

LATIN AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITIES

Old and New Challenges

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The most important challenge faced by Latin American Jews is to see themselves as full members of their Jewish communities and not as if they are permanently living in transit on their way to Israel or elsewhere. Strengthening Jewish education, training lay and professional leadership, and developing a comprehensive funding system for Jewish institutions are three ways to meet this challenge.

THE CONTEXT

An analysis of the Latin American Jewish communities can by no means omit the historical context in which such communities developed. During the first half of the twentieth century before the existence of the State of Israel, the focus was on meeting basic social service needs, particularly of those who arrived as part of the several migration waves. In response, mutual benefit associations and the *Chevra Kadisha* were developed.

Immediately after the Second World War, several political movements emerged that had a strong impact on the region and particularly on the local Jewish communities. First, encouraged by a triumphant Soviet Union, several Latin American national liberation movements of a clear leftist nature developed, featuring in many cases an intense nationalism. Within the Jewish communities, Zionism—the Jewish people's own national liberation movement—became stronger than ever. A sizeable group of Jews advocated *aliyah* as a means to implement the changes that their political and social ideas demanded.

Those who remained in Latin America tried to establish groups parallel with Israel's political organizations as if they were a government in exile. These political parties

came to control the central organizations of the Jewish community. Particularly in the Argentinean Jewish community, the largest one in Latin America, it became important to belong to the dominant political party in order to "have the key to community money," regardless of whether that party was representative of the larger community. As a result, many community members felt alienated from the organized Jewish community and consequently were not involved in its workings.

At the same time, in those Latin American countries that veered from democratic governments to dictatorships, there was a very marked desire to reproduce the policies of European social democracies. These governments promoted a welfare state that was responsible for meeting their citizens' basic needs. However, lacking the required economic resources, they funded their social programs with an inflationary policy that damaged the fixed-income sectors.

To some extent, the Jewish communities have copied such mechanisms, with such slogans as "no Jewish child shall go without a Jewish education." However, the "pay for services" culture is also strong so that those who lack the financial resources to obtain service from Jewish institutions gradually have turned away from them.

Fund raising, which in the 1930s and 1940s lay the foundation for the present community organizations, declined in the era of the welfare state. In its place, Jewish communities created small financial institutions—"cooperatives"—to support their budgets and engaged in minor fund-raising efforts.

In those countries in which the Jewish community was and is a still active part of the middle class—Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Chile—three structural problems have resulted:

1. The feeling of personal responsibility for the well-being of other Jews weakened, as such responsibility remained in the hands of the collective entity called "the community."
2. Fund raising as a tool to distribute wealth diminished in effectiveness. For example, the day school scholarships that needy students receive are primarily contributed by those parents who pay full tuition. Members of centers and synagogues likewise carry the heaviest burden of costs.
3. When for various reasons the financial organizations that supported the community no longer could do so as generously, the Jewish institutions that relied on them for their funding had to shrink, close, or become indebted. Many lost their assets as a result.

In those countries in which the Jewish community is part of the highest economic levels of society, such as Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, there are of course fewer socioeconomic problems. The focus of community organizations is on religion and ritual, and there seems to be less of an interest in developing creative programs to attract and help as many Jews as possible.

THE CHALLENGES

The Long-Term Challenge

Particularly in middle-class Jewish communities, the ideology of Zionism is pervasive in Latin American Jewish life, not only stimulating high levels of *aliyah* but also causing

those to remain to feel that they are permanently living in transit, even if they live their entire lives in their country of birth.

As a result, these community tasks have never been properly fulfilled:

- *Development of a open and egalitarian relationship with Israel:* There must be an open dialogue with Israel that would aim at devising new forms of relationship that would not stifle or limit Latin American Jewish community development. Similarly, a communication network with other Diaspora communities could stimulate educational and cultural exchanges.
- *Obtaining accurate demographic data about the Jewish population:* In the past, when our parents and grandparents founded the institutions that still flourish today, they did so on the basis of a profound knowledge of their own culture and needs. However, by copying organizational models from Latin American governments, they took little interest in future planning.
- Our generation has lost that information, and we must work to recover it. We must also institute strategic planning mechanisms.
- *Developing a comprehensive funding policy for community activities:* Funding systems based solely on members' fees should be eradicated and endowment funds established. Those endowment funds would enable the funding of innovative educational and social programs that would permit our institutions to be in the forefront of social change.

Education

We are the people of the book and should recognize ourselves as such. Understanding that our formal and informal educational system is the tool required to convey our values, we must succeed in having our schools and community centers be the best in each of our countries. Only by incorporating Jewish values in the daily activities of these institutions and their staff can we ensure their transmission.

Developing the Human Resource

One of the major challenges we face is the increased complexity of the tasks addressed by those in community leadership, be it because of the increasing size of the institutions they manage or the challenges of the external environment. Therefore, training of lay and professional leadership must be strengthened along two dimensions:

1. Development of management skills through the acquisition of the largest possible number of skills and techniques
2. Incorporating Jewish values into daily leadership tasks. Unfortunately, in many cases our lay and professional leadership do not have the Jewish knowledge necessary to perfect, deepen, know, and understand the application of such values to their work. This knowledge must be gained so that Jewish institutions are clearly Jewish and clearly differ from nonsectarian agencies. The notion of *Tikkun olam* should be integrated into leadership activities as a concept of permanent improvement

The Challenge of Jewish Fundamentalism

The challenge of Jewish fundamentalism must be understood within the context of the growth of fundamentalist sects and movements in the general society, as well as the lack of Jewish content and practices in many Jewish institutions and the dominance of Zionism and political parties in community life. Lubavitch and other ultra-Orthodox groups filled a vacuum and grew tremendously from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Their growth illustrates the importance of

filling Jewish community life with meaningful Jewish content and actions; one successful example is the creation of a volunteer network that enables Jews to help others and be helped.

The Challenge of Culture and Creativity

Only if we unfetter our artists' and leaders' imaginations (and here artists and leaders are grouped together intentionally) can we reinvigorate Latin American Jewish life. The richness of a community should be measured in the quality and quantity of its cultural production and creative community undertakings. Only when this concept is understood by communal leadership will we succeed in developing vibrant, growing communities.

The Challenge of Leadership Development

Our parents and grandparents adopted positions of advanced leadership while being proudly Jewish and committed to Jewish values; they led their communities through the challenges of building Jewish life in unknown territories. It is time for our generation to do the same.

Our challenge is to lead each of our communities, not resorting to some messianic dream, but by becoming enablers for our fellow Jews.

The Challenge of the Permanent Communities—No Longer in Transit

Finally and most importantly, the challenge of Latin American Jews is to see ourselves as *de jure* citizens, no longer in transit, but full members of our Jewish communities from the bottom of our Jewish hearts and identities.