

# JERUSALEM LETTER

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## A SPECIAL REPORT

### THE JEWISH AGENCY: HISTORIC ROLE AND CURRENT CRISIS

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#### **Democratizing the Establishment**

Some twenty years ago when the Jewish Agency was reconstituted, I wrote that one of the great contributions that the reconstitution would make would be to establish an arena for the conduct of world Jewish public affairs. No longer would it be necessary to conduct the affairs of Israel-diaspora relations by having a few Jewish leaders from the United States meet in a room with a few people at the head of the government of the State of Israel. It would be possible to broaden that circle to include the rest of the Jewish world as well as the State of Israel in an arena in which the public affairs of the Jewish people could be conducted.

Twenty years later it is clear how amply this prediction has been fulfilled. The Board of Gov-

ernors of the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) today represents a major share of the leadership of the Jewish world. People have moved into positions of leadership in world Jewry from their communities and from their parties in Israel in a way that was not possible earlier because there was no mechanism.

#### **To Rebuild the Jewish National Home**

The Jewish Agency was originally designed not as an arena for the conduct of world Jewish public affairs, but for the singular purpose of rebuilding the Jewish national home in the Land of Israel. As such, the Jewish Agency is as unique an organization as the Jewish people is a unique people, and it has no parallel in the world. The Jewish Agency exists by virtue of

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an international charter established in 1922 by the old League of Nations as part of its mandate to the British to legally take control of the powers of government in the land they had conquered in World War I and to work towards "the advancement of a Jewish national home in Palestine," as they put it.

The Jewish Agency may be the only such organization in the world that has a special charter under international law, one that was readopted by the United Nations as part of a general readoption of the surviving elements of the League of Nations that were deemed worthy of continuing after World War II. The Agency survived the catastrophic inability of the League of Nations to fulfill its world mission because it became the instrumentality of the Zionist movement and the Jewish people as a whole. While we cannot point to an easy and simple definition of what the Agency is, it is easier to define what the Agency is to do, which is to be a Jewish agency (with a small "a") that would be responsible for rebuilding the Jewish national home.

### **Joining Zionists and Diaspora Jewish Philanthropists**

The World Zionist Organization (WZO) could have been that agency alone. The mandate that chartered the Agency did not prescribe that there should be something other than the WZO and it was left to the WZO and its president at that time, Chaim Weizmann, to determine in 1922 just what that Jewish agency would be. Weizmann immediately recognized that to be a proper Jewish Agency it would have to be more than the WZO alone, that the WZO should lead, but that all of the leadership of world Jewry should be mobilized behind the effort.

For seven years he worked hard to persuade those who were then truly non-Zionists, leaders who were concerned about the fate of their people, especially in the upheavals of World War I and the postwar period, and especially in Eastern Europe where those upheavals took the worst forms of communism, xenophobic nationalism, antisemitism and the like. He worked to find a way in which these non-Zionist philanthropists, people who sought to fight antisemitism, could work together with the World Zionist Organization to establish a proper Jewish Agency.

At that time, one of the major problems that separated the two groups was that the non-Zionists still believed that emancipation was enough for Jews, that

what had happened from the eighteenth century onward in the granting of civil rights to Jews wherever they were living was sufficient, and that this should be the goal of the Jewish effort. They believed that the task of Jewish leadership was to secure those rights in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Arab world which had lagged behind France and the United States and the other countries of the West in granting or affirming such civil rights.

The Zionists believed that this was not enough. For the Jewish people to be truly secure and to continue to exist in a creative cultural and political way, the Jews needed to return to their land, there to rebuild their national home. In those days the discussion of the need to establish a politically sovereign state was kept somewhat under wraps; the idea of a Jewish national home was the essence of the Zionist message. In most of the communities in question, the Zionist movement was even locked in combat with some of those same philanthropic leaders, good Jews all, but Jews with a different mission.

