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PLAIN SPEAKING AND HOPEFUL PLANNING: CHARTING A NEW COURSE FOR ISRAEL-DIASPORA RELATIONS

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Genesis and Organization of the Assembly. The Assembly in session Framework for Continuity. Relationship of Assembly to Existing Institutions. Conclusions.

The First World Assembly of Young Jewish Leadership held in mid-December at the Moriah Hotel in the Dead Sea area was an effort to forge an agenda for Israel-Diaspora relations that reflects the realities of contemporary Jewish life and the possibilities for qualitatively new relationships in the future. It was a no-holds-barred encounter between Jews representing diverse backgrounds and ideological standpoints who, nevertheless, held one major presupposition: Israeli and Diaspora Jews stand in danger of drifting apart and it is the responsibility of the emerging Jewish leadership in both communities to prevent this from happening.

GENESIS AND ORGANIZATION OF THE ASSEMBLY

The idea of a world young leadership assembly had been broached more than half a decade ago by the WZO's Young Leadership division, Dor Hemshech. At the same time, its American counterpart, the United Jewish Appeal's (UJA) Young Leadership Cabinet, had been moving in a similar direction, seeking to develop closer personal links between its members and their Israeli counterparts, especially younger members of the Knesset. When the idea emerged again, both Israelis and Americans were ready to make the Assembly a reality.

The sources of the disquiet that led to the Assembly are not unique and cover a wide spectrum of political, organizational and philosophical issues: concern over Israel's policies in Lebanon and the territories; questions about Israel's religious policy and its impact on Reform and Conservative Judaism; the persistent failure of Western Jews to make aliyah; the question of whether Diaspora Jews can resist the pincer assault of anti-Semitism and assimilation and endure as a source of moral and political support;

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Israeli and Diaspora frustration with the institutional structure charged with effecting the Israel-Diaspora linkage, especially the WZO-Jewish Agency; and the overarching concern that the two communities are moving along divergent paths spiritually and culturally — as younger Jews who do not remember the Holocaust, the founding of the State, and even the Six-Day War come to maturity, will they understand one another as Jews?

Those most intimately involved in the organizing effort — Stephen Greenberg, Young Leadership Cabinet Chairman; Ed Robin, a previous Cabinet Chairman; Danny Rubin, leader of the American delegation; and, on the Israeli side, Uri Gordon, Chairman of the Jewish Agency's Youth Aliyah Department and Arik Carmon of Tel Aviv University's Israel-Diaspora Institute — faced difficulties that ranged from selecting credible and politically acceptable delegations to setting an agenda which would satisfy the American penchant for "process" and the Israeli preference for "structure." As the planning proceeded, both sets of organizers faced skepticism, and even occasional hostility, which compounded the already formidable task.

Two key decisions were made: one, that the scope of the Assembly should be broadened to include not only Diaspora fund-raisers and members of the Israeli political and Zionist establishment, but academics, journalists, businessmen and religious leaders as well; and, two, that all those attending participate as individuals and not as representatives of organizations. Official sponsorship was placed in the Office of the President of Israel in order to avoid a too-close entanglement with existing institutions.

The Assembly did succeed in bringing together individuals who would not have commonly engaged in a project of this magnitude. The Americans included a core of present and former Young Leadership Cabinet members, but also two United States Congressmen, a half dozen academics, Jewish communal professionals including executives from four of the country's largest Federations and several national agencies, and Jewish journalists. The Israeli participants included a sizeable contingent drawn from the WZO-Jewish Agency establishment, Knesset members and ministry officials, but also embraced academics, businessmen, army officers, and journalists.

In reality, neither the delegations nor the process as a whole could avoid being strongly colored by the substantial involvement of the UJA and the WZO-Jewish Agency structure. The American group was selected by the Young Leadership Cabinet, and failed to include adequate numbers of women, rabbis, Jewish educators, and activists from outside the "organized community" to be truly representative of emerging American Jewish leadership. This, it should be stated, resulted not from any exclusionary intent — indeed, the aim was quite the opposite; rather it reflected structural limitations in the selection process. On the Israeli side, political considerations were a persistent factor to contend with and considerable skepticism had to be overcome on the part of many who saw the Assembly as another WZO-Jewish Agency "show." The resulting Israeli group of participants was notably lacking in women and members of the Sephardi and religious communities. It should also be noted that there was only token representation from Diaspora communities other than the United States; in effect, the Assembly was an Israeli-American gathering.

Nevertheless, the Assembly established itself as a self-governing process and the organizers were proven right on the one issue that mattered most — young American and Israeli Jews are prepared to relate in new ways. Some delegates came with private agendas to pursue, but the Assembly was never deflected from its primary focus on the shared agenda of setting directions and building the infrastructure for the next generation of Israel-Diaspora relations.

THE ASSEMBLY IN SESSION

The bulk of the Assembly was devoted to discussions in workshops of concrete issues, goals, and means of knowing one another better and working more closely together. The discussions were unusually frank, thanks in large measure to the trust which had been built up in the initial round of workshops which focused on personal self-definition. Even the formal plenary speeches were not routine set-pieces but blunt and provocative personal statements. The sessions produced no lack of controversy but also generated a sense of solidarity, fellowship, and purposiveness.

