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### DIASPORA COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES IN PROJECT RENEWAL:

#### THEIR ROLES AND IMPORTANCE

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Project Renewal has attracted a good deal of interest ever since announced by Prime Minister Begin in late 1977. For the residents of the 69 distressed neighborhoods in Israel it signaled great hope. For the government it became the centerpiece of its social service programs and an opportunity to raise the level of diaspora financial support for re-building Israel. For diaspora communities, the promise of partnership with a particular neighborhood and jointly planned specific projects excited fundraisers and planners alike. Fundraisers saw this direct connection as a unique and effective technique for encouraging contributions. Project Renewal was heralded as "the key to transition from war to peace", a possible theme for the 1980's diaspora fundraising campaigns. Diaspora leaders welcomed Renewal as a chance to have input into Israel in terms of shared expertise - not merely monetary contributions.

The realization of this partnership has taken various shapes and forms. Diaspora involvement for some communities was translated into raising money and visiting the twinned Israel neighborhood from time to time. In many cases a Project Renewal committee was established within the framework of the local board or Jewish federation. In some instances a professional staff person was assigned to serve the Project Renewal committee. As diaspora communities began to involve themselves more fully and take their role in Project Renewal more seriously, they came to recognize the existence of two sets of difficulties: the first relating to the progress of the project as such, and the second relating to a gap in direct communication and relationship building between the parties involved. In response to these perceived needs, at least thirteen diaspora communities have made their role in Project Renewal more real and more effective by placing on-site representatives in their twinned Israel neighborhoods. No conscious planning was done within the Project Renewal framework to develop on-site representation; no suggested role definition or recommended job description existed. Each of these diaspora communities independently decided that it was necessary for its involvement in Project Renewal to have someone on the spot looking after its interests in some way.

Thus, as the position has evolved, the community representatives work closely with diaspora leadership through direct communication and during the latter's visits to Israel. The representative is in no way designed to replace diaspora involvement, but rather to supplement and strengthen it. The purpose for such a position is threefold. On the one hand, the representative is responsible for keeping the

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diaspora community informed and involved with the local project on a day-to-day basis. He/she also helps the community develop an understanding of the Israel scene, e.g. what types of intervention have the best chances for success, which are doomed to failure, and how the community's resources can be utilized most effectively. Finally, the role calls for 'translating' the outlook, requirements, and desire for true partnership on the part of the diaspora community into understandable terms for the Israeli actors, e.g. the local project manager, the municipality, government offices, the Jewish Agency, and the residents. Those diaspora communities which utilize such liaison persons have experienced a transformation in their relationship to the local neighborhoods - from a largely philanthropic linkage into a very real, living relationship between people. In Ashkelon, British Jewry had hired a full-time liaison person - a former lay leader who had made *aliya*. Australia also mobilized a former lay leader now living in Israel with time and energy to invest in Project Renewal on a voluntary basis. Milwaukee, Switzerland, South Africa, San Francisco and New York had part-time representatives. Baltimore, Los Angeles and Western Canada also took on part-time liaison people whose initial tasks were primarily communicative in nature. Washington, D.C. drafted a community lay leader who was spending the year in Israel as its liaison.

The Center for Jewish Community Studies has followed Project Renewal since its inception, and indeed had anticipated its emergence in a field study of Jewish Agency involvement in Israel communities initiated two years earlier. From the first, we foresaw the need for some kind of involvement that would bring together the diaspora community with the Jewish Agency, the municipalities, and the government. The institution of a liaison role is a necessary concomitant of such a partnership. Consequently, the Center undertook to serve two U.S. Jewish communities in that capacity. When the Center became aware of this growing phenomenon, it decided to bring together the diaspora community representatives functioning in Israel to examine their respective roles and functions. The forum that emerged provided the representatives with an opportunity to share their experiences and to learn from one another, as well as to evaluate the contribution of this relatively new figure in Project Renewal.

From the discussions of the group it became clear that several models of community representative had developed on an ad hoc basis. Each model has its advantages and disadvantages. The overview presented here deals first with the various roles played by existing community representatives, what could be termed their job descriptions. It then looks at the kind of person required to play each role. This descriptive analysis of the role of community representative was prepared as a direct result of the general agreement found among the forum participants that the role played by such liaison persons is a vital ingredient for a successful Project Renewal. It reflects many hours of discussion at the Center within the framework of the community representatives forum, in which eight of those working in such positions participated along with Center personnel involved in Project Renewal.

#### Role of the Diaspora Community Representative

The role of any particular community representative takes form in light of the needs, problems and opportunities in his or her targeted Israeli neighborhood and in response to the desires and resources of the diaspora partner. The range of involvement extends from a quarter-time singular effort to a full-time basis with considerable staff support. It varies from a limited information-providing role to one of a trusted delegate empowered to speak in the name of the diaspora community. All representatives deal directly with their diaspora federations;

none are employed by or report to the Jewish Agency, the Israel government, the municipality or the project itself. They do, however, work very closely in conjunction with these other actors. Five major tasks stand out as components of the role of community representative: communicator, linker, troubleshooter, initiator, and delegate.

