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A NEW JEWISH AGENCY FOR THE 1990S

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[Editor's Note: In response to recent sharpening of the debate on the Jewish Agency, the Jerusalem Center has issued a call for serious comment on what the future of the Agency should be. The comments received will be published and circulated by the Jerusalem Center either through Viewpoints or in some other appropriate format. We are pleased to present the first comment by Ted Kanner and look forward to presenting others in the future.]

At its February 1987 meeting, the Jewish Agency Board of Governors, led by the diaspora community leadership, took another step forward in its assertion of authority over the operations of the Agency. They did so by taking control of the Agency-

owned companies in the wake of the widespread dissatisfaction with the management of Bank Leumi, Israel's largest bank originally founded by the World Zionist Organization. The community leaders were joined by many of the diaspora Zionist members of the Board as well in expressing dissatisfaction with the role of the Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive in his capacity as Governor of the Bank. This direct confrontation between the Israeli and diaspora leadership of the Jewish Agency of the last few months makes it all the more urgent to reform that institution for the coming decade and beyond. It is now generally agreed that there need to be far-reaching changes in Agency procedures and perhaps in its structure as well.

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A Needed Instrument to Link Diaspora Jewry With Israel

My first point is that there is a clear necessity for an instrument to bring together the Jews of the diaspora and Israel. If there were no Jewish Agency, we would have to invent such an institution which had the capacity to bring together the Jews of the world, with full recognition of the fact that Israel is a politically sovereign Jewish state while the diaspora communities are voluntary in character.

The Jewish Agency currently serves several purposes. It certainly serves, in certain instances deservedly, as the whipping boy for all those who are frustrated with Israeli society, for those who have or have not endured the processes of immigration and absorption, for those who once worked for the Agency, and certainly for the many who just need a whipping boy.

A Quasi-Government

First and foremost, however, the Jewish Agency today acts as a deliverer of human services to a great many people. With all of its shortcomings, it has made and continues to make an effective contribution to the building of Israel's society in the areas of immigration, immigrant absorption, rural settlement, Jewish education, youth programs and neighborhood revitalization.

In effect, the Jewish Agency is a quasi-government. It performs functions which in other countries are performed by the government, functions which it began to perform before the establishment of the state. The Agency is also a quasi-government because those who serve on its Executive are related to the political party system of the state. It is a quasi-government because the Chairman of the Executive and the Heads of the Departments are by Israeli law parallels of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers and their compensation systems are identical.

To Whom Does the Jewish Agency Belong?

There are currently three partners in the Jewish Agency. First, there is the government of Israel, which, through a series of formal and informal relationships, licenses the continuing work of the Agency. Second, there is the World Zionist Organization, the partner that represents both ideological and historical interests and which sees itself as representing the people of Israel. The third is the voluntary leadership of the diaspora, dominated by the American Jewish community. It is a system of two political players -- the government and the World Zionist Organization -- and one voluntary civic and geographically very distant player -- the diaspora leadership; a system which has no symmetry and, more seriously, a system where at least one of the parties has very little lasting leverage or clout.

The Influence of Party Politics

The political nature of the World Zionist Organization has long been recognized. The composition of its Executive is, for the most part, politically determined. There is also recognition and increasing unhappiness about the role of the Israeli political parties in the election of Department Heads of the Jewish Agency. Department heads are members of the Executive who are in residence and who are responsible for implementing the policies of the Board of Governors. Though there has been an increase in at least the understanding of the "advice and consent" role of the Board of Governors, it remains a fact that the political parties nominate the candidates who will be presented to the Board of Governors for their "advice and consent."

It has been this aspect of Jewish Agency governance that has captured the attention of the diaspora leadership. There are calls for "depolitization" of the Agency, meaning that Department Heads

should be selected on the basis of merit and demonstrated ability rather than political affiliation. Obviously this issue is central to the effective and efficient administration and management of the Agency, but it represents only the tip of the iceberg of the issue of political influence.

The Jewish Agency, by definition, is involved in a series of relationships with the government of Israel which are both financial and programmatic. Frequently, the nature and quality of these relationships affect the ability of a department to do its work. The Immigration and Absorption Department must relate to the Ministry of Absorption, Youth Aliyah to the Ministries of Education and Social Welfare, Rural Settlement to the Ministry of Construction and Housing, and the Treasury of the Agency to the Ministry of Finance.

