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THE BRAZILIAN JEWISH POLITY IN A DEMOCRATIZING SOCIETY: THE ISRAELITE FEDERATION OF RIO DE JANEIRO STATE (IPSRJ)

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A New Community in this Century

Brazil has 150,000,000 inhabitants, out of which 150,000 are Jews — a tenth of one percent of the overall population. The largest concentration, some 70-80,000 Jews, reside in São Paulo. The Jewish community in Rio de Janeiro numbers approximately 40,000. Until the end of World War I, Jewish immigration to Brazil had been insignificant. The U.S., Canada, and Argentina were the great attractions for Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. The onset of restrictive immigration policies in these countries, in addition to the incipient process of modernization in Brazil, attracted Russian, Polish, Romanian, and German Jews who fled anti-Semitism and/or poor economic conditions.

In the mid-1920s, about 10 percent of the European Jewish immigration headed for Brazil. From the 1920s to the early 1930s, approximately half of the emigrants from Eastern Europe heading for Brazil were Jews. From 1920 to 1928, the Jewish population in Brazil tripled from 10,000 to

30,000. As a result, in the 1920s and 1930s the Jews in Brazil began to structure themselves in a more consistent fashion as an ethnic community.

This demographic growth, directed to the great urban centers such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Porto Alegre, and Recife, rendered the Jews more conspicuous. Jews distinguished themselves by means of language, traditions, habits, and by a series of mutual aid institutions. A further factor of importance was that the Jews generally did not belong to the formal labor market, having an outstanding role in economic sectors such as the itinerant trade and the textile trade — economic activities that promoted fast upward social mobility.

The Jewish presence raised anti-Semitic feelings, which were expressed in the press and in intellectual and political circles. This negative image would in part derive from the nationalist wave at the end of the 1910s, which conceived immigrants as competitors to Brazilian workers, or as non-productive human beings, exploiters of

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manpower or sustaining themselves from internal wealth. The political elites of that time believed that those foreigners conveyed contesting ideologies such as anarchism and communism which were strange to the nature of the Brazilian people. In this case, Jews were considered cosmopolitan, capitalist, communist, urban, modern, in short, dangerous foreigners who would threaten Brazilian identity. This view was reflected in extreme right movements such as Ação Integralista Brasileira (Brazilian Integralist Action), influenced by Italian Fascism, and by restrictive policies regarding the entry of Jews to Brazil. However, the anti-Semitic atmosphere in Brazilian daily life was mostly restricted to a battle of words and was not evident as a popular mass movement.

Jewish community life during the 1920s and 1930s was politically decentralized, respecting the regional as well as the religious, cultural, ideological, and political diversity originating from east central Europe. The differences between German and Polish Jews were sharp, as were those between Sephardi and Ashkenazi, right and left, religious and lay, Zionist and anti-Zionist. During this period, which lasted until the end of World War II, Jews constituted a community apart. Brazilian society was a mere geographic reference which stimulated adaptive strategies more than interactive ones.

The Rise of Brazilian Xenophobia

The nationalism of the 1930 Revolution, led by Getulio Vargas, within an international context of crisis of the liberal-democratic tradition and the rise of totalitarian movements, favored the intensification of xenophobic attitudes. With the onset of the Estado Novo (New State) in 1937, an extremely centralizing authoritarian regime showed little tolerance toward groups displaying strong beliefs in their singularity; cultural manifestations that were not expressed in the national language were prohibited, and any attempts against the formation of the "Brazilian race" were repressed. At that time, Jews were faced with the challenge of how to make Jewish identity compatible with the condition of being Brazilian.

In the face of the existing threats, the Jewish leaders tried to establish survival strategies that would allow them to mediate with Brazilian society. The creation of centralized entities such as the Israelite Federations of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo during the late 1940s was in part an ethnic-institutional response to the heritage of the authoritarian regime in effect from 1937 to 1945. However, there were other important influ-

ences as well such as the end of World War II, the public announcement of the atrocities of the Nazi genocide, the Brazilian democratization process from 1945 on, and the creation of the State of Israel.