Much of what went on was a mutual learning process. Several American participants remarked that they had learned more about how Israelis felt during the Assembly than in all of their previous visits to Israel. Above all, they discovered the intensity of the ideological passion which still surrounds discussion of Israel-Diaspora issues for many Israelis. Time and again, the contrast was drawn between the pragmatic approach to Jewish issues characteristic of American Jewry and the more ideologically charged approach of the Israelis. The vigor of the Israelis' Zionism put some of the Americans on the defensive initially. However, diaspora participants articulately defended the authenticity of their Jewish self-expression and the vitality of American Jewish life. For the Israelis, the intensity of that Jewish commitment, even if not couched in formal ideological terms, was a revelation. Many Israelis were induced to revise their estimation of the depth of Jewishness which lies behind the fundraising activity that dominates the Israeli perception of what Diaspora life is about.

Though the Israel-Diaspora boundary produced one major line of cleavage among Assembly participants, it was by no means the only one. Among the Israelis there were often fierce debates about the character of Israeli society and the appropriate bases for relationships with the Diaspora. At the same time, groups of participants discovered natural alignments around issues — especially those with political overtones — that cut across the Israel-Diaspora boundary. One of the most interesting, for example, was that between members of the Israeli religious left and American proponents of Reform Judaism around the issue of religious pluralism in Israeli society.

It is, perhaps, easy to dismiss what went on at the Dead Sea as "talk." Yet that, in a sense, is what the organizers of the Assembly were aiming to promote: a kind of talking which has too rarely taken place between Diaspora and Israeli Jews. It was not primarily about ideology per se, but about personal convictions and the collective sense which the respective communities hold about themselves and their place in the Jewish people's contemporary enterprise. The result was much self-criticism, much challenging of the other's positions, and ultimately a readiness to deal with specific issues in a context of mutual respect if not total agreement.

Several factors worked together to make this possible: 1) the high caliber of the participants; 2) the organization of the Assembly, which permitted the participants to create their own agenda; and 3) a genuine readiness on the part of nearly all the delegates to speak to one another in highly personal terms. The Assembly constituted a major risk from beginning to end: that important people would not come, that the proceedings would end in boredom or chaos, that everyone would leave feeling more skeptical and alienated than when they arrived. But the wagers were won on nearly every count.

FRAMEWORK FOR CONTINUITY

The Assembly revealed a parallelism of agendas which makes possible common endeavors even in the absence of full ideological congruence. The issues workshops generated proposals which were substantive

and specific. With no prompting from the organizers, the participants demanded that a framework be established for the continuation of the Assembly process and the implementation of the proposals.

That framework is provided by four task forces set up by the Assembly to deal with four key areas: 1) aliyah, 2) economic ties and development, 3) Jewish education, and 4) existing institutions, especially those which link the respective communities. Each task force consists formally of five Israeli and five Diaspora members, with other Assembly participants (and non-participants) invited to attach themselves to the task force of their choosing as coordinate members. As of this writing, all of the task forces have begun to organize their work in the clear expectation that they will be asked to report on concrete progress to Assembly II.

This raises the most important question to emerge from the Assembly: will it make any difference? The obvious answer is that it is too soon to know. The goal of the Assembly was not immediate visible change. The premise was that those gathered at the Dead Sea, nearly all under forty-five years of age, will eventually inherit even more significant leadership roles than they currently occupy. As a result of the Assembly experience, it was hoped, they will assume such roles knowing their counterparts far better on a personal basis than did the last generation of leaders in Israel and the Diaspora.

As the establishment of the task forces indicates, strengthening personal relationships was not the sole aim of the Assembly. At least four other levels of activity are envisioned, encompassing aims more problematic than the development of personal ties. The first is to carry out specific projects designed to advance the goals agreed upon by the Assembly participants. These include such initiatives as the study of Hebrew by many of the UJA young leaders; the incorporation of discussions on aliyah in Young Leadership missions; and joint summer camping experiences for Diaspora and Israeli youth in Israel. Some of the work of the task forces will involve identifying, supporting, and publicizing existing programs which further the Assembly's goals of heightened personal contacts, mutual education, and joint pursuit of enhanced Jewish identity. Expanded economic ties and joint projects will almost surely emerge from the new contacts made by entrepreneurs at the Assembly.

The fourth level of activity central to the Assembly process is perhaps the most far-reaching if least productive in immediate terms: addressing some of the fundamental ideological issues in contemporary Jewish life. Many of these issues, especially those surrounding Zionism and the meaning of Jewishness, were aired at the Assembly. Some of the gaps discovered among the participants were profound. In some areas (for example, the insufficiency of merely living in Israel as a guarantor of Jewishness) substantial consensus emerged. What may have emerged most vividly was the awareness of how different the experience of Jewishness in Israel and in the Diaspora remains, despite the deep and genuine sense of solidarity which pervaded the Assembly. The Assembly as a whole made clear that if "we are one" in many important respects, we remain two or more in many others. The process of developing meanings of Jewishness and forms of Jewish expression which can bind together Israeli and Diaspora Jews is far from fruition. The Assembly demonstrated, at least, that those who are not professional intellectuals are prepared to engage in this process, and thereby offers a measure of hope.