Very frequently it happens that the individual Department Head and Minister are direct political opponents or, at the very least, political competitors. Unfortunately, Israeli political rivalries are not as subtle as those with which Americans are acquainted. Overt and frequently primitive methods of attack are used, even within the same party. These rivalries and antagonisms, both inter-party and intra-party, not only inhibit orderly decision-making and implementation, but consume inordinate amounts of time and energy. Political posturing, strategizing, consulting, and the use of the media for political ends occupy the highest priority of the political leadership of the government and the Jewish Agency. The issues of the institution -- the achievement of objectives, the resolution of problems, the planning of programs, long range anticipation of and planning for changes in external conditions, research and evaluation -- these and the other usual concerns of a service body, government or private, occupy at best a secondary position on the priority agenda.

An additional problem is the fact that relationships among Department Heads of

the Agency are politically colored. The Labor affiliation of the Treasurer is as great a factor as any other in affecting the nature of his relationship with the Head of the Immigration Department whose political affiliation is Herut.

Decisions regarding the hiring of staff, from Directors-General down, are politically influenced. Party members are rewarded with choice assignments, "perks" are granted to political favorites, the selection of overseas emissaries and certainly their place of assignment are politically inspired -- in short, patronage is rampant.

What is most troubling, at least to this observer, is that all of this is the norm. Such practices are as true in the Israeli government as they are in the Jewish Agency. The level of competence in the functioning of the government is viewed by many as being no better than that of the Agency and by some as worse. The work habits of individuals in both bureaucracies are atrocious. Ambition and motivation are for the most part non-existent and decision-making on almost every level is politically motivated.

These problems are serious and endemic. They make efficiency a concept without meaning and they apply a different standard to the notion of accountability.

What then are the solutions? Certainly the separation of the World Zionist Organization and the governance systems of the Agency would help. The institution of contemporary systems of centralized management -- computerization, paper flow, supervision and evaluation, planning and budgeting, the development of work plans, and the upgrading of employment standards and salaries would all help. The professionalization of the leadership of the Agency, from the Chair of the Executive to the Heads of the Departments to the Directors-General, would make a major contribution. The clarifying of the role of the Board of Governors and the redefinition of the expectations of members of the Board in terms of time,

assumption of responsibilities and accountability could help immeasurably.

Needed: The Involvement of Israeli Civic Leadership

Another factor necessary to help correct this situation is the civic leadership of the people of Israel. In my opinion, the WZO does not represent that interest. Most Israelis view the Agency with disdain and with no understanding. Part of the reason is that they feel absolutely no sense of proprietorship.

What is needed is the development of a new participant -- the voluntary involvement of the civic, business and professional leadership of the people of Israel. This is a group which is present here, which can participate in a regular, responsible fashion similar to the way many American lay leadership groups function, a group which can demand and expect accountability, and a group which, together with diaspora lay leadership, can have the leverage and clout to participate with the other partners in shaping the Agency of the future.

Revising the Agency's Current Agenda

What should be done with the Jewish Agency's current programs in the future? First, it is conceivable that the Agency might go out of the service delivery business without going out of business. For example, the government may be a more appropriate home, after forty years of statehood, for Rural Settlement and Youth Aliyah.

Project Renewal should be kept within the Jewish Agency for the obvious, pragmatic reason that it works. It is the one model where the government and the voluntary sector do make things happen. It has the potential for engaging in other areas of urban development and for enhancing the necessary fundraising for critical projects.

The Agency's Immigration and Absorption functions should be reshaped into a single authority run jointly by the

government and the Agency. The policies of that authority would be determined by a board composed jointly of government, Agency and public members. Tasks would be assigned through a clear division of responsibility established by this board and then would be administered and performed by professionals. There are existing programs where this model works.

New Tasks: Toward a Parliament of the Jewish People

The real mission of the Jewish Agency of the future should be to serve as the world parliament of the Jewish people and to deal with those issues of the Jewish people in Israel and in the diaspora that affect the very continuity of the Jewish people.

