

THE SHIFTING ROLE OF DIASPORA COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES IN ISRAEL

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With the onset of Project Renewal in 1978, several Diaspora communities hired Israel-based representatives as they recognized the importance of direct communication with their twinned neighborhoods. As Project Renewal was gradually phased out and alternative models for direct Israel-Diaspora community relations emerged, the role of these community representatives required redefinition. This analysis of the role of community representatives, part of a larger study on Partnership 2000 commissioned by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, attempts to understand how they conceive of their participation in that project and what meaning they assign to it. The findings indicate that while community representatives exhibit high levels of identification with both their Diaspora community and their twinned Israeli locality there is a visible decline in their satisfaction and perceived job clarity in the transition from Project Renewal to Partnership 2000. The community representative might need to take an active role in defining the overarching goals of the partnership between his or her community and partnered region in order for the project to become more substantive and effective.

In their institutional links with the State of Israel, many Diaspora communities identified the need to maintain a more sustained connection and therefore appointed Israel-based representatives. With the onset of Project Renewal in 1978, communities increasingly recognized the importance of direct, unfettered communications with their twinned localities (Lappin & Tercher, 1990). Furthermore, they sought greater non-political objectivity, effective communication, visibility, and accountability (Elazar & King, 1982). Consequently, the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of this phenomenon, so that presently there are twenty full and part-time community representatives in Israel (some of whom represent more than one community), representing Jewish communities from throughout the Diaspora.

These community representatives play a multifaceted role fulfilling the following functions (Elazar & King, 1983):

- *Communicator*, who processes and interprets relevant information from Israel for his or her community
- *Linker*, who facilitates and negotiates the

encounters between individuals and institutions from the Diaspora community and those in Israel, both on a national and neighborhood level

- *Troubleshooter*, who helps overcome the various administrative and programmatic hurdles and glitches that inevitably arise in the course of this type of transnational, transcultural collaboration
- *Initiator*, who commands the necessary expertise to conceive and launch programs
- *Delegate*, who formally represents and is vested with the authority of his or her community vis-a-vis other institutions

More symbolically, I suggest that an appropriate metaphor for the community representative is the hyphen in the Israel-Diaspora relationship forged by their community.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE TO PROJECT RENEWAL

Initially, the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), the instrumentality entrusted with managing the institutionalized cooperation

between Diaspora communities and the State of Israel, was somewhat resistant to this development, viewing it as potentially undermining its own hegemony in that arena (Lappin & Teicher, 1990; Lazin, 1994). Moreover, the decision of Diaspora communities to appoint an Israel-based representative, while ostensibly a mere personnel consideration, was in fact fraught with symbolic importance—the primary implication of which was that these communities were unwilling to provide a *carte blanche* to the national institutions mediating between them and the neighborhoods. Among other things, this decision seemed to epitomize a communal sense of confidence and assertiveness that has increasingly characterized Diaspora-Israel relations over the past two decades. Other more formal expressions of this same tendency were the preconditions laid down by Diaspora communities for their enlistment into Project Renewal, such as the inclusion of a social dimension to the rehabilitation emphasis of the project (King et al., 1987), the active involvement of neighborhood residents (Lazin, 1996), and the creation of a non-political department for the project within JAFI. In the final analysis, JAFI's ability to control the direct ties between overseas communities and Israeli residents and the mayors was indeed mitigated by the presence of these community representatives (Lazin, 1996).

The existence of a community representative was identified as one of the principal components that provided depth and intimacy to the relationship between the twinned Diaspora community and Israeli neighborhood/town. Other such components included missions and private visits, consultations, and volunteer activity (Elazar, & King, 1982). In fact, a community representative was one of the factors—along with the level of lay and professional personnel, the frequency of visits, and the nature of planning, correspondence, and review of expenditures—that allegedly explained the differential levels of intensity and involvement in Project Renewal among Diaspora communities (Andron, 1992).