Beginning of IFSRJ

The political performance of the Israelite Federation of the State of Rio de Janeiro (IFSRJ) from the 1950s to the 1980s was basically determined by two objectives: to fight any anti-Semitic manifestations, and to defend the State of Israel. The defensive aspect is prominent, a survival strategy chiefly stipulated by the international context. This period also corresponded to the absorption of second-generation Jews into the university and the liberal professions, a process stimulated by the new industrial and urban postwar dynamics which generated social advancement and assimilation. Affluence and absence of external embarrassment were the major characteristics of Jewish community life in Brazil in the 1950s and part of the 1960s.

The 1964 military coup obstructed nineteen years of democratic experience by establishing a dictatorship in Brazil. The new context prompted Jews to experience the same vicissitudes as did the average urban strata of society, namely, a period of economic rise and political authoritarianism never seen before by the nation. Interestingly, during the military regime the Zionist channel proved to be of great importance to individual Jews. Many leftist Jews emigrated to Israel during this period and the Zionist movement provided them a path to liberty. Ironically, with the democratization of Brazilian society the Zionist channel has declined.

This period also coincided with the radicalization of the Arab-Israeli conflict that resulted after the 1967 and 1973 wars, which unequivocally demonstrated the importance of the State of Israel to Jews. IFSRJ, which at that time was already under a strong Zionist influence, attempted to mobilize the Jewish community in defense of Israel.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Middle East conflict was to generate some tension not only between IFSRJ and the Brazilian government, due to the enhanced economic relations between Brazil and the Arab countries, but also between it and some sectors of civil society which took up anti-Zionist or anti-Semitic attitudes.

The Brazilian vote at the UN condemning Zionism as a form of racism, the debate on the opening of a PLO office in Brazil, and the increasing sympathy of civil society for the Palestinian cause all effected

changes in the political behavior of IFSRJ. From then on, this institution became more aware of the movements of society and employed the media as well as efforts in the Brazilian Congress in defense of the State of Israel. At that time, the transition from the authoritarian regime to the democratic one was already underway.

Democratization in the Jewish Community

The rise of democratization in the country, beginning in the 1980s, had important echoes within the Jewish community. One of the chief indicators of this was the transformation from an indirect to a direct voting system for selecting IFSRJ's executive. This change was influenced by Brazilian society's wish to choose the President of the Republic through direct elections. About 10 percent of the community participated in the last IFSRJ elections.

This new context enabled the expression of ethnic identity in the political environment. Some IFSRJ presidents began to gain legislative positions in the state and national parliaments with significant success, revealing the existence of a "Jewish vote" in Rio de Janeiro, a new phenomenon whose existence had heretofore been doubted within the community. Today, the state parliament of Rio de Janeiro has 42 representatives, four of whom are Jews. Two of these are closely linked to the Jewish community and one was the last president of IFSRJ. His predecessor had also gone on to serve in the state parliament.

Jews and Blacks Join to Fight Neo-Nazism

A second expression of ethnic identity arose in 1992 and 1993 when Jews and blacks formed an alliance against neo-Nazism which by that time had begun to echo the increase in neo-Nazi activity worldwide. Both in São Paulo and in Rio de Janeiro the activities of skinheads, who targeted blacks, Jews, people born in northeast Brazil, and homosexuals, prompted the establishment of political alliances against racism.

For the first time in Brazilian history, blacks and Jews united politically. In the process of constructing this ethnic alliance in Rio de Janeiro, some doubts raised by blacks as to the possibility of a union with Jews were overcome by IFSRJ leaders. These doubts had revolved around the difficulty of establishing closer ties with Jews at a time when Israel was seen as representing North American imperialistic interests and an aggressive policy in the Middle East, especially in relation to Palestinians. This old charge from the era of the 1960s revealed an identification by some seg-

ments within the black community with a leftist, Third World vision.