Weizmann persisted and his persistence was capped with momentary success in 1929 when the Jewish Agency was established, when the Zionists and the philanthropists met in Switzerland to establish a Jewish Agency that was a partnership, that brought together both sides of the Jewish world at that time. Unfortunately, it did not succeed for a number of reasons, not the least of which were the technical difficulties of travel that were not superseded until the advent of the jet plane at the end of the 1950s. There were other reasons as well, partly having to do with the great difference between Zionist and non-Zionist ideology, and partly due to the critical role played by the self-appointed diaspora leadership. Louis Marshall, the great leader of the philanthropists from the United States who became the spokesman for the non-Zionist partners around the world, died on his way back from the founding meeting. As a result of all this, that first effort did not succeed, despite Weizmann's vision.

Nevertheless, it lingered on for a decade in limited ways. The non-Zionists had to be formally represented in the activities of the Agency, whose offices were established in Jerusalem. One man was sent to speak for the non-Zionist diaspora during the period from 1929 to 1936. What was sad was that the effort was indeed made but it could not be made

wholeheartedly. Between 1936 and 1946, the partnership remained in existence on paper only, and finally in 1946 the WZO took over full responsibility for the Jewish Agency.

Taking over full responsibility may have been a necessary response for the times, but it was not a sufficient response for the needs of the Jewish people. The philanthropists of the postwar years were mobilized by 1946 for the critical fight for Jewish statehood. David Ben-Gurion, who was Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive at that time, made a decision to turn to the non-Zionist philanthropists rather than the diaspora Zionist leadership for the wherewithal to undertake the task involved. In the United States especially, they had become the community leaders in every respect except perhaps in leading the fight at the United Nations for a Jewish state.

The year 1946 began a period in which there was no formal common institutional mechanism through which the two groups could work together. Instead, they had to relate through their respective institutions. The Jewish Agency and the WZO were on one side, and the fundraising institutions, particularly the United Israel Appeal (Keren Hayesod was really part of the Zionist world in those days, much more tightly so than it is now), on the other, trying to satisfy all parties that the available resources were being mobilized properly and that expenditures were being monitored in a way that would make the donors confident that their funds were being used in the best possible way.

This, in time, led in the late 1960s to the reconstitution of the Jewish Agency after it became apparent that there had to be a single institutional framework to bring together both elements of what had become a historic partnership.

### **Nation-Building vs. World Jewish Relief**

The foundations of the division between Zionists and non-Zionists in those early years were rooted in two basically differing conceptions of what the tasks of world Jewish leadership should be. There were those, primarily the Zionists, who argued for nation-building as the principal task of the true leadership of world Jewry, and, indeed, argued that only those leaders who were involved in the task of nation-building were entitled to lead the Jewish people.

On the other side, there were the philanthropists

who argued that, first and foremost, it was necessary to make certain that support was available to relieve Jews in distress. After World War II, these two views came together operationally around state-building, when it became apparent after the Holocaust that philanthropy and civil rights in their lands of origin were not a solution to the distress of the Jewish refugees, that only the reestablishment of a Jewish national home that was also a state would be sufficient. So, through a state-building that saved Jews in distress, the two positions came to coincide and together achieved so much.

However, the conflict between the nation-building outlook and the philanthropic outlook is a historic conflict and it did not disappear. It may have been successfully submerged operationally, but it remained an ideological reality in many quarters. True, the lines were blurred. There were those Zionists who remained outside the new state as leaders of their diaspora communities. There were those from the once non-Zionist camp who embraced the idea of nation-building in Israel, but still the two positions were locked in a quiet but still very real conflict that found expression less in public arguments about nation-building or philanthropy and more in discussions of the proper role of the diaspora, the proper role of the Jewish Agency, what functions should be undertaken by it, how should the money be divided?

The issue of division between local needs and Israel is one that divides the nation-builders as much as it divides the philanthropists. In fact, especially in diaspora communities like the United States, there are philanthropists who say: "Our job is to support Israel at all costs," whereas the nation-builders say: "Without a strong local community, we will not be able to continue supporting Israel." Operationally, then, state-building was only a partial reconciliation.