One of these new issues should involve the deepening of commitments to Judaism and the Jewish people, both in Israel and throughout the Jewish world. The principle tool for this is Jewish education. New statements of objectives for education are necessary. Innovative approaches in curriculum development, teacher recruitment and training, and formal and informal methodologies are urgently required. The issue of "Jewish" education in Israel warrants critical examination as well as the situation in the diaspora.

Jewish education, in both its broadest and its most pragmatic sense, is an issue for the Jewish people of the world to ponder and solve. Jerusalem does not possess all of the wisdom on this matter. There is wisdom all over the Jewish world, as there are education problems all over the world. What is needed is collaboration -- to diagnose the real issues both on a local level and on a global level and to bring together the wisdom that exists wherever it exists to develop solutions to the real problems.

Another vital issue of the Jewish people for the Jewish Agency should be the future of Soviet Jewry. I am distressed by what I consider the absence of a global strategy for getting Jews out of

the Soviet Union. Whatever energy exists is devoted to the secondary question of "Where should they go?" rather than the primary issue of "How do we get them out?" All of the energy should be directed toward getting out as many Jews as possible -- Zionists, "refusenicks" and just Jews, and then, if we need to (and I am not sure we do), we can worry about their destination.

A third issue that will ultimately affect all of us is the Jewish development of the Galilee and the Negev. A great deal of creative thinking needs to be done on these issues and the Jewish Agency can be the locus for that thinking.

The fourth issue involves the quality of life in Israel. Many Israelis may feel that this issue belongs only to them and not to the entire Jewish people, but I do not agree. These are issues which affect both immigration and emigration and have an impact on the international relations of both Israel and the diaspora. These issues include such controversial ones as religious pluralism, democracy, civil rights, and Jewish-Arab relations.

The fifth issue should involve the creation of a world Jewish lobby to organize political power in order to work to insure the security of Israel, protect the security of all Jews everywhere, and provide freedom for all Jews to live where they choose and to worship as they wish.

The sixth issue that the Jewish Agency of the future should face is to develop the ability to assist in providing the full range of communal services for all Jews, including education, culture, health and welfare, in every place where those services are needed.

The final issue is the recognition that Jewish life will prosper only in a free and democratic society. The future of the Jewish people of the world is linked to the future of other peoples of the world and we must be deeply involved in the struggle for freedom and self-determination. This agenda is obviously my own and is by no means exhaustive, but it should provide

some shape to a vision of the future tasks of the Jewish Agency.

How to Get There From Here

To lay the groundwork for this revised Jewish Agency agenda will require the participation of the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive and the Chairman of the Board of Governors. They would create a process which would include a series of colloquia and consultations to begin to crystallize the key issues of the Jewish people. That process would need to include academics, Jewish communal professionals, political leaders and lay leadership from every segment of the Jewish world. The process would culminate in a World Conference on Jewish Needs patterned after the very helpful 1969 Conference on Human Needs, with the participation of all four partners in the enterprise -- the government, the WZO, Israeli civic leadership and diaspora leadership.

This process should result in a redefinition of the role of the Jewish Agency as an instrument of the world Jewish community.

The process of redefinition must include an examination of the relationship between the Government of the State of Israel and the Agency, a new conceptualization of the assignments given to the Agency, a view toward involving the people of Israel in the work of the Agency, and the construction of an agenda that will respond to the needs and issues of the Jewish people, in Israel and around the world for the decades ahead.

The reshaping of the Jewish Agency and the redefinition of its functions will require the development of a structure that will make these new functions possible and effective. The new structure would be empowered by its constituencies to perform these new functions and to assume an additional one, that of nourishing a Jewish Think Tank -- a vehicle that will be devoted to the continuing analyses of major Jewish issues.

These analyses will stimulate and contribute to the conscious process needed for policy development to deal with these issues.

The Jewish Agency has a clear historical mandate to be the vehicle for both nation-building and people-building. Taken in its broadest sense, this responsibility could prove to be even more relevant and important during the next forty years than was the case during the past forty years.

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The recently retired Executive Vice President of the Greater Los Angeles Jewish Federation, Ted Kanner is in Israel for six months as a consultant to the Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency and to the Head of the Aliyah and Absorption Department. He is also a Visiting Associate at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. This is a revised and expanded version of a paper he presented at the Jerusalem Center on March 4, 1987.

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