

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 319 5 Av 5755 / 1 August 1995

TRANSITIONS AT THE JEWISH AGENCY ASSEMBLY, 5755-1995

Daniel J. Elazar

The "Fundraisers" Coup / The Keren Hayesod Voice is Heard / JAFI's Jewish Concern for Israel Takes a New Turn / "Religious Pluralism" as Usual / The Real Religious Pluralism in Jewish Israel / The Future of the WZO — Again / What Now?

The "Fundraisers" Coup

This year's Jewish Agency Assembly was a very special combination of the ordinary conduct of business and some major innovations and transitions. One of the major transitions attracted attention throughout the entire Jewish world. Avraham Burg was formally elected and installed as Chairman of the JAFI Executive, replacing Acting Chairman Yehiel Leket, who in turn had replaced the Chairman, Simcha Dinitz, when the latter ran into trouble. Formally, Burg was nominated by the leaders of the WZO. His candidacy was only ratified by the leaders of the UJA, UIA and Keren Hayesod, after which he was elected by the Assembly.

In fact, the Chairman of the Executive was chosen by a revolutionary process, a kind of coup d'état by the diaspora fundraising organizations led by the United Jewish Appeal of the United States, the Council of Jewish Federations, and the local community federations that work with them. According to the JAFI Constitution, the task of nominating the Chairman of the Executive constitu-

tionally falls to the World Zionist Organization, subject to the advice and consent of the United Israel Appeal and Keren Hayesod. The only formal constraint was that the Chairman of the Executive had to be an Israeli, acceptable to the Zionist parties represented in JAFI. In every case in the past, the WZO, that is to say, the Israeli party system, has put forth its nominee, who has then had to undergo a review process by the "fundraisers" in order to gain their approval before his nomination is official and is placed before the Assembly.

This year in a preemptive move resulting from the Dinitz situation, the "fundraisers," particularly the Americans, decided to act first and indicate to the WZO leadership exactly who would be acceptable to them and receive their consent and who would not. The nominating committee of the "fundraisers" considered Acting Chairman Yehiel Leket and MK Avraham Burg, who had proclaimed himself a candidate, both of the ruling Labor party. Impressed by Burg's media presence and exceptionally attractive personality, they chose him on the

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax. 02-619112, Internet: elazar@vms.huji.ac.il. In U.S.A.: 1616 Walnut St., Suite 513, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5308; Tel. (215) 204-1459, Fax. (215) 204-7784. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

grounds that the Agency needed rehabilitation in the public eye after the Dinitz scandal. Despite the Labor party's and Prime Minister Rabin's desire to nominate Leket rather than Burg, Labor did what the situation demanded.

With Burg's choice, three of the four institutions governing Israel — the Histadrut, the Jewish Agency, and the World Zionist Organization — have passed into the hands of a younger generation with far different aspirations and programs than those previously in power. Haim Ramon is already placing his imprint on the Histadrut. It remains to be seen how Avraham Burg will do so in the Jewish Agency and the WZO.

In the second part of the leadership transition, Mendel Kaplan completed his second term as Chairman of the JAFI Board of Governors. He was replaced by Charles "Corky" Goodman of Chicago, a former president of the Council of Jewish Federations of North America and a major figure in the Crown business empire. As required, the representatives of the UIA and Keren Hayesod met to nominate the Chairman of the Board of Governors, which is their prerogative, but who had to be confirmed by the WZO. Despite suggestions from some not to do so, he was, with no problems. Thus, in a swift move, the diaspora leadership of JAFI seized effective control over the choice for both positions.

By the same token, informally, the Americans of the United Israel Appeal agreed that they would not easily choose a non-American again, someone who had not come up through their system and its processes. So in one change the leadership of the past decade was replaced. What was revolutionary about it was the way that it was done.