1. Communicator - In this role, the representative is responsible for providing information to the diaspora community via written reports, telex and telephone on a regular basis regarding developments within or relevant to the local neighborhood. He/she traces the progress of projects being funded by the diaspora community. This involves being in regular contact with all government, municipal and Jewish Agency officials who are playing a role in the project and attending local Steering Committee meetings. It also includes relaying information, opinions, questions and requests from the diaspora federation to Project Renewal actors in Israel.

In addition to simple reporting and translating, there are a number of advantages to involving someone whose sole interest is that one neighborhood and its relationship to its diaspora partner. The on-site representative is able to transmit the nuances of Israeli society and to interpret the Israeli perspective of events and issues as they occur in the neighborhood. This personal dimension is what gives life to an otherwise routine connection. He/she is also in a position to respond immediately to any unusual events. One example of the importance of this aspect is when a suspicious fire broke out in the Project Renewal office in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Musrara, a phone call to Los Angeles by its representative effectively prevented potential overreaction in the diaspora community stimulated by partial reports in the Jerusalem Post international edition and the JTA dispatches.

2. Linker - This task involves responsibility for arranging visits to the neighborhood by diaspora leadership, missions, and other relevant visitors from the diaspora community with the goal of building knowledge, understanding and personal ties with the neighborhood, its people and those involved in Project Renewal on behalf of the various bodies in Israel. The aim is for visitors to become helpful in fundraising efforts back home, as well as in establishing a stronger personal dimension to the linkage between the diaspora and the project neighborhood. The representative is advisor and contact person for visitors wishing to make concrete contributions to the neighborhood with gifts of sports equipment, dental clinic supplies, and other such items. The community representative is also in a position to provide ongoing public relations materials describing progress in the neighborhood as well as to fulfill special requests by the federation fundraising campaign which the Jewish Agency does not normally provide, e.g. slide shows, photos, etc. Another aspect of the linkage function is to develop relationships within the Israel neighborhood on an individual basis in order to establish the diaspora community's presence. Taken a few steps further, this role can become a residents' advocate, utilizing the independence and influence of the position to achieve results which would be impossible for the residents alone.

3. Troubleshooter - By definition, the community representative is outside of the implementation system and not caught in the bureaucratic hassles of getting projects moving. This affords a degree of objectivity which enables the representative to identify points of blockage and bring people together to facilitate resolution, thereby expediting the project. Such a follow-up function is essential in Israel where there are numerous potential pitfalls for a project on the road

from conception to budgeting to implementation. The intervention by the community representative - often requiring cajoling, clarifying, and informing one party of the other party's requirements when communication breaks down - is often just what is needed to grease the wheels of progress or to bring together two parties in dispute. This facilitation function builds motivation in others and increases the pressure in Israel to produce results.

4. Initiator - The community representative, in some cases, will initiate a particular, or particular projects which directly involve the diaspora community. One example is the planning and development of a volunteer program, utilizing the talents of persons in the diaspora community who want to come to Israel and donate their time. The possibilities for projects of that kind are many - from youth tutoring English classes or running sports programs to volunteer dentists staffing a local dental clinic. Another type of project which has developed at the initiative of a diaspora community through its on-site representative is an employment and economic development assistance scheme. This program of grants and loans for vocational training and establishing businesses is an exciting attempt to provide neighborhood residents with new options as well as to stimulate the local economy. Given a knowledge of the particular diaspora community, the representative can call upon the skills and interests of specific individuals in relation to specific projects. For example - a public housing planner to consult on a housing plan or a market analyst in reference to needs assessment and site planning for a shopping center. The representative is the local contact in Israel, searching out projects in the neighborhood which would be most benefitted by volunteers and helping to establish a framework through which the volunteers could then contribute.

5. Delegate - In some neighborhoods, the representative is empowered by the diaspora community to function within the project and make decisions in its name. This is the opposite end of the spectrum from a strict information-provider role, and more often than not evolves when the representative has been an active leader in the diaspora community before coming to Israel and is therefore able to speak authoritatively in the name of the community.

Combinations of these tasks have been adopted by the diaspora communities or have naturally evolved to suit their needs, the situation in the Israeli neighborhood, and the qualifications of their chosen community representative. For example, in fulfilling the communicator function, the representative must attend local steering committee meetings and regularly meet with the project manager, Jewish Agency officials, municipal leaders and residents to understand the total picture. Thus, in the course of these activities, the representative often acquires information concerning progress (or lack of it) in a certain area. Soon the communicator role also encompasses the tasks of the "troubleshooter" as the representative presents this new information to the appropriate body to spark action. In much the same way, the linkage function develops from the communicating task, and initiating projects directly involving the diaspora is a natural outgrowth from the work as linker.