### **Nation-Building or State-Building**

The nation-building school itself has two variations. There are those who see nation-building strictly as state-building, that is to say, building the Jewish nation through the strengthening of the State of Israel. They would require concentration of JAFI efforts entirely or almost entirely within Israel for purposes mainly to be determined by the government of the state. The second variant is that nation-building refers equally or almost equally to the entire Jewish nation, the State of Israel and the diaspora,

and that a major dimension of the nation-building task is fighting assimilation in the diaspora through Jewish education and the strengthening of Jewish communal institutions.

An example of this division can be found in the differing positions of those of the nation-building school who advocate that assistance to Jews in the ex-Soviet republics should be confined to helping them emigrate to Israel, and those who see that Jewish nation-building also requires establishing Jewish communities and Jewish schools in those republics for the Jews who do not choose to emigrate, if only to develop a generation who will be more prepared to consider aliya. Operationally, the state-building and philanthropic schools can converge on operational goals and see Israel as the first and foremost focus of JAFI activities, while the nation-builders can be divided in their operational goals.

### **The Impact of Different Environments**

Furthermore, the partnership can only flourish if due consideration is given to the different environments from which the partners come. Israeli partners from any source come from an intensely political environment, one in which partisan politics is the norm in public activity, is pervasive, and is ideologically justified. Public affairs are conducted by representatives of political parties or secondarily by individuals identified with one party or another, even if they, themselves, are not politicians. This is as true of the Manufacturers' Association as of the Knesset.

By contrast, most diaspora communities see their work as civic and unpartisan, to be kept away from ideologies — religious as well as political — and parties. Diaspora Zionists follow the same pattern as their Israeli counterparts, except that their politics is very often detached from their constituencies because of the nature of the diaspora.

Representatives of the diaspora communities through the *magbiot* (fund-raising campaigns) also have their politics, but it is more a politics of personalities, far less pervasive, and conducted with a certain ambivalence within the context of ideologies that see participation in Jewish life as a matter of civic and philanthropic service rather than pursuit of partisan success. Israelis and their Zionist counterparts are open in their pursuit of partisan political goals, while the community representatives must pursue theirs in more subtle and limited ways. Both

of these are realities that must be taken into consideration in determining the structure of the partnership.

### **The Six-Day War Transforms Givers into Jewish Leaders**

By 1967 it became clear that a new synthesis was needed, partly because the diaspora leadership had come to see themselves in a different way. The Six-Day War was the catalyst for change, beginning with a new self-perception on the part of the philanthropists. A personal experience illustrates the point. I was then living in Philadelphia and was involved with a group that succeeded in establishing a Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, with support from the Federation and the local American Jewish Committee chapter. Edward Wolf II, who had been president of the Federation and came from one of the most distinguished Jewish families in Philadelphia, had for years been trying to establish an archives to hold the community records. Where he failed, we succeeded in less than a year in 1968.

Trying to understand why, it seemed that when Wolf had asked for an archives center, he was talking with leaders who perceived themselves to be philanthropists, whose work was benevolence, not of any historic interest. After the 1967 War those same leaders began to see themselves as part of the historic process of the maintenance, extension and development of Jewish life. Once they saw themselves as true leaders of the Jewish people involved in something more than simply being generous, decent human beings, they wanted their story preserved.

The changed perceptions after 1967 brought the diaspora "non-Zionist" leadership to seek direct involvement in Israel. The reconstitution of the Jewish Agency was perhaps the greatest result of those changing perceptions, certainly as far as the Israel-diaspora relationship was concerned. It came at a time when the advances in technology enabled those leaders to gather several times a year and speak to (or, more recently, fax) one another daily. These new realities have contributed much to the success of the reconstitution and the reestablishment of a world Jewish polity with a collective decision-making capacity.