The Keren Hayesod Voice is Heard

The second revolutionary change took place in the Assembly itself. By and large, the Assembly — better organized for participation this time than in the past many years thanks to its Chairperson, Miriam Schneirov, who insisted on making a real effort in that direction and came up with the ideas for doing so — was otherwise quite routine. Indeed, it suffered from the usual problems of the first stages of democratization, namely, a regression to reexamine matters already discussed in the smaller forums that govern the Agency. This is always exacerbated at Assemblies by the fact that there often is little continuity in the delegations from year to year.

This year, however, even the discussions were

notable by the fact that for the first time in this writer's experience there were far more active participants from the Keren Hayesod countries than ever before. Delegates spoke up from the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, and several other countries that had not often been heard from before in Assemblies dominated by North Americans, particularly from the United States. This, too, is the mark of a very important transition taking place toward a more all-inclusive world Jewish polity.

JAFI's Jewish Concern for Israel Takes a New Turn

The third revolutionary development was the adoption of a resolution recommending that the Agency provide funds for supplementary Jewish education in the Israeli school system, most particularly the state general schools. For the last number of years a few of us have been arguing that the real division emerging in the Jewish people for the next century will be between those who want to be Jews and those who are Jews by accident, who more than anything else want to be "normal." This is not an Israel-diaspora division since it is occurring in both segments of world Jewry. Only the impact of the choice is different. In the diaspora, individual Jews can choose the path they wish to follow without assaulting the community. In the Jewish state, assimilation takes on collective dimensions and often leads to government actions in the field of public policy that affect both sides, as has begun to happen in Israel over the past few years.

Thus, those Jews who want to advance Jewish life and civilization will have to band together in the face of those who simply are not interested in either Judaism or their Jewishness as other than a fact of life and who wish to pursue one personal path or another within the new world culture. Those of us who see this as the major new divide see the Jewish Agency as one of world Jewry's preeminent instruments for supporting the Jewishness of Jews, especially as it readapts its program at the century's end, which, perforce, is becoming necessary because the relief, rescue, and rehabilitation concerns of the twentieth century are moving to completion.

The Assembly's resolution to provide Jewish Agency assistance for the maintenance of Jewishness in Israel is a first step in that direction. There were loud and passionate negative reactions on the part of some Israeli delegates who challenged the right of the Agency to take such a stance and to provide assistance for such tasks within Israel. They defended their own

Jewishness, but theirs was, by and large, the argument of an older Israeli nationalism based on twentieth century statist ideas coupled with an emotional stance in defense of Israel's — and their own — non-religious forms of Jewishness. While little is likely to come of this resolution initially, it does mark the beginning of an appropriate redefinition of JAFI's tasks and functions.

As if further proof were required of the thesis proposed here that JAFI is on the way to becoming a custodian of the Jewishness of world Jewry in Israel and the diaspora, the Wednesday night gala in honor of Mendel Kaplan made the point quite clearly. The hundreds of people there to honor Kaplan were cool when the band started to play standard Western music, but became "hot" and excited participants when it switched to Jewish and Israeli folk songs. These were people who had come to an event in Israel wanting to be demonstrably Jewish and, when the opportunity presented itself, they responded accordingly, giving the evening the atmosphere of a Jewish wedding (which many of them may not have had in their own or their children's weddings) rather than just another occasion for tributes.

"Religious Pluralism" as Usual

While these revolutionary changes were taking place, other business continued as usual. There was the usual demand for "religious pluralism" in Israel, and for JAFI to be involved in the fight for it. As usual, religious pluralism was implicitly and exclusively defined as recognition of non-Orthodox (Conservative and Reform) Judaism by the state and Israel's religious establishment and, more precisely, the extension of equal recognition to Reform and Conservative rabbis. "Religious pluralism" has become the code word for this, much as in the United States the term "urban" has become the code word for assisting blacks and other colored minorities.

