of course, the same person. The form of congregational government remained unchanged. Both constitutions delineated the duties for two "Ministers," a Senior Minister and an Assistant Minister, and the 1963 document drew attention to the congregation's relationships with other New Zealand congregations by requiring either Minister, "if required," to attend "meetings of the New Zealand Board of Jewish Ministers or any Beth Din which may be established in New Zealand by authority of the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth."

All these constitutions frowned upon members marrying non-Jews. Otherwise "privileged members" (members "who shall have held and paid for a seat in the Synagogue for not less than twelve calendar months") were constitutionally advised, under the terms of the 1932 constitution, that "any person married contrary to the Jewish faith shall not be entitled to any of the privileges." The 1963 constitution denied "privileges" ("except such as would remain the right of such member under the laws of traditional Judaism") to "a member who is married to a person not of the Jewish faith or is married contrary to the laws of traditional Judaism."

Eligibility for membership on the Board of Management was also affected by marital choices. The 1932 document made "ineligible for election" "members married contrary to the Jewish faith"; the 1963 document barred members "married contrary to the laws of traditional Judaism" and members who are "also a member of an organisation furthering a form of Judaism other than traditional Judaism." The 1932 constitution also made "female members" ineligible for election.

The 1963 constitution also asserted its authority over the Chevra Kadisha, which was to "conduct its affairs in co-ordination with the Board," notwithstanding its separate corporate existence. The congregation developed a new set of rules when it entered its current premises on Webb Street in 1977. The Webb Street rules included the disapproval of mixed marriages, both as to the privileges of members and their ineligibility for a place in congregational governance.

Given its purpose, it is not surprising that the Wellington Chevra Kadisha also organizes itself on a traditional Jewish basis. Its rules state clearly that "the objects of the Society shall be the carrying out with respect and decorum [of] the preparations for the burial of the dead according to Orthodox Jewish rites and customs." The Chevra Kadisha, like the Wellington Hebrew Congregation, acknowledges the supremacy of "the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth" and obliges itself to accept the interpretations of "the Senior Minister of the Wellington Hebrew Congregation." Membership in the society is open only to "persons of the Jewish faith [over the age of 18] who are eligible for membership" in the congregation. The organization is governed through an elected board.

On 14 October 1877 (5638), four months after the special meeting to approve revised rules for the Wellington Hebrew Congregation, a meeting was held at the Synagogue to adopt "certain rules that the committee had framed for the guidance of the Hebrew School." These were passed unanimously by the 21 men present and they have remained the basis for the school's rules ever since. The rabbi was responsible for the running of the school, subject to direction from the congregation's General Committee (later the Board of Management). Membership in the congregation is a requirement for persons wishing to send their children to the Hebrew School.

It would be surprising if the challenge of Reform Judaism to traditional thought and practice did not carry with it some constitutional implications. The very first goal specified in the rules of the Wellington Liberal Jewish Congregation ("Liberal" has since been changed to "Progressive") is "to provide, support and maintain Houses of Worship according to the practice of Liberal Judaism." It is not clear why "Houses" appears in the rules, unless there was some expectation that the movement would grow to such an extent as would require the development of more than one temple to accommodate its membership.

The third "object" of the "Society" is also ideologically distinctive: "to unite liberal-minded and progressive Jews in the City of Wellington and its surrounding territory; to further the development of Progressive Judaism; to encourage the formation of Liberal Jewish Religious Communities, Congregations, Branch Groups and Schools of instruction for the young."

The Society also expressed the hope that its existence might "stimulate and encourage the study of Judaism, its language, history and lore," with "the fundamental principles of Judaism" re-

maining unchanged, notwithstanding “their application [to] modern life.”

The constitution also looks towards those with a less evident Jewish identity, hoping “to awaken an active interest in those Jews who, for one reason or another, now fail to participate in Jewish religious life.” The “objects” of the constitution serve here as the functional equivalent of a preface, analogous, in brief, to the category of “constitution as revolutionary manifesto” delineated by Elazar.

