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NEW ZEALAND JEWRY IN TRANSITION

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New Zealand's Estrangement from Israel

The November 1986 state visit to New Zealand by Israel's President Chaim Herzog brought attention to that country's small Jewish community for perhaps the first time. Initially excited by the prospect, the community's exhilaration was superceded first by apprehension, then by dismay, as Herzog's arrival was preceded and accompanied by highly critical media coverage and adverse political comment. Although undoubtedly planned with happier thoughts in mind, Herzog's visit occasioned alarm and embarrassment among New Zealand's Jews, more estranged from their neighbors than previously, while bringing into sharp focus the unpleasant image which Israel has acquired in recent years among New Zealand's political opinion-makers.

Once counted among Israel's friends, during the years of Israel's involvement in Lebanon, opinion within New Zealand turned sharply negative. New Zealand's increasingly assertive foreign policy often takes the form of a self-righteous desire to provide uncompromising guidance to a corrupt world. As these tendencies have come to focus on Israel, the results of New Zealand's distant moralizing have been two-fold: first, to contribute to a social and cultural atmosphere at the very least unpleasant for the country's Jews; second, to erode support for a more intimate and cordial state-to-state relationship.

Repercussions on New Zealand's Jews

New Zealand Jewry's vulnerability has increased with the perceptible decline in the

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New Zealand public's support for Israel. Examples of this abound. On one occasion, the leader of a New Zealand political party refused to send his annual Jewish New Year message to New Zealand's Jews as a form of punishment for Israel's alleged misdeeds. During this period, even recipes for Jewish foods printed in New Zealand newspapers elicited reader's letters attacking both the press for printing the recipes, and the Jews for enjoying their feasts at a time when Arabs were suffering under Israeli hands. Government appointment of a Jew to the position of Race Relations Conciliator - an Ombudsman for race relations responsible to Parliament - led to very strong criticism, including the claim that a Zionist could not hold such a position, since a Zionist was, by United Nations definition, a racist. Complaints to the New Zealand Press Council were heard, though not sustained, alleging that reports written by Israeli correspondents should be published with a description that they have been filed by Jews living in Occupied Palestine.

New Zealand Jewry in Transition

These developments caught New Zealand Jewry off guard, after a placid if obscure existence for much of its history, much like New Zealand itself. Jewish settlement virtually coincided with European colonization - the first synagogue was established shortly after construction of the first church. Despite a presence dating back to 1829, however, Jews have never dwelt in New Zealand in large numbers.

Despite some latent anti-Semitism of the kind imbedded within British culture, Jews have never been subjected to harsh measures in New Zealand, nor have they ever been victimized by acts of violence committed with or without official sponsorship. New Zealand had a Jewish Prime Minister in the 1870s and Jews have been elected mayors of the country's largest cities.

Still, the Jewish population in New Zealand has been both static and meager. There were about 1600 Jews at the turn of the century and perhaps 3500 following World War II, approximately 0.2 percent of the country's total. With New Zealand's population presently hovering at about 3.4 million, the Jewish presence in the country numbers slightly under 5000 - little more than 0.1 percent. Over the years, Jewish

communities have been founded and synagogues built in various New Zealand cities, but the communities have vanished and their houses of worship stand unused, if they remain at all.

The founding generation of British Jews was succeeded in the 1930s by a small number of German and Polish Jews who concentrated themselves, as have most of the country's Jews, in the two principal north island cities, Auckland and Wellington (the capital). Following the end of World War II, a sparse number of survivors sought to reshape their lives in a society almost as far from Europe as is geographically possible. More recently, in addition to a handful of North American Jewish migrants, a few families of Soviet Jews have come, most of them searching for a new home after at least one disappointment elsewhere.