Back 2,500 years ago, Ezra and Nehemiah came back to Eretz Israel from Babylon in the fifth century BCE and established the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah (Men of the Great Assembly) as the governing body

of the Jewish people. (The present Knesset is deliberately named after the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah and has the same number of members. There were 120 members of the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah because 120 represents ten *minyanim*, or a symbolic *minyan* for each of the — by then disappeared — 12 tribes.) The Anshei Knesset Hagedolah wanted to represent the whole Jewish people, but the only way that the Jews from Babylon or Egypt could be represented is if two or three would come to live in Jerusalem for a few years. That was the situation at its best until our times.

### Opting Against a World Jewish Parliament

In the years following the first establishment of the Jewish Agency, there was much talk in the Jewish world of establishing a world Jewish parliament. Instead the reality is that the Jewish people in the twentieth century have developed a network of functional authorities who take responsibility for different aspects of the work of world Jewry. The Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) has its role; ORT has its role, the World Jewish Congress has its, as do others. Among them, the Jewish Agency has moved from being a multi-purpose functional authority which has as its focal point the rebuilding of the land and state of Israel to become the nexus of this network of authorities.

This functional solution, rather than a parliamentary one, developed out of a convergence of interests starting from different premises. The early leaders of the State of Israel assumed that since Israel was a politically sovereign state, it would speak for the Jews of the world. If that proved to be impossible, it was assumed that nobody else would, and nobody could subordinate a politically sovereign state to some voluntary world Jewish parliament. So while the dictates of political sovereignty could not accept a world parliament, they would accept a multi-purpose functional authority.

The Jews of the diaspora, meanwhile, saw themselves as citizens of their respective countries who had come together in voluntary communities. They did not particularly want to sit in a body called a world Jewish parliament for fear of its triggering antisemitism and charges of dual loyalty. However, a functional authority whose purposes were broadened was an expeditious answer, and several functional authorities an even better answer.

The reconstitution of the Jewish Agency placed the Agency at the nexus of that network, at the critical juncture. On the one hand, the WZO reaches out into the network of representative bodies and religious movements in the Jewish world. On the other hand, the UIA and Keren Hayesod reach out into the community to the community fundraising and planning bodies. To put it another way, the Jewish Agency has the State of Israel on one side and the voluntary communities on the other. On yet a third side it has looser connections with the representative and religious bodies of those communities. And on a fourth side it has connections with those instrumentalities designed to promote certain functions in Jewish life, whether relief and rehabilitation or education.

Any new synthesis ought to start from the understanding that we are discussing a network of authorities. The decisions to be made involve such questions as: Has the time come to create greater integration, to expand the authority at the nexus to become more encompassing than it is, or simply to improve relationships between the various institutions? These relationships now need to be reevaluated in light of a generation's experience to see where we want to go from here.

### Next Steps to Consider

The very success of the reconstitution has transformed the situation of JAFI and the world Jewish polity to the point where next steps need to be considered as we approach the twenty-first century. The tasks of JAFI partners and governing bodies, then, is not one of repairing damage but of moving forward, of building on their success in order to develop an institutional framework even better able to confront the challenges of the coming generation than what exists today. In that connection, the following issues must be considered:

1. Is the partnership broad enough to include all those who should participate in the JAFI arena?
2. Given the realities of public life, with its inevitable politics, in what ways should the politics involved in the governance of JAFI and the carrying out of its mission be structured and what accommodations have to be made between the different kinds of politics which the partners bring to the table?
3. How should the formal leadership of JAFI be chosen so as to properly operationalize the institution-

al arrangements designed to respond to the first two challenges?

### **A Will to Bridge Israel-Diaspora Differences**

We know that we face the challenges of different environments and different styles. We are a world people, but we are a people whose components easily and excellently adapt to life in their own countries as well as easily and excellently cooperating with Jews in other countries. Our constitutional achievement has been to create an institution that provides an arena in which to confront our challenges face-to-face, not to ignore them and walk away from them, a forum in which to allow ourselves to get aggravated but then to bridge our aggravations.

