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THE JEWISH AGENCY: A BALANCE SHEET

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Assessing Progress Made, and To Be Made / Departments: Rural Settlement / Project Renewal / Youth Aliyah / Aliyah / Education / Virtues and Drawbacks of the Present System / Reform Movements / The Balance Today

The most important institutional task facing the Jewish people today is creating a proper structure and process of governance for the emergent world Jewish polity. The Jewish Agency, as reconstituted, stands at the nexus of that effort since it is the major institutional link between the State of Israel and the diaspora communities. That is why it has been subject to so much controversy in recent years, even if not always for the right reasons. After a decade and a half of reform effort, it behooves us to assess where the Agency stands. In the last analysis, our focus must not be on the reform effort per se, but on the functioning of the Agency departments—the “bottom line,” as it were.

ASSESSING PROGRESS MADE, AND TO BE MADE

By now, we are all agreed that there are things that need improvement in the structure and functioning of the Jewish Agency. What is often overlooked in the rush to reform is what the Agency does do well and how it and its constituent bodies have initiated efforts to confront that which needs improvement. Nor do those advocating drastic change always perceive the degree to which the reform efforts in themselves represent a power struggle for political control of what has proved to be a crucial institution in the contemporary Jewish world, even if they are initiated *l'shem shamayim* (for the sake of heaven; that is, not for personal interest). Hence, a sober approach to

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improving the Jewish Agency requires that one understand what is good about it as well as what is not; what is being done to improve that which exists, and how well; and what may not be amenable to improvement for reasons beyond anyone's control at this moment.

The principal work of the Jewish Agency is conducted through four functional departments and several specialized funds and programs. The departments include: Rural Settlement, Immigration and Absorption, Youth Aliyah, and Project Renewal. The special funds include the Joint Education Fund, the Israel Education Fund, and the Jewish Agency support programs for institutions of higher education in Israel and Jewish programs in Israel and the diaspora. In addition, there is the Institute for Leadership Development. Finally, there is Jewish Agency support for social welfare services.

RURAL SETTLEMENT

Almost everyone agrees that the Rural Settlement Department has compiled an excellent record of solid accomplishment, so much so that its personnel are in demand for other programs and it has been a source of recruitment for Project Renewal. When the full story of the Jewish Agency is told, the record of the Rural Settlement Department will reflect great achievement in settling the country.

Questions, though, will need to be raised as to whether it is not superfluous to continue to pour in funds in the attempt to shore up settlements whose viability has been demonstrated to be minimal. The problem is that when these settlements were established, they were part of an overall strategy to establish a Jewish presence throughout the territory of the state, and especially in certain strategic areas. While this need has diminished, it has by no means disappeared. Moreover, there are the people who were sent to those settlements as new olim, who, like it or not, have built lives for themselves. A fair amount of this kind of uneconomic but statistically important settlement continues today, along with the ongoing achievements of the department, especially in the Galilee.

The major controversial issue surrounding the Rural Settlement department today is the question of settlement on the other side of the Green Line—in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza. This issue has been formally resolved by dividing the department into two and placing the second department, whose task is to undertake settlement in the territories, within the framework of the World Zionist Organization, hence outside the Jewish Agency's jurisdiction.

A larger problem looms ahead but has yet to be confronted, namely, what to do with the department now that it has essentially accomplished its primary mission, that of rural settlement within the pre-1967 borders of Israel. Its human and material resources should be made available for other deployment. This issue has not been systematically addressed by supporters or critics of the Agency.

PROJECT RENEWAL

Project Renewal, the newest Agency department, also deserves a high rating. Despite all the problems attendant on its beginning, Project Renewal as a whole has proved to be an extraordinarily successful program, and is considered by many to be a model of the direction in which Agency programs should go in the future. The Project Renewal Department, after a problematic start, has become a major factor in the success of the entire endeavor and is not presently under pressure to be changed.

The main issue confronting it is what the future will bring, as the original neighborhoods are phased out of the Project. How should the diaspora communities continue the links they have established with their Project Renewal neighborhoods? How can the gains made be preserved? What about those neighborhoods which have not yet benefited? Since there are neighborhoods waiting to be phased in, the solution may be simply to transfer resources from one group of neighborhoods to another, under the department's direction.