The Lure of Australia

If New Zealand is far from the world centers of Jewry, it is at least reasonably close (1200 miles distant) to a country whose Jewish communities are substantial and thriving. Australia, with its promise of higher salaries and more exciting environments, often beckons to New Zealanders generally, and has a special appeal for New Zealand Jewry. There, it is held, it is possible to maintain and sustain a Jewish way of life which is beyond New Zealand Jewry's means and capacities. Young New Zealand Jews in particular may look to Australian Jewry as they contemplate the difficulties of finding a Jewish mate in their own country.

If some of the more commercially minded or maritally desperate look to Australia for sustenance, the university youth seem to be looking to Israel. A survey of one of the Jewish student organizations found that all but one of its members wished to settle there following graduation. If there is any escapism reflected in this, it is the desire to escape the choice between assimilation and decline, between indifference and irrelevance, which so clearly besets New Zealand Jewry.

Clearly, the aspiration to live a fuller Jewish life plays a role in encouraging *aliya* from New Zealand. While other Jewish communities, including the United States, are more likely to lose those young people least interested in their Jewish

heritage, in New Zealand the decline in numbers comes partly from those people most concerned. The consequences of this are that the tasks of Jewish community life fall heavily and disproportionately upon a shrinking cadre of willing participants composed of those Jews who are not indifferent enough to separate themselves from their community and heritage or passionate enough to seek a fuller Jewish life elsewhere.

Religious Life

Auckland and Wellington each host an Orthodox synagogue and a Liberal (Reform) temple. There are no Conservative or Reconstructionist congregations and New Zealand's Jews have little knowledge of these movements. The synagogues also house Jewish libraries and social centers, and serve as bases for lectures, meetings of Jewish organizations and entertainment.

New Zealand's remoteness from world Jewry makes it difficult for its congregations to recruit rabbis. These difficulties have been exacerbated in recent years as the small size of the congregations and their restricted financial means have made the positions less attractive. The Liberal congregations often function with rabbinical students from Hebrew Union College assisting the communities on a temporary basis during their American summer recess. The Orthodox congregations have also experienced difficulties in retaining a rabbi.

The absence of rabbinical leadership affects the community's confidence and morale. Older members recall brighter times, while younger ones are deprived of role models and instruction. There is limited adult education, while an hour's Sunday school represents the norm for most of the young at both Liberal and Orthodox institutions. Any Jews requiring the services of a *bet din* (religious court) must look to Australia or elsewhere for assistance. Since New Zealand's divorce laws are written on a "no-fault" basis, it is likely that failed Jewish marriages terminate in a civil divorce, rather than with a *get* (religious divorce). There are no *yeshivot* in New Zealand. A few New Zealand Jews have gone to study in Australian *yeshivot* from time to time.

Kashrut (dietary laws) may be observed in Auckland and in Wellington, although at some

financial sacrifice. Wellington's Orthodox synagogue has a kosher cooperative on its premises, offering a limited selection of products including kosher meat slaughtered by its *rabbi/shochet* (ritual slaughterer). The observance of *kashrut* has declined among the congregation; a recent survey of the membership revealed a very small proportion fully adhering to the dietary laws.

The Liberal congregations hold services on Friday nights and/or Saturday mornings and on the various holidays. Until a few years ago, the Orthodox community was able to maintain the pattern of three services daily, but today it is only able to assemble a *minyan* (quorum) for Shabbat (Friday night and Saturday morning only) and on the various holidays. The Wellington community now uses a small chapel on its premises for its Friday night service, adequate for the 20-30 people in attendance. Saturday morning may attract between 50-75 people, with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur drawing between 200-300 worshippers. A wedding or Bar Mitzvah may also draw a substantial attendance, while a less traditional fete, an annual Bat Mitzvah involving several girls simultaneously, will fill the synagogue, upstairs and down, with as many as 500 persons on hand.

