

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

The Jewish Federation in Canada

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The most significant feature that Canadian federations, which represent the vast majority of Canadian Jewry, have in common is their differences from federations in the United States. These differences stem from fundamental premises of Canadian culture, as well as the role historically played by United Israel Appeal of Canada. Canadian Jewry must continue its quest to define itself as a Diaspora distinct from that of the United States.

Ten Canadian federations are affiliated with the Council of Jewish Federations. They represent the vast majority of the 360,000 Jews living in Canada according to the 1991 census. Yet, no two of these federations or the communities they represent resemble one another. The Jewish condition parallels the Canadian condition—spread out over five time zones, with its two metropolitan centers (Montreal and Toronto) attached to two quite different cultures, its prairie communities severely isolated, and its third largest and fastest growing community cut off by a mountain range forcing its gaze southward rather than eastward. More than one-half of all Canadian Jewry lives in the province of Ontario, the majority in Toronto. The most significant feature that Canadian federations have in common is that they are definitely not American.

The national and international relationships maintained by Canadian federations are completely different from those of U.S. federations. Being part of worldwide Keren Hayesod quarantines us from the UJA/UIA structure of the United States. This has positive aspects as it results in a more hands-on and symbiotic relationship with the United Israel Appeal of Canada. Canadian delegates to the Jewish Agency are part of the Keren Hayesod numbers and have more in common with Mexican, Argentinean, French, Australian, South African, and British participants. Yet, this re-

lationship has some negative aspects inasmuch as it denies Canadian federations the dynamism of such UJA-type enterprises as the Young Leadership Cabinets, National Lion of Judah structures, and nationally organized missions geared to giving levels or affinity groupings.

The Canadian system is distinguished by the role of the United Israel Appeal of Canada and its relationships with individual communities. For many decades it was the "Israel side" of the campaign that received the lion's share—up to 80 percent—of combined campaign efforts. UIA was cast in the role of Canadian Jewish banker. Whenever a community had a problem it could not solve within the paltry local portion, it had no choice but to turn to UIA of Canada for assistance—sometimes a "loan," sometimes a grant, and more often than not simply permission to do what was required. That scenario has changed dramatically in the past few years, and UIA now finds itself scrambling to protect the Israel dollar. Canadian federations are not immune to the growing perception that Israel can do without Diaspora largesse and the creeping reality of serious needs to be addressed in the local community.

Much of the professional cadre of Canadian federations is not as rooted in social work as is the case in the U.S. federations. For one, employment criteria include a greater emphasis on Jewish knowledge. And though the border with the United

States is not an ironclad barrier, importing staff is difficult and often results in cultural dissonance. Thus, movement through the agencies is more common and mobility among federations less frequent than in the States.

Another salient difference is the firm entrenchment of the concept of collective national responsibility among Canadian communities. Part of the landscape since the establishment of the National Budget Conference (NBC) in 1974, various incarnations of this continent-wide system have been more universally accepted and successful than similar attempts in the States. Based on a formula for assessments and enjoying virtually full compliance, Canadian federations have together funded such major challenges as large-scale immigration in the 1980s, as well as the ongoing support of national service agencies, such as the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services, and various cross-country campus initiatives.

The two national exercises of UIA and the National Budget Conference, then, served for several decades as the vehicle through which Canadian federations worked together, albeit on the agenda of other organizations. It was only in 1992 that the federations reconstituted CJC-Canada to address this anomaly. Part and parcel of the reconfiguration was the unanimous adoption of the principle that the funding federations had not only the right but the responsibility to prioritize and plan for the services required by the national collective.

Whereas in the past, the recipient agencies sat around the table, along with the federations, to secure funding for a program of their own design, their budgets and programs will henceforth be scrutinized as if they were agencies of a local nature. Needless to say, such a shift in decisional powers is not without its occasional tensions as historical mandates and sacred cows come up for review.

In assessing needs both nationally and

locally, Canadian federations define their preoccupations in very different ways. This is a result of a difference in fundamental premises of Canadian culture not shared by our American cousins.

The role of religious and ethnic communities in Canada is a product of a national policy of multiculturalism that is diametrically opposed to the concept of the American melting pot. Accompanying this is a fundamental difference on church and state issues. In a country in which educational systems were grounded along confessional lines, particularly in the east, it is not surprising that Jewish schools receive significant government funding. This fact is the single most important reason for the high number of Jewish day schools across the country. In Montreal, where Jewish schools in both English and French have been the alternative to the Protestant and Catholic schools for several generations, it is no wonder that 70 percent of Jewish children pass through a day school at some time during their academic careers. Other communal services enjoy government funding directed to culturally sensitive service delivery programs based on the same philosophy of multiculturalism.

The current appetite for continuity issues is also defined somewhat differently in Canada. Though there is concern about the rising rate of intermarriage, particularly as one travels westward, many of our communities are more concerned about whether they will have Jews at all in the decades to come. As Toronto, Vancouver, and to a certain extent Ottawa attract more and more young people, such centers as Montreal, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, and Halifax are faced with demographic shifts of great consequence. The promotion of immigration to these cities is predicated as much on a demographic survival instinct as it is on any humanitarian motive.

In several Canadian cities, the aged over 65 represent over 25% of the population. Providing for their needs is a major communal responsibility.

In Montreal, retaining youth is a communal obsession. Continuity here means finding jobs for young graduates, providing a viable social life, and ensuring that one can function adequately in French. Canadian communities have all been marked by a high percentage of multigenerational families, and recent trends in mobility from university age onward are a disconcerting new feature to many Canadian Jewish families.

The preoccupation around future relations with Israel is a bit more akin to that of the States. For most of the Project Renewal era, Canadian federations funded projects from regular campaign proceeds and not from "over and above" contributions. Thus, the kinds of projects and the independence of action that is to characterize Partnership 2000 have already been part of the Canadian experience for some time. Such projects as Canada Centre in Metulla have provided for a pan-Canadian focus in Israel that is tangible and through which great pride is generated. More and more, the Israel dollar is being translated into other kinds of projects in Israel, as well as providing the funding pool for Israel experience and Gift of Israel programs.

This change in thinking is difficult in a national community that has been ardently Zionist for decades. Unless the post-Aliyah agenda of the Jewish Agency is put in very clear and compelling terms, and soon, the response to overseas needs will look quite different in just a few years. A vague Israel

agenda cannot compete with the deeply felt needs at home.

As in the case in many domains of Canadian Jewish life, the shift in agendas often falls victim to the dilemma of trying to be responsive and progressive in a context that is innately conservative.

Finally, Canadian Jewry must continue its quest to define itself as a Diaspora distinct from that of the United States. "American Jewish-Diaspora-Centrism" rarely takes into account the existence of Canadian Jewry (or of other Diasporas for that matter). Canadian delegates to the General Assembly, for example, are always struck by how much Canadian federations could share in the program and by how little of their communal wares they are asked to or allowed to display. Canadian leadership see themselves as Judaically more sophisticated and better educated than the American Jews they encounter in such assemblies. Canadian Jews often feel out of sync with sessions, speakers, and facilitators in the American milieu. Thought has been given from time to time to establish a separate Canadian G.A. to address issues in a more familiar context.

Canadian and American federations are like twins separated at birth. The shared legacy of Jewish tradition, history, communal life, and even basic communal structures is undeniable; but two different contemporary North American environments have produced two very different siblings.