YOUTH ALIYAH

Youth Aliyah is still considered to be one of the Agency's most successful programs. Over the years it has rendered great service to the state and the Jewish people, as well as to the individuals who have completed its residential educational programs. Today, however, the question must be asked, whether residential education is needed at all regarding the vast majority of students now recruited by Youth Aliyah, when the task is no longer that of providing a haven for children who have come to the country alone, but of removing children from their families. While Youth Aliyah is to be commended for frequent internal self-studies of student achievement levels, there has been no study made of the larger question: the place of residential education in the Israel of today. Youth Aliyah's own research suggests that, while achievement by the highest and lowest level students in Youth Aliyah centers is greater than that of their counterparts who remain at home, the reverse is true with regard to those in the middle levels. The latter must, perforce, include a major share of the students within the Youth Aliyah system. Thus, any assessment of Youth Aliyah would have to conclude that what they do, they do well, but that it is time for a re-examination of whether they need to do what they do for everyone they seek to include.

ALIYAH

The department which comes in for the most criticism is Immigration and Absorption—the Aliyah department. For many years, much of that criticism was deserved, at least with regard to aliyah from the western world. The department suffered from inept staffing in Israel and the diaspora, and a consistent failure of communication, internal and external, in a situation where the communication of information is at the heart of its functioning. Moreover, there was no evidence that its work in the diaspora of the west had any effect in stimulating aliyah.

More recently there has been a sharp improvement in its performance, a move away from the old patterns which were tied in with Israel's party politics and fettered by preconceptions of how to promote aliyah. Instead, the department has been shifting its emphases to (1) promoting aliyah, by forging links with the mainstream institutions of the diaspora community, such as the Jewish federations and community centers, and (2) maintaining aliyah, by mobilizing successful olim to encourage and help new arrivals from the same communities. Most of these improvements have gone utterly unnoticed in the controversy surrounding the late Raphael Kotlowitz, the immediate past head of the department, a controversy that had far less to do with the department's functioning than with personality clashes within the Jewish Agency Executive and Board of Governors.

Overlooked, in all the concern for aliyah from the west, were the successes of the department in dealing with rescue aliyah. Perhaps the mass aliyah of the Ethiopian Jews will remind us of how well the Agency can do in difficult situations.

Much remains to be done to improve the Aliyah Department; there is evidence now that the old system did not increase aliyah from the west. But there is now an organization in place capable of doing what needs to be done, if given the proper leadership and backing. Efforts of reformers should be placed there.

EDUCATION

Education is the least noticed sphere of Jewish Agency success. This does not mean, however, that it has not achieved good results, particularly in its programs to bring young people to Israel for an Israeli experience, and in its support for teacher training efforts. Israel is an educational resource par excellence, perhaps the most vital single educational tool we have for promoting Jewish identity. Hence, the role of the Jewish Agency in making that experience available to thousands of young people through a wide variety of frameworks is one of its most signal accomplishments. But it is an accomplishment in which the Agency takes a back seat, working through the various education-oriented departments of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) and through a myriad of other Jewish organizations, rather than directly. The biggest problem is that the WZO departments are not willing to work together where cooperation is required, a problem that is outside the Agency's jurisdiction.

VIRTUES AND DRAWBACKS OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM

The Jewish Agency's efforts have been criticized as being too diffused, functioning through so many channels. From a managerial point of view that does indeed seem problematic; but as students of administration learn more about how to accomplish things, it becomes more and more clear that cybernetic models, offering a variety of channels to reach the same goal, are usually far better than pyramidal ones, which have neat chains of command and lines of control—but which rarely work in practice the way the organization charts suggest. It is entirely possible that the multiplicity of channels could be a good thing in this case, even if it leads to occasional duplication of effort. Redundancy means that almost every group in the Jewish world can find its point of access, rather than having to meet one single set of criteria before support is available.