In 1929 there was an effort to live together, but through force of circumstances both sides walked away from one another. Did they achieve more than it was possible to achieve together? Abraham Lincoln talked about the relationship between the North and the South at the time of the American Civil War, suggesting that it was preferable to have a regular marriage than to try to live together without benefit of that kind of sanction because the two sides could not separate. They had to live with each other and the real question became how to do it best. The same is true of Israel and the diaspora. Doing it best requires a constitutional framework that can create an institutional capacity to do the job.

### **New Directions: Israel Becoming Dominant; Europe Reemerging**

In the intervening years since the reconstitution, there have been other changes in the Jewish world, most especially the massive aliyah from the ex-Soviet Union and Ethiopia and a demographic crisis in the Western diasporas. Both of these changes are presently in progress. What will be in ten years in Israel and the diaspora and what rethinking will be needed?

One major change will be a demographically augmented Israel that, if present trends continue, may become the largest single community in the Jewish world by the year 2000, and perhaps even become home to a majority of world Jewry twenty or thirty years after that. The Zionist dream is approaching a realization that few other than its greatest visionaries expected. This will change today's perceived balance between Israel and the diaspora. Most Jews still think of a Jewish world in which American

Jewry is three times as large as Israeli Jewry, but this is no longer true as the two communities approach numerical parity.

While a majority of Jews will still live in the diaspora in the immediate future, it will be a multifaceted diaspora. There will remain large Jewish communities in Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union, however many come to Israel. There still will be many Jews living there, many of whom will be actively interested in defining a place for themselves in the world Jewish polity. As the European Community moves toward greater integration, its Jewish communities will form more of a bloc of 1.2 million, a not insubstantial number.

So Israel will take on new responsibility, while the diaspora will take on new complexity. Europe, east and west, will have to be integrated into the world Jewish polity in a stronger way than in the past. As a result, the English-speaking Jewish communities that act as bridges between the United States and the continental European Jewish communities, by virtue of their position within the institutional framework, will have an even greater task to perform.

### **Development of Civic Life in Israel**

Israel will be moving from a public life that is politically permeated to one which has a strong civic dimension. A true democracy is a stool that rests on three legs — a strong private sector where individuals can pursue their own lives as they see fit; a strong governmental sector, democratic and responsible to public opinion; and a strong civic sector where individuals come together not to force government to act but to act instead of government and make democracy possible through volunteerism. Civic life — the coming together of people on a voluntary basis to undertake public tasks — is the dominant feature of Jewish communities in the diaspora, especially in the United States where civic life is so well developed in general. Civic life is beginning to emerge as a force in Israel as well and is likely to do so much more over the course of the next decade as more individuals have the resources to become involved civically and not only politically.

The need for establishing clearer lines of what it means to be Jewish, as well as better education for Jews as to how to get there, were once diaspora — principally American Jewish — tasks. Now they are

world tasks of the Jewish people, in Israel as well as other diaspora communities. In Western Europe, the efforts to create a unity that goes beyond the borders of individual countries, which have lagged so far behind the European Community, will become matters of no small importance. All these factors and others will require changes in our thinking and the Jewish Agency should be at the center of thinking of how to respond to those changes.

### Confronting the Major Issues

Looking at the Jewish Agency of today, what are the outstanding issues that seem to be most pressing in the eyes of its leadership? The first has to be a kind of general friction between the representatives of the WZO and those of the communities/*magbiot* as a result of the aforementioned differences in conceptions and goals. Many of these frictions, which have to do with personal styles as well as more formal expectations, are inevitable in any complex organization that brings together people of different backgrounds and expectations. Others are a product of the particular combination in this case. These problems may be ameliorated through improved processes and commitment to these processes, but this is easier said than done.

An even more difficult problem is the essentially protective approach the Zionist parties have consistently taken in their decision-making. They have emphasized protecting what they have rather than trying to provide vision for JAFI as a whole in light of the ideological principles they espouse, which might have strengthened the WZO itself. This creates special problems in the decision-making process.