In response, IFSRJ attempted to underline long-standing ties with the black community that included trips to Israel by black personalities from the Brazilian political-cultural world; the participation of black leadership in Jewish and non-Jewish social, political and cultural events; and the visit by leaders of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel to several black entities in Rio de Janeiro. One IFSRJ program of particular importance in this regard proved to be the Seminario Israel (Israel Seminary) that brought Brazilian public personalities to Israel in order to counter the effects of Arab propaganda on their perceptions. IFSRJ also chose to restrict its field of action to within Brazilian territory in the struggle to have blacks and Jews jointly fight racism. As stated by the then-IFSRJ president: "If there was any prejudice against a Palestinian in Brazil, he would be defended by everyone taking part in the front against racism." IFSRJ's leadership not only became apprehensive about Israel's negative image, but sought to distribute publications about the Jewish state among black leaders in order to overcome their doubts. Finally, postponing any discussion about the Middle East would prove to be fundamental to the continuation of the Jewish/Afro-Brazilian alliance to fight the common evil of neo-Nazism.

If IFSRJ was successful in mitigating criticism of Israel, this did not overcome all existing ambiguities. For example, at the initial meeting of the Frente Contra o Racismo (Front Against Racism), the President of the Zionist Organization of Rio de Janeiro, as a representative of the Jewish community, heard at least four speeches by black leaders referring to the Palestine question and thereby emphasizing the importance of this issue to Afro-Jewish relations in Brazil.

What Degree of Political Involvement?

The increased politicization of IFSRJ generated a series of controversies within the Jewish community as to the legitimacy of that entity's becoming a "political machine" with elective objectives, to become a "Jewish party," to the detriment of work more concerned with the internal life of the community.

This debate basically involved two tenets, the first of which conceived the Jewish condition as a private matter of a depoliticized nature, which would operate solely within the group. According to this view, IFSRJ should thus seek to efficiently manage the internal problems of the community and its federates and, simultaneously, be a protecting shield against anti-

Semitic and/or anti-Zionist threats. With regard to national realities, the responsibility to fight those threats should be taken up by "Brazilian citizens of Jewish origin," notwithstanding the degree of politicization of the ethnic group.

A second and contrasting tenet supported the incorporation of ethnicity into the sphere of politics. This view avows the right to legitimate participation of ethnic groups in larger political arenas, where the combination of ethnic and political components would orient the group's action. In this case the group's interests are awarded public visibility, though not necessarily demanding specific political representation (political parties, for instance). According to this view, IFSRJ would be a political player within civil society, representing a particular ethnic group.

Local vs. Israel Allocations

This debate within the Jewish community was not limited to a mere battle of ideas. It was also reflected in the current conflict between IFSRJ and Keren HaYesod of Rio de Janeiro. From the time of its creation in 1947 until the early 1980s, IFSRJ's relationship with Keren HaYesod was harmonious, as IFSRJ fought against anti-Semitism and sought to defend the State of Israel.

Since the 1980s, IFSRJ has become more involved institutionally with regard to Brazilian realities, deepening its involvement in the democratization process of society. At a moment when greater political action is allowed, IFSRJ has been claiming its space among the spectrum of those entities within the civil society that act to reinforce democracy in Brazil. However, as a result, the central political entity of the Jewish community in Rio de Janeiro not only began to require greater resources in order to carry out political and cultural projects that utilized various communications media, during a period of economic crisis in the country, but it also began to question the distribution of funds collected by Keren HaYesod.

This conflict deepened in 1993 with IFSRJ facing a financial crisis and insisting on a public inquiry regarding Keren HaYesod allocations. IFSRJ was no longer prepared to accept the fact that out of the resources collected by Keren HaYesod, 92.5 percent went to Israel, 1.5 percent remained with the Confederação Nacional Israelita Brasileira (Brazilian Israelite National Confederation — CONIB), and only 6 percent was left for local Jewish institutions. In addition, a recent agreement between Keren HaYesod and Vaad Hachinuch arranged for special supplies for Jewish

schools without IFSRJ direction, participation, or approval, although both Keren HaYesod and Vaad Hachinuch are formally linked to IFSRJ's structure. These internal differences were aired in the media. IFSRJ's president publicly criticized Keren HaYesod during IFSRJ's weekly television program, causing some embarrassment among members of the Jewish community and calling into question the legality of Keren HaYesod activities in Brazil.