Code words aside, neither "religious pluralism" nor "urban" mean those things per se. In Israel's case, insisting that pluralism, which, after all, is a "good" word in contemporary democratic societies, has such a narrow meaning misrepresents the Jewish state and its reality. It is very difficult to write about this subject since there is so much emotion invested in it and one can understand the feelings of people whose own paths to Judaism are not as fully recognized in Israel as they would like. Nevertheless, as they wage their campaign, fairness alone requires them to understand two major

points.

The first is that Israel is hardly monolithic in any respect and enjoys a pluralism in its own style that must be taken into consideration in framing diaspora demands; and the second is that Israel is a country with at least half a dozen different recognized religio-ethnic communities which in the Middle East are the primary manifestations of pluralism. These include Jews, whose divisions we will explore further on in this discussion; Arabs, including Muslims in cities and towns, Bedouin, and Christians, each distinct in their ways of life; non-Arab Christians of various denominations, from Armenians to Mormons; Druse; and Circassians (Muslims of Russian rather than Arab background). Among the Jews there are ultra-Orthodox of several varieties, religious Zionists, traditional, and secular groupings. There are Conservative, Reform, and humanistic Jews, each of whom have their own congregations and associations even if their religious leaders are not fully recognized.

The Real Religious Pluralism in Jewish Israel

Perhaps most overlooked by outsiders is the pluralism within the ultra-Orthodox/Orthodox camp. To those who see all Orthodox Jews as dressed in black, whether they are or not, it is hard to see the many serious intergenerational groups into which they are divided. There are something like a dozen different Hassidic bodies, several communities gathered around "Lithuanian" yeshivot ranging in orientation from the ultra-religious and nationalist like Mercaz HaRav Kook to the militantly anti-Zionist yeshivot of groups like Toldos Aharon. There are the older customary differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, usually further divided by country of origin, almost all of whom have their own synagogues, and for the larger groups, other institutions as well in which whole different sets of religious customs are maintained.

Kol Halr, for example, the Jerusalem weekly newspaper which, as every Jerusalemite knows, hardly overlooks an opportunity to take a poke at Haredim and the Orthodox establishment, has been running a weekly column during this past year in which the columnist "reviews" a different synagogue and its services each week as a critic would review a performance or a play, giving each a rating at the end of the review. The number of different kinds of synagogues that he has identified, ranging from a classical Sephardic "Minhag Yerushalayim" congregation in Talbieh to a Moroccan Bratslaver Hassidic synagogue in the Katamonim, is

not merely impressive but overwhelming, and he has hardly scratched the surface.

Then there are the differences from city to city. For example, if Jerusalem is the place where religious conflict among ultra-Orthodox and other Jews is hardly concealed, Safed is a place where all groups seem to live in harmony and consciously pursue harmonious sharing, while Hebron is a place devoted to religious ultra-nationalism. These differences may not seem that important to the diaspora, particularly in North America where religious differences are of a different order, but these are the differences that appeal to Israelis; whereas, if the truth be told, Conservative and Reform Judaism, after more than forty years of struggle, remain confined to a few major public institutions supported by and principally serving their diaspora adherents and a few dozen small congregations, many of which are active only for the High Holidays and primarily serve olim from English-speaking countries plus a few others attracted to them. It is not just that the religious Jews in Israel have not found satisfaction in those two diaspora-originated movements, but, perhaps especially, neither have the traditional or secularist Jews.