This posture has, in turn, raised questions on the part of the community/*magbiot* partners with regard to the permanent JAFI allocation to the WZO. The feeling has grown that the Jewish communities of the world through their fundraising bodies are providing permanent support for an anachronism whose leaders use the money to oppose all of their partners' plans and proposals, thereby opening the door to repeated attacks on the very existence and legitimacy of the WZO. At the same time, the WZO leadership feel themselves to be at the mercy of the *magbiot* with regard to their very existence and position as spokesmen for the nation-building perspective.

Another issue that has been raised is the proce-

cedure for electing the Chairmen of the JAFI Executive, the Chairman of the Board of Governors, and the Treasurer. Under the present system, one side or another has principal control of the nominating process, while the other side has, at most, a veto — the "advise and consent" process. Proposals have been advanced to unify the electoral processes so that the Assembly and/or the Board of Governors jointly elect those officers.

A more critical problem is the severing of relationships between the department heads and directors-general of the JAFI departments. The success of the community/*magbiot* leadership in securing the appointment of directors-general on a merit basis has tended to sever the connection between department heads and their directors-general who used to be subject to appointment or removal by the department head. As a result, all agree that in no department, with the possible exception of Project Renewal, which has the Chairman of the Executive as its department head, are the heads and directors-general cooperating easily; most are in a situation of confrontation or severed relationships. Needless to say, this is an unhealthy situation. Proposals suggested for its resolution are extreme, either to eliminate politically-appointed department heads or to restore the political connection between each department head and his director-general.

Another issue that has been raised of late is the role of the committees of the Board of Governors. In a very useful step, the Board of Governors wisely expanded its standing committees to include members of the Assembly. Unfortunately, after working long, hard and thoroughly to reach decisions, in many cases committees have had their decisions overruled by others before their recommendations reached the Board of Governors, leaving them with a feeling of frustration and preventing the smooth functioning of what was designed to be an improvement in the governance of JAFI. The resolution of most, if not all, of these issues depends upon the composition of the Board of Governors, which reflects the character of the partnership.

### The Current Confrontation

In June 1991, Mendel Kaplan, Chairman of the Board of Governors, launched an effort to confront these problems and make such constitutional changes in the Agency as were necessary to respond to them.

Kaplan's principal support in this effort came from the representatives of the *magbiot* on the Board of Governors. After a year of considering what was to be done, marked by a continuing below-the-surface conflict with the WZO, led by Simcha Dinitz, Chairman of the JAFI Executive, and marked in the middle by a four-day Board retreat in Tiberias to discuss the relationship between the two partners in a broad way, the UIA-Keren Hayesod leadership decided to concentrate first on eliminating the political heads of the JAFI departments.

This meant striking right at the heart of the WZO's power base by constitutionally taking a giant step away from the Israeli political-governmental model that traditionally has served JAFI toward an American civic-administrative model which has been pressed by the American representatives for years. Not surprisingly, all hell broke loose within JAFI over the issue. As these words are being written, both sides have lined up for what gives the appearance of being a "do or die" confrontation. This confrontation will not only determine the structure of the Agency in the immediate future, but may even determine whether twenty years after the reconstitution, the partnership will continue to exist.

The UIA-Keren Hayesod leadership have been joined by other diaspora community leaders, especially the powerful forces within the Jewish community federations in the United States, at least some of whom believe that it would be better to end the partnership than to lose on this issue. Meanwhile,

the WZO leadership is in the process of mobilizing the leadership of their respective political parties in Israel up to and including Prime Minister Rabin to stop the change.

The present situation in the departments is, indeed, difficult. More than that, the conflict has become the lightning rod for tensions on both sides over the past several years. But there is a real question as to whether it is worth breaking up the partnership to change it. That would not serve the true interests of the Jewish people in Israel and in the diaspora. At a time when the Jewish Agency should be looking ahead to improving its role at the nexus of the emerging world Jewish polity, it is caught up in an internal struggle of this nature, about which the most hopeful thing that can be said is that perhaps the Agency must complete putting its own house in order in whatever way it chooses to do so before it can truly play the leading role that it must on the world Jewish scene.

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