Once these sentiments are out of the way, however, the constitution follows the conventional approach. Membership rules are succeeded by those dealing with governance. As with the other Jewish constitutions being considered here, democratic values are dominant in the provisions dealing with government and accountability. As for membership, the constitution provides a category of “Associate Member” for “any persons seeking to become a member of the Jewish faith, who has been approved for a probationary period and instruction.” Membership is open to anyone deemed acceptable by the Board of Management and obviously a distinction exists in practice between Progressive and Orthodox congregations on this point.

Another constitution with a more avowedly ideological agenda is that of the Zionist Federation of New Zealand. Its goals are:

- to foster the unity of the Jewish people;
- to strengthen Jewish consciousness;
- to promote Jewish cultural activities;
- to strengthen Israel;
- to carry out the aims and objects of Zionism;
- to foster and encourage the study of the Hebrew language and Jewish culture;
- to organise New Zealand Jewry and to unite the Jewish organisations of New Zealand for [these] purposes.

It is probably no accident that the constitution of the Zionist Federation should be the most ideologically focused, brimming with energy and enthusiasm. It was drafted by those with a strong attachment and commitment to Israel, regarded as a nation at risk and as a homeland for New Zealand Jewry as for Jews everywhere. The concern for Israel among Jewish activists in other organizations enables the Zionist movement to organize itself as a federation and to call on the resources of people from other groups.

This is given constitutional expression in this constitution, which is federal in nature. Thus, clause 4, giving the “objects” of the Federation, is followed by a clause which identifies the “means” by which the Federation’s goals might be fulfilled. These include “the co-ordination under the authority of the Federation...of all Zionist Organisations or other organisations doing work for Israel or the Jewish people” accepting the aforementioned “aims and objects.”

In describing its “means,” however, the constitution’s drafters produced some additional purposes as well, almost as though the strength of their feeling about Israel and Zionism was too strong for these to be contained within convenient constitutional reference points. Thus, the Federation committed itself to:

- Enlisting for the Zionist movement the support of the greatest possible number of Jews in New Zealand;
- [C]ooperating with any Jewish movement...for the maintenance and defence of Jewish rights or for the welfare in any other respects of the Jewish communities of New Zealand;
- The strengthening and fostering of Jewish national sentiment and consciousness;
- The organisation and strengthening of Jewish educational and cultural institutions based on the spiritual heritage of the Jewish people;
- The fostering and encouraging of a sentiment for Israel in the Jewish youth of New Zealand;
- The education of the Jewish youth towards fulfillment of their duties to the Jewish people of Israel.

As a federation, provisions for governance were necessarily more complicated. The constitution provided for regular conferences and stipulated the size of conference delegations, apportioned according to the strength and size of the participating affiliated and associated bodies. The Federation has an elected leadership and its executive includes representation from different organizations associated with the Zionist movement. These include representatives of the Jewish youth groups and the movement’s newspaper, the *New Zealand Jewish Chronicle*.

Other Zionist organizations are no less forthright in their statements of purpose. The Wellington Zionist Society commits itself “to...educate the people of New Zealand” about Israel; “to strengthen the State of Israel”; “to render moral assistance to the people of Israel” and “to facilitate the ingathering into Israel of

Jews desiring to settle there”; “to foster the unity of the Jewish people”; “to strengthen Jewish consciousness and heritage”; “to educate and promote Jewish culture in New Zealand”; and “to propagate the cause of Zionism.” An age of skepticism and disbelief such as ours makes the purity and intensity of such language all the more striking.

The constitutions of other New Zealand Jewish organizations also include compelling language concerning their responsibilities towards Israel. The WIZO Federation constitution, for instance, pledges itself to “a programme of education among members in order to inculcate in them a knowledge of Zionist ideals, Jewish culture and tradition.” The B’nai B’rith Wellington Unit constitution pledges its “support for the State of Israel” among its various philanthropic and cultural purposes. The constitution of the Jewish National Fund of New Zealand, a body within a larger federation (JNF of Australia and New Zealand), includes a commitment “to promote in New Zealand” the interests of the JNF and to carry out “such tasks as shall from time to time be conferred” upon it by the World Zionist Organisation. These organizations see the place in the larger world to a greater (WIZO and JNF) or lesser (B’nai B’rith) extent in terms of their ability to contribute to the realization of Jewish national goals in the land, state, and among the people of Israel.