A ROLE IN TRANSITION

However, while the hiring of a community representative in Israel gave Diaspora communities a more permanent presence in Israel, Project Renewal was, by definition, a much more transitory phenomenon. The massive influx of immigrants from the Soviet Union during the early 1990s forced the Israeli government, JAFI, and the Diaspora fund-raising bodies to redirect their effort towards underwriting the tremendous costs of immigration and absorption. Consequently, Project Renewal “lost its important place among public policies and budgets were cut” (Alterman & Cars, 1991). At that time, the JAFI Renewal Department embarked on a series of projects intended to forestall the resentment of the neighborhood residents over the shift of funds and attention to the new immigrants. As Project Renewal continued to be phased down, much thought was devoted to how the positive features of the project could somehow be replicated or applied to subsequent models of Diaspora-Israel cooperation. That both communities and neighborhoods desired some form of continued relationship was also borne out in survey research (Gottlieb & Schreter, 1986) and reflected in subsequent proposed recommendations (International Committee for the Evaluation of Project Renewal in Hoffman, 1986; Tobin, 1995). Another recommendation proposed expanding the twinning pioneered in Renewal to a regional scope, since providing increased economic opportunities for populations previously serviced under Renewal had to be tackled on a regional basis.

Those recommendations ultimately led to the formulation of Partnership 2000 (P2K) in 1993. Designed to address the material and spiritual concerns of the residents of the region and of the Diaspora community(ies) through a process of joint governance and allocation of funds, P2K has been heralded by many as a new model for Diaspora-Israel relations. In fact, one federation executive director, in a speech to the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in 1996, went so far as to refer to the project as a

“paradigmatic shift” (quoted in Peck & Patz, 1998). Partnership 2000 may be understood as an institutional response to both external environmental forces and internal organizational constraints (Schwartz, 1998). What remained to be seen was the role to be played by the same community representatives who were so instrumental in Project Renewal.

RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

This analysis of the role of community representatives is part of a larger study on Partnership 2000 commissioned by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. At this time, when dramatic changes are underway in both Israel and throughout the Jewish world, the institutional relationship between these two entities appears to have become extremely fluid. Partnership 2000 offered an interesting and accessible portal through which to study this relationship. I felt that at least a very preliminary look at a few selected aspects of the project might shed light on how it came into being in its present form, how it affects the relations between those partnered under its auspices, and how it is understood by at least a subset of its participants. The community representatives constituted one such avenue of investigation. Their responses supplemented those from a sample of Diaspora lay and professional leaders active in Partnership 2000 (through questionnaires) and from over a dozen key informants—JAFI, UJA, and local community officials—who accompanied the transition from Project Renewal to Partnership 2000 (through semi-structured face-to-face interviews).

This particular inquiry into the role of community representatives in Partnership 2000 attempts to understand how they conceive of their participation in the project and what meaning they assign to it. Implicit in these research questions is a comparative, retrospective view of their role within Project Renewal; this, in fact, constituted an integral and explicit part of the methodological tools employed. I received completed questionnaires from a large majority of community representatives (15). With one exception, all

those surveyed represent North American communities, and all but three had experience with Project Renewal. Among this group, two were surveyed in semi-structured face-to-face interviews and were observed taking part in their community's joint steering committee meeting. Included among these fifteen community representatives are not only friends and former colleagues (I myself worked professionally for a number of years in one of the Jewish national institutions) but my wife as well.

FINDINGS

Community representatives (CRs), as depicted by those surveyed, are almost equally divided by gender, almost all hail originally from North America, and all possess a considerable amount of experience in this line of work (the mean number of years in their position was 11.3). Comparing their perceptions of their current role in Partnership 2000 (P2K) with their past role in Project Renewal (PR) yields some interesting findings. While community representatives exhibit almost equally high levels of identification with their Diaspora community and their twinned Israeli locality and tend to view their role as “highly central” to both, several notable differences emerge (Table 1). These findings point to a visible decline in the satisfaction and perceived job clarity as community representatives made the transition from PR to P2K. This decline in job clarity among community representatives is also manifested in their perceptions of how those with whom they work—both in the Diaspora community and the Israeli region—view their performance.