For example, this writer for many years recommended that the Conservative movement pursue the Sephardim, many of whom are traditional in their behavior but not Orthodox and whose traditional religion is much more moderate and more accepting of the contemporary world than the more militant Ashkenazic Orthodoxy. For other reasons, the recommendation may not have worked, but it was not wholeheartedly tried by the movement's leadership in Israel, the vast majority of whom are Americans, far removed from Sephardic sensibilities. This is not to say that there are no Sephardim in Conservative synagogues in Israel, but for the great bulk of Sephardim, the essence of Conservatism did not appeal, in the first place, probably because the Conservative movement is primarily a Litvak reform movement and is very heavily Ashkenazic in its ways as a result. Then the issues that dominate the Conservative movement today, especially those of egalitarianism, simply do not speak to many Sephardim. Thousands of Sephardim are perfectly capable of going to services Saturday morning and then to the soccer game or to the beach Saturday afternoon with scarcely the blink of an eye, but they would not want to end separate seating within the synagogue itself, much less accept even Bat Mitzvah, not to speak of active women's participation in the service. An American may marvel at the contradictions implicit in this

view of the world. Be that as it may, it is the view that is dominant among the vast majority of traditional Israelis and even among those who reject the tradition in their own lives but have a certain view as to what is "real" Judaism.

When traditional Judaism collapsed in Europe nearly two hundred years ago, various indigenous and hence authentic responses emerged to pick up the pieces including two non-Orthodox religious responses — the Reform movement and the historical school which became the Neolog movement in Hungary and the Conservative movement in the United States. They were responses to popularly expressed needs in the diaspora. When the Jews arrived in the United States and sought new forms of Jewish life, most, too, moved away from traditional Orthodoxy to build indigenous Reform and Conservative movements.

No such effort has been tried, much less has succeeded, in Israel. For some reason which should be explored elsewhere but not in this *Jerusalem Letter*, Israelis have not felt the need to do so and hence have not done so, but that does not mean that those who do not want Orthodoxy need Conservative and Reform Judaism in order to have pluralism, even Jewish religious pluralism, in their country. This may be unfortunate for a very large segment of the diaspora which does not find its favorite expressions of Judaism fully expressed in Israel in the way that they would hope. By the same token, Israelis feel that Zionism as they understand it cannot be fully expressed in the diaspora, especially the American diaspora.

This does not obviate the legitimate demands of non-Orthodox Jews, but it does lead to an angry stand-off which is not helped by more ineffective resolutions demanding "pluralism." It would be much better to focus on individual problematic issues and to get them corrected; for example, attacking the hard line of the Israeli rabbinical establishment on the conversion of babies adopted by Israelis overseas, or the lack of a standard examination for *semicha* (rabbinical ordination) which anyone — Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform — could take and, if they passed, gain recognition, in the same way that the bar examination requires a certain level of legal training but is open to all who take that training. These are issues which many Israelis would support out of a sense of fairness and which could legitimately advance the goals of those who want to have Conservative and Reform Judaism included as fully legitimate expressions of religious pluralism in Israel.

The Future of the WZO — Again

Another perennial issue has become even more immediately important and that is the future of the World Zionist Organization. The diaspora community leadership has been pounding away at the WZO for years as unrepresentative, ineffective, and wasteful, a perception that may or may not be justified but which is so strong that it seems that nothing can change it. So while the WZO has retained 50 percent of the formal authority in the Agency, in fact it has been reduced to a shell of its former self. Most of its activities have been transferred to the Agency or made "joint." Concurrently, its annual budget has been regularly reduced. In essence, it has nowhere to go. Hence, those at the WZO have also come to realize that they must make changes if they are to survive.

When the late Leon Dulzin was Chairman of the WZO and JAFI Executives, he tried to bring them to those changes through an effort that became known as the "Herzliya Process," after the venue of the WZO committee that considered what was to be done. Dulzin gave the WZO a major challenge when he opened the meetings of that committee by announcing that the WZO had the best partners available in the Jewish world, namely, the Jewish community federations in North America and their equivalents elsewhere, and that the WZO needed to reorganize itself to be worthy of that partnership. Not only were Dulzin's ideas rejected, but so, too, was the work of the committee, and Dulzin himself was brought down as chairman because of it as older WZO stalwarts joined with representatives of the communities to depose him in their anger at his attempt.