The JNF New Zealand constitution is itself federal in character. Although largely inoperative in practice, the constitution reflects an earlier period of vibrancy and communal commitment, the era of the blue box and regular household collections. Like the Zionist Federation, the membership of JNF New Zealand consists of other organizations (the JNF of the South Island, for instance) rather than individuals. The organization comprises a democratically elected executive and there are provisions for a regular JNF conference.

The WIZO federation’s constitution also provides a framework of rules for participating WIZO groups. The framework is a fairly simple one, with a democratically elected executive and various requirements as to meetings and finances.

The Wellington Zionist Society and B’nai B’rith, by contrast, have individuals, not other groups, as their members. The Wellington Zionist Society’s constitution specifies that members “shall be of the Jewish faith,” defined as “any person who is eligible for membership of either the Wellington Hebrew Congregation...or of the Wellington Liberal Congregation,” with disputes as to eligibility being determined by “reference to the Minister for the time being of such Congregation to which enquiry is made.”

In short, the Zionist Society accepts as Jews anyone who is acceptable to either of the two congregations, a practice common to other Jewish groups not seeking to become embroiled in controversies about "who is a Jew."

The B'nai B'rith constitution also states that it is open to "persons of the Jewish faith," while the rules of the Wellington Hebrew Philanthropic Society state that its members "shall all be of the Hebrew faith" and that its goals are "to relieve financially distressed persons of the Hebrew faith," defined using identical language to that found in the Zionist Society constitution.

The rules of Wellington's Council of Jewish Women provides that membership "shall consist of an unlimited number of female persons who shall be of the Jewish faith," which simply uses the words quoted above (with "any female person" replacing "any person") in defining what is meant by "of the Jewish faith."

While power relationships within constitutional documents are the sections of keenest interest to would-be politicians and power-brokers, for others, particularly at meetings, it is the fine points of a constitution, the detailed rules about quorums or amending procedures, that prove most fascinating. But constitutions seek to inspire loyalty and commitment, and for that purpose it is the goal-oriented language of a preface, or a set of "objects," which is the most exciting. The constitution of Wellington's Council of Jewish Women sets out its objectives in strong terms:

- To intensify in each Jewish woman her Jewish consciousness, her sense of responsibility to the Jewish community, to the wider community generally and to the State of Israel;
- To bring about a closer fellowship amongst all Jewish women;
- To serve as a collective voice for Jewish women throughout New Zealand;
- To encourage Jewish education;
- To initiate and assist Jewish charities and charities generally;
- To work for the improvement of general social conditions;
- Any other objects which...have the effect of improving the conditions of people generally of any nationality, race or religion.

The simplest organizational documents of any of the Jewish groups are those belonging to the country's regional councils.

Here, too, statements of purpose fulfill the role generally played by the preface to a constitution. The Wellington Regional Jewish Council is enjoined to “assume a watchful and active role”; to respond to “antisemitism”; “to take initiatives in education”; “to increase Jewish consciousness and identity”; “to take a stand on important issues in the New Zealand community.” This is a lofty agenda, and in times of difficulty attachment to such goals can allow Jewish councils in Auckland and Wellington to play an important unifying role, speaking for the Jewish community to the government and through the media.

The Jewish councils send out subscription notices to individuals, so that any “member of the Jewish community” can support the organization and attend the annual general meeting. A general statement concludes the Wellington Regional Jewish Council’s brief set of rules: “The Council is a Jewish organisation dealing with Jewish concerns and is not open to people who are not Jewish.” A federal principle operates as well. The membership of the Jewish Council comprises members appointed by five community organizations “considered to be most representative of the community by reason of numerical strength and activities.” There is also an “electoral college,” apportioned among various Jewish organizations according to their size, which functions at the annual general meeting in order to elect the members of the council and its officers.