The duties of the CR under P2K appear to be somewhat more demanding than those of PR, at least with respect to the frequency of visits to both the Israeli locality and the Diaspora community. Given the considerable distance between their place of residence (a majority live in Jerusalem) and their partnered region, this is not an insignificant component of their job description (Table 2). What also becomes evident is the substantial

Table 1. Differences in Job Satisfaction and Job Clarity

	CR Job Satisfaction		CR Job Clarity		Perceived Estimation of CR Job Clarity by those in Diaspora Community		Perceived Estimation of CR Job Clarity by those in Israeli Locality	
	PR	P2K	PR	P2K	PR	P2K	PR	P2K
Little or none	0	1	0	2	1	0	0	0
Moderate	4	8	3	8	1	8	2	6
High	8	6	9	5	9	7	10	7
Missing	3	0	3	0	4	0	3	2

reduction in contact with the Israeli government and the concomitant rise in contacts with NGOs (non-governmental organizations) other than JAFI (Table 3).

In their perception of relations between Diaspora community members and their Israeli partners, Project Renewal here too is perceived more favorably than P2K (Table 4). Interestingly, not only does the appraisal of commonality of purpose and the clear division of labor between community and Israeli partners appear higher for PR, even the perceived accountability between partners fares better. The significance of these findings may bode ill for a project that seems to place such a high premium on the direct and collaborative relations between partners.

The perceived reduction in commonality of purpose and clear division of labor between the two partners extends to their respective relations with JAFI—a perception that echoes that of the Diaspora participants polled (Table 5). Furthermore, community representatives' appraisal of accountability between their communities and JAFI was also higher for PR.

DISCUSSION

**Partnership 2000 and Project Renewal:
A Comparative Perspective**

Data collected from Diaspora participants in the study pointed to a higher level of identification with the P2K region than with the PR neighborhood. Despite this, the perceived clarity of goals in P2K was dramatically lower. In fact, this theme of wholehearted identification with the project coexisting with serious difficulties in conceptualizing the goals of the partnership and its programmatic objectives resonates throughout the interviews conducted and the meetings I observed. Furthermore, these same data suggest lower levels of cooperation and effectiveness in relations between the Diaspora community and the regions as compared with these same parameters in PR.

These differential estimations of P2K and PR among community representatives with regard to commonality of purpose and job clarity reflect a more fundamental distinction between the two projects. PR, while rather ambiguous regarding its overarching goal for

Table 2. Differences in Frequency of Visits

Frequency of Visits to Israeli Locality	PR	P2K	Frequency of visits to Diaspora Community		
				PR	P2K
Less than 6 times yearly	0	0	Never or almost never	30	0
Bi-monthly to less than bi-weekly	4	2	Less than yearly	5	7
Bi-weekly or more	8	13	Yearly or more	3	7
Missing	3	0	Missing	3	1

Table 3. Interface with the Israeli Government and NGOs

	Interface with Central Israeli Government*		Interface with Other (non-JAFI) NGOs*	
	PR	P2K	PR	P2K
Little or none	5	8	6	2
Moderate	3	4	3	6
High	4	0	2	3

*Included here are only those with experience in both projects.

Israel-Diaspora relations, was characterized by decidedly concrete (figuratively and literally) objectives. P2K, by contrast, seems to have been much more successful in articulating its abstract relational mission (at least as understood by its Diaspora participants) than its programmatic objectives. In this sense, it may be understood as the inversion of the means and ends of its programmatic predecessor. While community representatives by and large welcomed the greater intensity and parity in the interpersonal relationships between partners afforded by P2K, some of the comments provided by community representatives underscore their frustration with other aspects of the project and perhaps explain what appears to be a greater sense of professional satisfaction with PR.

- "PR was more intimate. The mayor, project manager, all volunteers, and the Diaspora communities were all in sync. In P2K, things are still unclear.... There is little understanding of common goals.
- "In P2K, things are still unclear."
- "They [Diaspora participants] don't believe in the value or at least the reason for

P2K to support most of the projects that are funded. They don't feel proud of most of the projects and don't know how or why to talk up the 'Israel' projects."

- "They are not really committed to objectives."