Nevertheless, in 1994 Yehiel Leket initiated another attempt at reform through a committee headed by Rabbi Richard Hirsch, a member of the JAFI and WZO Executives and the Executive Director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. That committee is now at work and is running into many of the same difficulties that Dulzin's committee encountered. Serious and sympathetic observers have grave doubts as to whether the WZO will be able to pull itself together well enough to make the necessary changes and restore confidence in the organization itself, a well-nigh impossible task and one for which the present WZO is poorly equipped.

Avraham Burg has hinted that at the right moment he will intervene to force those changes upon them, but whether he can do that or not remains to be seen. In any case, a very modest effort to change the guidelines under which the committee would pursue its work was

voted down at this year's meeting of the Zionist General Council, which traditionally takes place the week before the JAFI Assembly so that its members can participate in both. Nor is it clear what is to be done. Burg did present a program after his election but it exists in outline only. Meanwhile, the leadership from the communities calls for the WZO's dissolution and disappearance.

What Now?

This year's JAFI Assembly was a shortened one. The American United Israel Appeal decided to bring its delegation here via Kiev to show them the work that the Agency was doing with UIA/UJA/community federation funds in the former Soviet Union. Initially, JAFI's voluntary leadership wanted the entire Assembly to fly from Jerusalem to Kiev for a day and then return to Israel for the meetings, but after they approved that plan, second thoughts prevailed and they realized that, at a time of budget crisis at JAFI, when the dropping value of the dollar meant that a huge shortfall in funds would exist in any case, such an additional expenditure would at the very least be a public relations disaster. So, in the end, the beginning of the Assembly was delayed and only the UIA delegation visited Kiev on their way to Jerusalem.

At the same time, Keren Hayesod held its annual conference in Eilat. It holds the conference every year just before the Assembly somewhere in Israel, but usually closer to Jerusalem. The delegates came back from Eilat by bus via the Negev on Sunday instead. Thus, at least half of the delegates were unavailable for the usual round of committee meetings on the Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday preceding the Assembly and also for the usual Sunday meetings. The Assembly was thus condensed to what was essentially a four-day schedule, which made it very difficult to do real business since all the time was occupied with the more formal and ceremonial presentations and programs. In essence, only the visible, official business was completed.

In any case, the two new chairmen were launched on their tenures in office. Their terms not only cover the last years of the chronological twentieth century but will include such momentous events as the marking of the 100th anniversary of the WZO and, it seems, major advances in the peace process. They are likely to be the first leaders of a Jewish Agency no longer encountering mass aliya or even anticipating it. Thus they will have an opportunity to lead JAFI through a major tran-

sition and to begin to clarify its new mission.

From the minute he assumed the acting chairmanship of the Executive, Avraham Burg has used his strong media skills to suggest the direction in which he would like the Agency to go — toward enhancement of the Jewishness of the Jewish people through devotion of greater resources and effort to Jewish education. Goodman has not yet given us any signs of where he would like the Agency to go except that he wants it to go there efficiently and competently. Meanwhile, the major new initiative of the Dinitz-Kaplan era, the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, is undergoing reassessment and evaluation as it completes its first four years of existence.

For the second time, the expected roles of the two chairmen are likely to be the reverse of what was formally intended. The Chairman of the Executive, constitutionally, is expected to lead the Agency organizationally, while the Chairman of the Board musters diaspora support and handles the political chores attendant on that. Simcha Dinitz, however, was a "Mr.

Outside" who did best in the diaspora and rather neglected his internal tasks, delegating them to others, while Mendel Kaplan assumed the organizational leadership role in terms of the restructuring of JAFI, changing its governance, and undertaking its reorganization. This is likely to be even more the case in the Burg-Goodman years, although, unlike Dinitz, Burg will attempt to forge a new vision for the Agency and not only "sell" it to the larger world. How well these new people do in their new roles will have a great effect on the future of the great national institution that they lead.

* * *

Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. His most recent books include *Federalism and the Way to Peace* (1994) and *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions* (1995).