What are lacking, in truth, are adequate criteria for determining what is useful redundancy and what is not, which programs should be supported, and proper means to evaluate the various programs. We do not know what can be improved because we hardly understand what is being done now. Useful redundancy should not be an excuse for haphazardness or for departmental "stonewalling."

One might ask, "If everything is so good, why is it so bad?" Here we come to the nub of the problem: a legacy which combines excessive party influence on the work of the Agency (particularly in hiring personnel and channeling funds), and excessive influence by the Israeli government on the entire enterprise. Both exist for historical reasons. With the failure, in 1929, to bring in the non-Zionists as real partners, the Jewish Agency became a strictly Zionist instrumentality in the 1930s, the exclusive preserve of the World Zionist Organization and, as a result, enmeshed in Zionist party politics. After the state was established, the Jewish Agency lost its pre-eminence in the governance of the Yishuv, becoming an appendage of the state it had created. Its best people were transferred to the new government. While that was natural enough in a period of state consolidation, it led to an unanticipated consequence—the frequent use of the Agency as a patronage plum for party worthies who were not acceptable or not needed in the state apparatus.

Moreover, the entire institution was informed with the crudest kind of Israel-centered ideology, which was often used as a crutch by inept Jewish Agency officials to justify their continued positions in the status quo. By the late 1960s, both the extreme partisanship with its patronage system, and the Israeli myths regarding the diaspora, had become recognizably obsolete.

Confronting the problem, the late Louis Pincus, as Chairman of the WZO Executive, initiated the reconstitution of the Jewish Agency. He gave the representatives of the diaspora communities outside the WZO (the "fundraisers" or "non-Zionists," as they were then known) a real share in the Agency's governance. He and Max Fisher, the leader of the latter, achieved their goal of institutionally separating the Jewish Agency from the WZO, making it responsible to a governing structure shared by the representatives of the diaspora communities of the WZO on a 50-50 basis.

The reconstitution of the Jewish Agency, the formalities of which were completed in 1971, created the opportunity for changing the situation. Indeed, much was done in the ensuing decade to introduce new leadership and new life into the Agency, to require better budgeting procedures, to limit patronage and introduce merit appointments within the Agency departments, to shift priorities among Agency programs, and to establish new ways of operation, as in the case of Project Renewal.

Many of these accomplishments have been overlooked, even by the people involved in bringing them about, since it is often difficult for those engaged in a task to see the forest for the trees, especially when progress seems so slow. Furthermore, many of the forces opposing change are vociferous at the outset but then adapt to the inevitable.

Most of all, those not intimately acquainted with the Jewish Agency still do not know that it and the WZO are separate bodies. The WZO is indeed deeply entangled in Zionist politics. This is not unreasonable for a political organization, which is what it is and always has been. However, it often happens that when the WZO acts for political reasons, as in distributing funds, the Jewish Agency is accused of being politicized—even though the action was taken by an independent organization and may have been perfectly legitimate within that context.

On the other hand, when WZO influence within the Jewish Agency leads to unwarranted political involvement, then there is a case for reform. Although this does occur in the distribution of offices and funds, it is mostly a matter left over from the old days.

REFORM MOVEMENTS

It was quite appropriate, as the first decade of the reconstituted Jewish Agency drew to a close, that the Agency Board of Governors should itself initiate a review process, to see what steps should next be taken and to begin to take them. That process, initiated at a Board seminar held in Caesarea in February 1981, was continued through the six commissions set up at that time, and focused on: redefining the Agency's goals and objectives, aliyah, Jewish education, debt reduction, management, and governance. It has already borne fruit, not so much in the implementation of formal recommendations, but in the change of atmosphere which it has generated in the Agency, the new interest it has fostered in the diaspora regarding the Agency and its workings, and the stimulus it has provided for those within the Agency who welcome change, to continue their efforts. It has also helped smooth the way for those reluctant to accept changes which strike them as radical departures from a hallowed past—even when such changes serve their needs and interests—to reconcile

themselves with the inevitable. Thus, the report of the Governance Commission, considered the most vital in the effort to reform the Agency, was only partially adopted. At the same time, the Executive and the Board of Governors under the leadership of Leon Dulzin, Jerold Hoffberger, and Max Fisher have implemented some of those reforms, utilizing existing powers to do so. Hence, the objective is attained in a less confrontational manner.