While this conflict may be explained in part by the difficulties experienced by IFSRJ in acquiring its own resources, it may also be explained by differing conceptions of the relationship between the diaspora and the State of Israel. The present IFSRJ leadership sees that institution as fundamentally oriented toward local needs and demands, and toward the necessary interactions with Brazilian society at large. It sees IFSRJ as an instrument for the attainment of a "Brazilian-Jewish way of life" without denying the importance of the State of Israel. On the other hand, Keren HaYesod, recognizing Israel's centrality within the Jewish world, believes that its main and only function is to gather funds for the Jewish state. Only with sanction from Jerusalem, attuned to the new profile of the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), was agreement possible to allow the distribution of Keren HaYesod resources for education. Contrary to the rules in the U.S., Canada, and some other countries where several arrangements exist to collect and distribute funds to Israel, Keren HaYesod in Brazil follows the Latin American tradition of almost total allocation of resources to Israel. IFSRJ's direction would thus be more in keeping with the American model.

Jewishness Brazilian-Style

Brazilian Jewry is living today within a strong and voluntary assimilation process, and is fully attuned with postmodern Judaism. This Judaism is acted out in special life cycle events — births, deaths, weddings, bar-bat mitzvot; holidays (Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur); in response to the rare incidents of anti-Semitism; and at moments of personal need — disease, existential crises, etc. Interest in Jewish history, culture, thought, and religion has been growing, as exemplified by the significant growth in the number of published works in these fields. Kabbalah, Jewish humor, and psychoanalysis are popular. According to one observer, in Brazil, "Judaism turned out to be a cultural-existential supermarket, in which one gets in or out, according to circumstantial needs, picking out from the shelves those items most adequate to the

moment" (Sorj).

Brazilian society has been influenced by an authoritarian political culture throughout its history. Today, as it undergoes an important democratic transformation, the Jewish community in Brazil finds itself living in a society in which Jews do not have major problems with anti-Semitism, their socio-economic situation is reasonable enough, former political-ideological cleavages have been greatly reduced, the fraction of anti-Zionist Jews is residual, and the link with the State of Israel is unquestionable.

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Marcos Chor Maio is a Researcher for the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This *Jerusalem Letter* is based on the author's presentation at the Jerusalem Center's Workshop in the World Jewish Polity, July 3-5, 1994. For a look at Brazilian Jewry from the perspective of the São Paulo Jewish community, see "The Jewish Community of São Paulo, Brazil" by Alberto Milkewitz (JL124; 1 December 1991).

**Political and Structural Arrangements in the New Era
of Israeli-Palestinian Relations**

Conference Proceedings, December 1993

After the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO, the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation sponsored a conference on Political and Structural Arrangements in the New Era of Israeli-Palestinian Relations, which was held in Jerusalem on December 6-8, 1993. Some 21 speakers explored possible structures and relationships between Israel and the autonomy, the political implications of the new arrangements, related experiences of other countries, the politics and election of the Palestinian council, avenues for functional cooperation, and legal and constitutional issues including settlements and jurisdiction. Included among the speakers were four representatives of the Palestinian community — a leading Gaza notable, a professor of political science from Bethlehem, a well-known Jerusalem writer, and a member of the PLO delegation to the peace talks.

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 1994, 218pp.
Softcover \$15.00

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Understanding the Jewish Agency: A Handbook, Third Edition

Daniel J. Elazar and Andrea S. Arbel

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The Political Economy of Israel: From Ideology to Stagnation

Yakir Plessner

The failure of the Israeli economy can be explained by its departure from the institutions and rules which govern predominantly market economies. Israel's economy has been operating on principles too far from European Liberalism (or American neo-Conservatism) and too close to Socialism. While national imperatives may have been a reason for ignoring economic considerations, ultimately this strategy led to domination of the economy by the government and the systematic exclusion and distrust of private enterprise. As long as the economy is not reformed to create a hospitable climate for private investment, Israel will not be able to extricate itself from economic stagnation. A major critique of Israel's socialist economy, this work is part of the JCPA's study of the political economy of Israel.

State University of New York Press, 1994, 330pp.
Softcover \$21.95; Hardcover \$65.50.