RELATIONSHIP OF ASSEMBLY TO EXISTING INSTITUTIONS

It was clear to all of the Assembly participants that pursuing much of the agenda they set will require the effective use and involvement of existing institutions. Here the ambiguous relationship of the Assembly to many of the most important of these institutions becomes an especially challenging problem. In many ways, the Assembly can be viewed as a process internal to the Establishment both in Israel and the United States. Certainly its leadership, its funding, and many of its participants come from the very heart of the

institutional network whose inadequacies were frequently recited at the Assembly. Yet, with few exceptions, those present were sincere in their assertion that they were not merely creatures of the Establishment, but regard themselves as critics from within. As such, the task of promoting change while continuing to ascend to or maintain positions of real power may well prove delicate. The initial commitment which emerged from the Assembly was to overcome the ignorance of the structures and processes shaping Israel-Diaspora relations which has in the past too often characterized all but those most directly involved in their maintenance. Whether there is room in the Caesarea Process for a cadre of "change agents" operating under the banner of the World Assembly of Young Jewish Leadership remains to be seen. But it is likely that American Federations and the WZO-Jewish Agency structure will feel the presence of this group as a new and watchful force on the world Jewish scene.

The World Assembly of Young Jewish Leadership will inevitably be compared to other initiatives undertaken in recent years to recast the Israel-Diaspora relationship, such as the Jewish Agency's Caesarea Process. In some ways, there is comparability. For example, both Caesarea and the Assembly bespeak a dissatisfaction with the current terms of the relationship. Both processes look toward a more encompassing partnership as the touchstone of the emerging relationship between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry. Both processes implicitly recognize that the basis of that relationship can no longer be construed as philanthropic. Israeli and Diaspora Jewry are partners in a world Jewish polity, and the institutions and activities which bind them together must be appropriately reflective of that reality. The World Assembly of Young Jewish Leadership is, nevertheless, not a junior Caesarea. It is an attempt to develop an ongoing framework for linking a broad spectrum of Jews who want to address the entire range of issues which Israeli and Diaspora Jews must attend to if their relationship is to mature. Above all, it is an expression of a new strategy for dealing with these issues that emphasizes personal encounter, exposure, and transformation alongside institutional change.

CONCLUSIONS

What accounts for the Assembly's success at that expression and its generation of substantive proposals for a continuing framework are the changes taking place both in the Diaspora and in Israel. A North American Jewish leadership is emerging which is, on the one hand, assertive in its Jewish nationalism, and, on the other, unawed by its Israeli counterparts. As a result, these leaders are prepared to demand more in the way of substantive participation in the agenda of Israeli society, and willing to concede to Israelis a voice in shaping the American Jewish agenda. They are ready to listen to the claims of an unadulterated Zionism, yet insist that a healthy Israel-Diaspora relationship cannot be predicated on the image of either a "helpless" Israel or a Diaspora without Jewish spiritual resources of its own. What they are seeking is a relationship of two "adult" communities, each with its own integrity, and as a result, better prepared to participate as partners in an ongoing life together.

There is a reciprocal Israeli willingness to recast the terms of the Israel-Diaspora relationship that opens manifold possibilities for more effective realization of Zionism's own vision. Israelis at the Assembly were often more than ready to concede the failures of their own institutions and endeavors in such areas as aliyah and absorption. They spoke admiringly of American Jewish volunteerism and pluralism. At the same time, they were insistent that the centrality of Israel in Jewish life in the contemporary era be taken seriously. For many, this meant both an assertion of their right to be heard in the councils of American Jewish leadership, and of the right and responsibility of Diaspora Jews to be more intimately involved in Israel. Although such involvement cannot, perhaps, be as full equals, the Israelis were eager that it be as more than benefactors.

In the end, the most difficult task which the Assembly will face is precisely that which inspired its initiation: sustaining communication across the physical and cultural space which separates Israeli and Diaspora Jewry. The obstacles which the task forces will encounter in trying to function as single instrumentalities are formidable. The danger of becoming merely two parallel structures connecting intermittently is real and understood by all. To be sure, not everything which can usefully be done need be done in tandem; yet the commitment of the Assembly participants was to try to act as much as possible as one body, not as two. The Assembly itself demonstrated that such an achievement is possible; it could not demonstrate whether commonality can be sustained over the long run.

The World Assembly of Young Jewish Leadership is one step along a path into unmapped territory. At the Assembly, the inherent duality of the Jewish world today was amply acknowledged by the use of such terms as "dialogue" and "partnership" — catchwords of a whole range of endeavors underway today that deal with the problems affecting Israel-Diaspora relations. Somewhere beyond dialogue lies an ideal of unity which is inseparable from the very concepts of Jewish peoplehood and religion. That unity searched for is not simple sameness. What it can be remains to be seen. The Assembly offered the proposition, however, that, far from reaching a dead-end, the Jews of Israel and the Diaspora can inject their relationship and the endeavor to improve it with new vitality.

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