The Rules of the Wellington Jewish Social Club state that “the objects of the Club” are “to promote general harmony and good fellowship among the members and to provide amenities for the promotion of social and cultural activity for the benefit of all members and to foster Jewish youth activities.” When it was established, there was only one congregation, the Wellington Hebrew Congregation, and so the constitutional requirements for membership were simple: “members of the Jewish faith at the age of 13 years and over.” When the Club gave up its separate premises and joined the congregation in the Wellington Jewish Community Center, membership comprises “every person who, being a member of any Wellington Jewish religious congregation...approved and recognised as such by the Center’s Management Council.” The Club’s constitution includes all of the scaffolding of organizational life: officers, elections, an annual meeting, an honorary solicitor, auditing of accounts, and so forth. This suggests that a constitution can exist almost in the manner of a ghost town in an old Western movie: the buildings are there, dusty with age but still standing, but all the people are gone.⁵

The Community Center's constitution has the least inspiring set of "objects" — expressed in the language used by lawyers concerned with conveyancing of property and trust deeds, far from the high ideals of Zionism or the sturdy bedrock of Jewish tradition. It is, however, probably the most contentious of all the New Zealand Jewish constitutions, since dissatisfaction with the structure of the management council, and the governance (and indebtedness) of the Community Center buildings is a perennial theme. It defies attempts to alter its structure, as imbedded within it are interests (the Social Club and the congregation) with separate claims to assets and decision-making power.

Constitutional development and change are signs of communal life and vibrancy. When members struggle to identify and articulate purposes that they feel strongly about, this is a sign of health and vitality. When committee members work well into the evenings and on weekends on constitutional revision, seeking to develop new ways of moving their organization and the wider community in a particular direction, this is evidence of commitment and dedication. But ultimately organizations exist not for the satisfaction of those who lead them, but for the benefit of a wider community. Some groups, hamstrung by their constitutions, find it virtually impossible to change them. Unable to obtain a quorum to consider the "trivial detail"⁶ of constitutional amendment and change, leaders and organizers struggle on, frustrated by outdated or cumbersome rules and the indifference of those they seek to serve. At the best of times, constitution-making can be an exhilarating activity, liberating the energies of those devising ways of governance and strategies for linking up with other organizations. There is, it would seem therefore, a legitimate place for constitutional change and initiative within the overall strategy for community survival being developed by those concerned with the survival of New Zealand Jewry into the twenty-first century.

Notes

- * This article, together with the complete texts of the constitutional documents it discusses, first appeared in Stephen Levine, *The New Zealand Jewish Community* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), a product of the on-going JCPA study of the constitutional documents of modern and contemporary Jewish communities.
- 1. Daniel J. Elazar, "The Constitutional Documents of Contemporary Jewry: An Introduction to the Field," in *A Double Bond: The Constitutional Documents of American Jewry*, Daniel J. Elazar, Jonathan

- D. Sarna and Rela G. Monson, eds. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), p. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
 4. See Maurice S. Pitt, "The Van Staveren Ministry," and Nigel Isaacs, "Van Staveren: A Rabbi of the People," in Stephen Levine, ed., *A Standard for the People: The 150th Anniversary of the Wellington Hebrew Congregation 1843-1993* (Christchurch: Hazard Press, 1993), pp. 83-89.
 5. For an overview of the Club and its history, see "The Wellington Jewish Social Club," in *A Standard for the People*, pp. 166-175.
 6. Elazar, "The Constitutional Documents of Contemporary Jewry," p. 50. The sample of New Zealand Jewish constitutional documents which appear in *The New Zealand Jewish Community* may be compared to the American Jewish documents reprinted in Daniel J. Elazar, Jonathan Sarna, and Rela Geffen Monson, eds., *A Double Bond: The Constitutional Documents of American Jewry* (Lanham, MD: JCPA and University Press of America, 1992), Part Three - Documents.