

ISSUES, CHALLENGES, AND PRIORITIES FACING THE AUSTRALIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY AND ITS JEWISH COMMUNITY PROFESSIONALS

KEN LANDER

Executive Director, NSW Jewish Communal Appeal, Sydney, Australia

The Australian Jewish community is one of the few communities in the Diaspora that is increasing in size, and about 70 percent of its children attend Jewish day schools. However, its principal challenge is ensuring Jewish continuity. The community also faces the challenges posed by a disproportionate number of aged and poor members—and the need to fund services and facilities for them.

At the end of the twentieth century Australia is in many respects the *goldena medina*—a land of opportunity and freedom. Australian Jewry is taking advantage of these opportunities to build a vibrant and growing community, is confident in its future, and is willing to meet the challenges confronting it.

It is one of the few communities in the Diaspora that is increasing in size. It is a community that has established one of the best day school systems in the world, with over 9,000 children attending Jewish schools (reaching approximately 70 percent of children). It boasts a wide range of community services, is acknowledged as one of the strongest Zionist communities, and supports a plethora of charitable and educational endeavors.

PROFILE OF AUSTRALIAN JEWRY

Australia's Jewish community is concentrated in the nation's capitals, with Sydney and Melbourne together accounting for over 80 percent of the population, followed by Perth and Brisbane with about 10 percent. The smaller communities of Adelaide, Canberra, and Hobart complete the main tapestry.

Over half of Australian Jewry was born overseas, reflecting the waves of Jews who have sought refuge here since the Holocaust. Australian Jewry has the highest per capita percentage of Holocaust survivors of any country outside of Israel. In recent years the influx of Jews from South Africa has had a major

positive impact.

Only one community, Sydney, has a centralized organization akin to a federation. All the other communities operate in an unorganized fashion.

THE CHALLENGE OF JEWISH CONTINUITY

The principal challenge facing Australian Jewry today is no different from that confronting world Jewry—to ensure the survival, growth, and vibrancy of the Jewish community. Australian Jewry in total comprises approximately 100,000 people, but outside of Sydney and Melbourne the problems of small communities with limited opportunities for young adults to meet and attract partners loom large. Even in the larger communities the pool of available partners is not great.

Overall intermarriage figures, relative to other overseas communities, are low (about 36 percent), but they can be deceptive. Recent analysis of the 20–30 age cohort indicates that rates are approaching the North American levels of 50 percent. Australia is a free and open multicultural society where the pressures of modernism are great, and it is easy to assimilate culturally. For many in our community, and these are not always the young, our creed seems increasingly irrelevant.

Recent census statistics indicate that the birth rate of Australian Jewry is 1.54 compared to the national average of 1.8. This natural increase is well below replacement

level, and the community is in fact dependent on immigration to provide its population growth.

Across the country individual communities have been attempting to grapple with some of these continuity issues. In Sydney a study was undertaken and a controversial report was presented that put the issue on the communal agenda and has provided the impetus for some initiatives to be undertaken. In the other communities it has fallen much more to individuals, both lay and professional, to try and take the lead. The challenge in these cases is to work together in a coordinated response.

TOLERANCE AND DIVERSITY

The tension between Orthodox and Reform is one that usually remains below the surface; however at the time of the writing of this article it has broken out into the public arena. The Australian community is generally traditional in its approach and for most of its history has been typified by a pragmatic, moderate Orthodox, religious approach. In recent years the moderate religious center has shrunk, and viewpoints have shifted to the left and to the right. The issue is part of the broader clash of philosophies that flow within the major streams of Judaism.

Lay and rabbinic leaders on an individual basis struggle to find solutions, but constantly find themselves mired in the framework of their inherited philosophies. As the pressures of modernity have increased, spiritual leaders have had difficulty in rising to the challenge. Although it may be too much to expect that we, in far-away Australia, will find the solution that eludes the greatest minds in Jewry today, the challenge in our community is to maintain respect for each other and a tolerance of each other's views. It falls to the lay leaders and professionals to take a lead and find common ground.

ISRAEL AND THE ZIONIST DREAM

Australian Jewry has traditionally been one of the most ardent of Zionist communities, unwavering in its support—emotional, po-

litical, and financial—for the State of Israel. Today the community is torn between its love for Israel and coming to terms with the reality of modern Israel.

Although the issues of Orthodox versus Reform and land versus peace have served to shake the relationship, the Maccabiah bridge disaster—in which four Australian athletes lost their lives and scores were injured, many seriously—had the effect of “shattering the dream.” The failure of the Israeli authorities to respond to Australian Jewry's concerns, anxieties, and criticisms has created a psychological divide that will be difficult to reverse. Communal professionals have generally been slow to understand this wider phenomenon, but nevertheless have attempted to lead the way in helping the community understand that a new and different relationship is required.

CHALLENGES FACING THE AUSTRALIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

An Aging Community

As a result of high levels of immigration to Australia, coupled with the high percentage of Holocaust survivors, Australian Jewry has a disproportionate number of aged members, something in the order of one and half times the national average. Changing government policies, coupled with the special needs of many of these people, create dilemmas in determining priorities for the provision of facilities and services.

The community prides itself on caring for its aged, but this is an extremely expensive business, one in which for the foreseeable future the needs will continue to outstrip the available resources.

Poverty

On the whole, the Australian Jewish community is a wealthy one. It is often overlooked, however, that up to 20 percent of the community live below the commonly accepted poverty line. Most of these poor Jews are the aged without dependents, large Orthodox families, and single parent or dysfunctional fami-

lies. The community is generally served by good community service organizations, but they face the dual challenge of lack of resources and the inherent reluctance of people to come forward and seek assistance.

Resources

The pressure to provide facilities and services at a pace commensurate with community growth is a constant problem, especially where both present and projected needs continue to outstrip the capacity to fund programs. Sydney, the only community with a combined campaign, the Jewish Communal Appeal, is actively grappling with these issues and is attempting to be innovative in its approaches to resource allocation and fund raising. In Melbourne and the smaller communities, the strong organizations with strong financial resources and leadership dominate at the expense of smaller and weaker organizations.

Leadership

For a community to thrive it needs practical visionaries—people who are able to think beyond today and enthuse others with their vision, but with the capacity to do so in a

practical way that does not result in an ongoing burden for the community. At the lay level there are simply not enough people to go round, and often one person is forced to wear many hats.

At the professional level the community as a whole has two problems. On the one hand it does not have the resources to attract the best people into professional communal service. Yet on the other hand, even when it can attract good, particularly young, people it is hard to retain them because there are not the opportunities for career development and promotion. The community is constantly faced with a lack of good professionals.

CONCLUSION

The Australian Jewish community cannot afford to be complacent. The very social fabric that allows it to prosper and thrive at the same time provides a freedom of choice that is often inimical to its own continuity.

Yet, Australian Jews believe that they are building one of the great modern Jewish communities of the world and that despite being at the edge of the Diaspora, they will, with vision, meet the challenges and continue to thrive.