Most members of the Orthodox congregation are far from Orthodox in their habits and inclinations. The majority of Shabbat worshippers drive to the synagogue. The Liberals find that much of their membership is passive, content with affiliation, and their services draw upon a very small core of active members. A Shabbat service may attract between 15-30 people. In the absence of a rabbi, a few of the members will lead the service, which is followed by a *kiddush* (reception). Holidays produce a somewhat larger turnout, but this is still likely to be far fewer than the total membership.

In New Zealand, divisions between Liberal and Orthodox reflect social and genealogical differences more than spiritual and intellectual ones. Often, though not always, members of Liberal congregations will include Jews and their non-Jewish marital partners, the children of such marriages, and persons who have sought to convert to Judaism under non-Orthodox auspices. If there is sometimes a bitter edge to Liberal-Orthodox relations, it arises, on the one

hand, from Liberal resentment of Orthodox rejection, and Orthodox misgivings about the Liberals' claims to Jewishness, both individually and collectively.

United by Zionism

New Zealand Jewry functions as a unit on community issues through the New Zealand Jewish Council. This umbrella organization serves less as a means of concentrating New Zealand Jewry's energies than as a vessel for containing them. Other Jewish organizations active in New Zealand include Friends of the Hebrew University and a New Zealand Jewish Students Association at several of the country's universities. WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization) plays an active role in New Zealand Zionist affairs, while a New Zealand Zionist Federation strives to coordinate Zionist and Israel-centered programs. There are and have been small B'nai B'rith chapters. Congregational monthly newsletters are augmented by the *New Zealand Jewish Chronicle*, a community newspaper loosely modelled on its British namesake.

In other respects, apart from the division between Orthodox and Liberal, New Zealand Jewry is free from categories and divisions. There are two youth movements, Bnei Akiva and Habonim, which cooperate quite readily. There are no political or religious factions among a Jewish population which is neither spiritually innovative nor intellectually ambitious, and which largely avoids political controversy of any kind.

Support for the State of Israel is a unifying factor among New Zealand Jewry. There are no real counterparts in New Zealand to the Jewish lobbying groups found in the United States. Both Orthodox and Liberal congregations circulated petitions calling upon the United Nations to repeal its infamous resolution equating Zionism with racism. Groups in Auckland and Wellington express Jewish commitment to the State of Israel, on whose behalf prayers are said in all congregations. The Jewish National Fund is an effective fund-raising body in both cities, and the tradition of biannual blue-box collections continues to be maintained. The United Israel Appeal is held annually, assisted by visiting Israelis, but the practice of selling Israeli bonds has never been instituted in New Zealand. Both Auckland and Wellington host Zionist Information Offices.

New Zealand Jewry does not aspire to be like American Jewry, British Jewry, or even Australian Jewry. It is not inclined to risk its dwindling strength on a campaign to influence the New Zealand government. This kind of political activity is frowned upon in New Zealand in any case, even more so when conducted by and on behalf of a distinctive ethnic/religious/national group, acting out of affection for, if not identification with, a foreign government. New Zealand's small, aging Jewish community prefers a low profile. It has neither the numbers nor the energy to wage lengthy and inconclusive public combat. But its support for the State of Israel remains undiminished.

New Zealand maintains diplomatic relations with Israel, although there is no New Zealand resident ambassador, consul or any other official, and at times there has been no New Zealand representative whatsoever accredited to the country. Israel, on the other hand, maintains an Embassy in Wellington, and the Ambassador is invariably received by the local Jewish community with immense deference and honor.

As South Africa now faces increasing strife, some Jews in New Zealand view that Jewish community as the means for infusing new life into New Zealand. But this latest solution seems destined to be no more efficacious than the earlier ones. For in New Zealand, as elsewhere, it has become evident to the young and the educated – the community's potential leadership – that the national life of the Jewish people, as it is developing in the land of Israel under the auspices of a reborn, politically sovereign Jewish state, occupies a central position within Judaism. If those least interested in Jewish ideas and values drift away, those most involved seem prepared increasingly to place their bodies where their ideas and imaginations are – in Israel rather than New Zealand.

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