Perceptions of Relations with and Role of JAFI

Comments of community representatives provide additional support to the findings presented earlier of the problematic role of JAFI in P2K. While one maintained that "JAFI is more flexible [in P2K] than before," others noted the following:

- "JAFI controls the project far more than they did Project Renewal."
- "I am pessimistic about the future development of P2K through the JAFI setup."
- "In general, I enjoyed the direct connection that PR allowed between Israel and Diaspora communities. I felt regulations imposed by JAFI for P2K only impede this connection and make the job of a community representative more difficult."

Table 4. Differences in Perceptions of Israeli-Diaspora Relations

	Commonality of Purpose Between Community and Israeli Partners*		Clear Division of Labor Between Community and Israeli Partners*		Accountability Between Community and Israeli Partners*	
	PR	P2K	PR	P2K	PR	P2K
Little or none	1	0	0	4	0	0
Moderate	1	9	5	3	4	6
High	9	2	5	3	7	3

*Included here are only those with experience in both projects.

Table 5. Differences in Perceptions of Relations with JAFI

	Commonality of Purpose Between Community & JAFI*		Clear Division of Labor Between Community & JAFI*		Accountability Between Community & JAFI*		Commonality of Purpose Between Twinned Locality & JAFI*		Clear Division of Labor Between Twinned Locality & JAFI*	
	PR	P2K	PR	P2K	PR	P2K	PR	P2K	PR	P2K
	Little or none	0	1	2	0	1	1	2	2	0
Moderate	5	6	5	5	6	7	2	5	3	7
High	5	2	5	2	3	1	7	0	7	1

*Included here are only those with experience in both projects.

The ambivalence expressed by community representatives regarding the role of JAFI in P2K and their own dealings with JAFI mirror many of the comments made by the Diaspora participants surveyed. Together, these would seem to portend a turbulent set of relations between JAFI and at least some Diaspora communities in the context of Partnership 2000 as presently constituted.

CONCLUSION

One theme that resonated throughout the data collected was that some communities, during the course of their involvement in the P2K, had “gotten it.” The comments seem to center more on how communities have conceptualized their role in the project than on any particular action or set of actions they undertook. As outlined earlier, the abstract (and somewhat ambiguous) nature of the project and its objectives evidently makes the task of explaining it to prospective participants a difficult one. The degree to which a community frames, recasts, processes, and articulates its own clear statement of its goals (as a community and within a partnership) as opposed to simply adopting the generic template or credo, is an important variable in determining the success of the relationship. Consider these comments of community representatives:

- “Those communities that know what they want and that have been firm in pursuing it are generally happier.”

- “Communities who’ve ‘gotten it’ see it as a way to connect individuals who were not previously involved to Israel and a way to get the general [surrounding, non-Jewish] community involved.”
- “Eventually, the more motivated communities will develop their own brand of relations with their Israeli counterparts—totally independent of any [intermediary] agent.”

Indeed, the lack of a uniform template for action, or even a semi-standardized set of objectives, ultimately results in Partnership 2000 being defined subjectively by each and every partnership. Some may argue that herein lies its strength and its potential to truly animate both individuals and institutions in the region and in the Diaspora. However, this also constitutes a limitation of sorts as it places the primary onus for defining and mapping a collaborative strategy on the partners themselves. As a result, the role of community representative in P2K may be even more critical and consequential than it was in PR, given the individualized nature of the project and the considerably smaller budget.

The role of community representative in P2K may also shift in focus, with increased emphasis on the tasks of initiator and linker. I suggest two additional components of that role. One is that of scout, referring to the task not only of linking those individuals and institutions that make up the partnership for

the purpose of cooperative ventures but, no less importantly, also actually seeking out and discovering new heretofore untapped elements (particularly in the region) that might contribute an additional dimension and new constituencies to the partnership at large. The other is that of operationalizer. By this, I refer to the need to derive greater substantive direction and concrete programmatic objectives from the rather vague mandate of P2K. A community representative able to make this important contribution to the partnership would be providing it with much needed precision, depth, and focus in the years to come.

If indeed, the community representative will assume increasing importance in this project as it continues to unfold, their current low level of job satisfaction and job clarity (relative to PR) should be of concern to those federations entrusting them with the vital task of helping nurture the institutional relationship that is increasingly being described as the centerpiece of their rapidly evolving Israel agenda.

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