In 1983, the Caesarea Process bore additional fruit in the form of the Herzliya Process, initiated by Leon Dulzin, who holds the dual title of Chairman of the Jewish Agency and the WZO Executives. He convened a representative group of WZO leaders and academics to develop a program for the reform of WZO.

Although the program was originally thought by many to be only windowdressing, Mr. Dulzin made it clear, at the first meeting of the group in December 1983 and subsequently at the January 1984 meeting of the Zionist General Council, that he was quite serious about its work and the reforms he proposed to introduce. Moreover, he emphasized, in his incisive analysis of the contemporary condition of world Jewry and the role of the WZO on the world Jewish scene, which he exposed in its weaknesses as well as its strength, that the WZO had to become worthy of its partners from diaspora communities.

Dulzin defined his own agenda for change. It included: equal status for non-party members of the WZO; a special plan for Zionists who plan to actually settle in Israel; strengthening the Jerusalem Program, which is the basis of membership in the WZO; and a new basis for individual membership in the Zionist movement. To this agenda was added the exploration of new ways to make the Zionist movement real in Israel, rather than a mere appendage of the Israeli political parties based on the results of the Knesset elections; and a concern with the relationship between the WZO and its Jewish Agency partners, the diaspora communities.

The Herzliya Process is still in its early stages. If it succeeds in fulfilling even part of its potential, it will be a worthy companion to the Caesarea Process, one which could give the world Jewish polity a more effective Zionist Organization, able to mobilize Jews to act on behalf of the Jewish people as a whole as well as the State of Israel through common institutions such as the Jewish Agency. Nevertheless, the differences within the group, as within the WZO itself, are real. A major effort will have to be made to reach agreement on which reforms need to be implemented, and then to achieve them.

THE BALANCE TODAY

In sum, the balance sheet of the Jewish Agency shows a result that is neither as bad as some of its critics would suggest nor as good as some of its apologists would wish. The Jewish Agency has come a long way in the past fifteen years towards introducing accountability and more efficient operations. It still has a long way to go, but in that it is not unique. It suffers from the exaggerated weaknesses of the public sector in Israel in terms of overstaffing and underproduction per worker, except perhaps at the highest echelons where the senior staff now consists of people who know how to work. Institutionally, the Agency's machinery remains creaky. The professionalization introduced must compete regularly with pressures to respond to patronage demands. In many ways the Agency remains slow and bureaucratic. In others—the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry, for example—it has shown a real capacity for quick response. There is no reason, then, for those who would reform the

Agency to slacken in their efforts. On the other hand, there is no reason for them to abandon the field, or to assume that the issue is hopeless and that their efforts do not produce results.

One caveat is in order. As new figures and bodies become influential in the Agency, and put forward their own agendas, they must be watched so that they do not repeat the mistakes of their predecessors. Party politics may be a WZO habit, but Zionists do not have a monopoly on playing politics. There are longstanding recipients of Agency support which do not deserve to draw upon the funds of the Jewish people; but new groups and individuals have their pet projects, as well, which are not always the most deserving of support. Some of the old hands at the Agency have often failed to follow proper procedures in the work, but some of the new hands have also begun to fall short in this regard, when their pets are involved. In both cases, continued effort and external vigilance to promote responsibility are called for.

The Jewish Agency, by its very nature, must be the nexus of the institutional network serving the Jewish polity. In order for it to play its proper role, its functioning must be improved. There is much yet to be done. But it can be done only if both Israeli and diaspora Jews change their perceptions of the Agency, in two ways. Israelis must stop seeing the Jewish Agency as merely a device controlled by the State of Israel to mobilize diaspora support for Israeli aims. Diaspora Jews must stop looking at the Jewish Agency as principally a philanthropic body designed to help needy Jews who happen to reside in Israel. Beyond that, both must come to recognize where the Jewish Agency has been effective, in order to identify where improvements need to be made.

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