Before attempting to accomplish any of these defined tasks, the community representative's first priority must be to establish good working relationships with all relevant Project Renewal actors in Israel. Two particularly significant relationships crucial to his/her effectiveness are those with the project manager and with the Jewish Agency Project Renewal department officials. In most cases the project manager is the central actor in Project Renewal, coordinator of the various interested parties in this complex program. The project manager looks to the liaison

person to represent the policies of the diaspora community, as well as their special needs and concerns. Particularly in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv where extra layers of bureaucracy tend to hinder the manager's effectiveness and the project's functioning, the manager often views the independent community representative as an ally who - in the troubleshooter's role - may be able to intervene in certain situations.

The community representative's relationship to the Jewish Agency is somewhat more complex. From the outset, the Jewish Agency's role in Project Renewal included representation of diaspora interests. It was the responsibility of the Jewish Agency to report to the twinned diaspora communities on progress in their individual neighborhoods. As of May, 1981, the Jewish Agency Renewal Department has introduced a new system of periodic reporting to each neighborhood, with the goal of supplying diaspora communities with updated reports every three months. This service, if it succeeds, could in principle lead to some degree of overlap with the community representative's communicator function. The question remains, however, whether the optimum service is to provide the diaspora communities with what they feel they need to know concerning their participation in Project Renewal, or to provide them with what the Jewish Agency feels it wants to share. Will four reports annually present a sufficient flow of information? Will these reports objectively transmit everything the diaspora partners must know in order to make informed decisions? Working together and coordinating efforts is the most effective solution. Therefore it is vital that the community representative form solid working relationships and achieve an understanding both with the project manager and with the Jewish Agency Project Renewal Department in order to limit duplication of effort, increase productivity, and promote progress in the neighborhood.

It should be noted that another unique feature of the role of community representative is his/her relationship to the local neighborhood. Residents perceive this person as the one actor with no hidden agenda. Rightly or wrongly, sometimes government or Jewish Agency officials tend to evoke a certain degree of suspicion and mistrust of motives. All participants in the Center forum indicated that residents (particularly those involved with the local steering committee) view the community representative as partner and ally, affording them a direct link with the diaspora partner. If this be so, the role of community representative offers a unique opportunity for deepening and enriching the diaspora-Israel partnership which is one of the stated and declared goals of Project Renewal.

#### Qualifications for Diaspora Community Representative

The set of roles played by a community representative seems to be directly related to the status, character, and background of the person chosen by the diaspora community. The types of people fall into two major categories --community leaders and community organization professionals. The community leader is a person from the particular diaspora community, or minimally from the same country, who has been active in Jewish communal affairs in his or her diaspora community. This person may actually have made *aliyah* or be living in Israel for an extended period. The community organization professional is also resident in Israel on a permanent or extended basis. He or she brings to the position a working knowledge of Israeli social and political systems and Hebrew language skills. It is important to note that without exception, diaspora communities chose representatives - whether lay leaders or professionals - who are natives of the twinned country and therefore familiar with the functioning of its Jewish community.

Both models have been tried by various diaspora communities, and there are advantages and limitations attached to each. The community organization professional offers skills and training that are especially valuable for working within the framework of a community development project. He/she is able to assess needs, analyze social problem situations,

and seek appropriate solutions. The professional, however, usually lacks the personal influence of a community leader. The leader is viewed as more influential by virtue of his/her standing in the diaspora. He/she can usually speak with greater authority for the diaspora community and can play a key role in relations with the Jewish Agency, the government, and municipal officials. His/her lack of professional community work skills, on the other hand, may limit potential effectiveness in the planning and functioning of the project. Some additional drawbacks are that few leaders who have not made *aliyah* are willing to invest the minimum of six months necessary to fulfill the role, and their likely lack of Hebrew skills means that they will have difficulty in understanding the people involved in the project who do not happen to speak English and the many written documents that accompany such an effort. It is preferable, but also difficult, to find a former community leader living in Israel who has the desire and time to contribute to Project Renewal (paid or volunteer). Whoever the representative is, he/she must become intimately familiar with the diaspora community, its capabilities and its wishes, while similarly being intensely involved with the target neighborhood in terms of acquiring an understanding of its needs and how it functions. Although there are some similarities among the eight participants in the Center forum, a number of divergencies are found when taking a closer look at their personal characteristics. The majority (6 of 8) fulfill this position on a part-time basis; most of them responsible for another job as well. About half are fluent in Hebrew while the others have a limited knowledge of the language. Two forum participants are professionals in the field of community work, four are or were diaspora community leaders, and two are professionals in other areas. For the most part, participants agreed that the ideal model seems to be a diaspora community leader who has settled in Israel, has a solid knowledge of Hebrew, and is willing to work as a volunteer on a full-time basis. Of course this is also the most difficult type of person to find.

#### Conclusions

From the experience of the forum participants, there is every indication that the community representative has a unique contribution to make to Project Renewal and is vital in forging a true partnership between Israel, the distressed neighborhood, and the diaspora community. The presence and involvement of a community representative has facilitated deeper and more meaningful ties between the twinned community and the Israel neighborhood while also serving as a useful vehicle for promoting implementation of the program. The concept of the community representative should be built into Project Renewal as an integral part of each diaspora community's contribution.

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