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Reappraising JAFI's Missions in Israel

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The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) has brought literally millions of people and hundreds of millions of dollars to Israel, a glorious history that is often denied, denigrated, or forgotten. Yet today, JAFI is engaged in serious self-examination of its mission and structure. As this reexamination process takes place, let us look at some past trends, present issues, and proposals for structural change.

Israel's Centrality in Flux

In the late prestate and early poststate period, JAFI played an important unifying role for world Jewry. More than at any time before or since, we as Jews closely lived the slogan "We are One," as rescue, renewal, and state-building unified most of us for a period of roughly three decades. The clarion call to assist baby David (Israel) into life and to nurture its fragile health and growth against all logical odds gripped us even as it galvanized us into action. The post-World War II years found world Jewry, including those behind the Iron Curtain, vowing as one, in the aftermath of the unspeakable horrors of the war, that there would be a Jewish state so that no Jew would ever again lack a place of haven.

While this objective unified us in political and monetary terms, these feelings and actions were grounded in a kind of Zionism for the "other." The centrality of Israel was good for the psyche of all Jews. It was meant as a haven for the physical manifestation of Zionism (aliya) for those Jews who did not live in or have access to the West. Thus, in truth, psychic Zionism - Israel as the center of heart and mind in idealized form - gave pride and pleasure to Western Jewry, but was rarely seen as the place for living out one's own pride, pleasure, and life. A decade after the state's birth, Israel's importance to Jews in America receded even as it retained high importance to most Jews elsewhere. Israel became taken for granted, as American Jewry's domestic agenda gained ascendancy.

The waning congruence of shared purpose was revived with the Six-Day War in 1967 and the horrifying realization that Israel had been at physical risk at a level few appreciated. This reinvigoration of centrality and shared purpose reenergized the fund-raisers to new heights, with heroic levels of giving by those who cared. Yet the last 30 years have again seen a steady, if sometimes uneven, reduction of shared purpose, relieved temporarily by the re-peaked concern born of the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Increasing accessibility to Israel has destroyed the myths, humanized the realities, and has brought interested lay people from around the world the increasing opportunity to peel back the layers of reality. At the same time, however, perceptions were colored by TV coverage of the Lebanon War in the early 1980s, followed by the intifada in the administered territories.

The mistaken view of Israel as a place of danger has kept far more American Jews away from Israel than Jews from elsewhere or Christians from America. Simultaneously, fears in America of the negative outcomes of the Jews' success in breaking social boundaries (assimilation) has replaced Israel as American Jewry's central concern. These realities, confirmed by studies, expose all of us to the fact that Israel is no longer central to most Jews in America and to fewer Jews in the West. The importance of JAFI as a magnet and engine for the opportunities of living out the manifestations of shared purpose are thus weakened and questioned. If Israel is not central to world Jewry's concern, JAFI must take into account the consequences.

Impact on Fund-Raising

The easiest way to measure this changing sense of shared purpose is through the dollars which are raised in the name of Israel and then shared with Israel. In the early days of the diaspora-Israel connection it was manifestly clear that the funds from diaspora Jewry truly were a matter of life and death for Israel, whose fragile economy needed JAFI's money and its services for state-building

. As fund-raising became more sophisticated, a radical change occurred. Historically, the dollars sent to Israel in the prestate and early poststate period were from a broad giving base, with the major percentage of dollars coming from the many. Increasingly over time, the majority of dollars were to come from an economic elite who were committed to Israel as a result of their generation's experience and memories.

In the 1950s, worldwide financial support of Israel's needs supplied a major percentage of its total gross national product. Life in Israel in that first decade included rationing, where an egg or a piece of meat or chicken each week was a luxury. Thus for those of us with a memory spanning a half century, the miracle of today's Israel and its economic success is savored in wonderment.

In that same period the equally miraculous ascent of the economic level of Jews in the Western world did not go unnoticed or unutilized in political terms. The positively identified American Jewish economic elite soon learned to capitalize upon their influential roles in the hallowed halls of Congress and the White House. Over the years, the almost unanimous transpolitical support for "little" Israel spoke to the American idealization of the underdog. The result is that nearly 25 percent of all American foreign aid now goes to Israel.

Elsewhere in the Western world, Jews, sometimes at great legal risk, found ways to send enormous fiscal support to Israel without the favorable tax shelters which the U.S. government provides as an encouragement for charitable giving. During this period JAFI's budget often ebbed and flowed, traceable to the perceived level and degree of risk to Israel in the eyes of world Jewry. JAFI and its worldwide partners were able to make a case to world Jewry, which resulted in an unheard of transfer of funds from the pockets of world Jewry to JAFI. During this period the World Zionist Organization played a major role in distributing these funds with

what might be described as very friendly and relatively loose oversight from abroad.

This ever-changing flow of dollars often correlated with the ebb and flow of immigration and/or the ability of the fund-raising mechanism to mount effective giving efforts, which strengthened JAFI organizationally. At its height, thousands were employed through JAFI to distribute funds and administer services to the Jews at risk.

What only became apparent recently was that even as the dollars began to diminish, so did their proportionate importance to Israel as a state. JAFI's budget is now equal to less than 3 percent of Israel's GDP. Israel's per capita income is slightly less than Great Britain's, and is among the top twenty countries in the world. Israel is now considered a developed country rather than a developing one.

The contraction of JAFI services, coupled with Israel's growth, has thus greatly diminished JAFI as a truly major player in many arenas of Israel's life in contrast with time past.

Leadership

The remembrance of the Holocaust weighed heavily upon diaspora leadership. American Jews often underestimate the extent of the unhealed gaping wound still felt in so many other parts of the world. The moral voices of the survivors and the voices heard from the grave greatly affected the shaping of JAFI's agenda by these leaders, who kept JAFI's main focus on rescue, even as the Israeli government increasingly and understandably tended to other concerns.

Throughout these decades there were great Jewish leaders whose names were known in their respective diaspora communities and indeed often among world Jewry. These leaders were sometimes people of wealth and sometimes people of learning, who moved easily among presidents, prime ministers and kings, and negotiated on behalf of Jews, sometimes publicly, but more often privately. Today, however, many diaspora leaders remain unknown to those they purport to lead or represent. A recent study asked a cross section of American Jewish leaders to identify those who most influenced them. The most frequently named national figure was mentioned by barely 2.5 percent of the respondents. Insofar as Jewish

Federation activists are concerned, there is no cadre of great Jewish figures.

If nothing else, we should be cautious in claiming for whom we speak when we act within the JAFI system. Those Jews who are viewed by other Jews as leaders no longer, with rare exceptions, use this venue as a frame for their talents, as was often the case in the past.

The conclusion is that JAFI, as a framework for focused and sanctioned confluence of purpose, purse and person, has waned in importance. The changing nature of local Jewish life and its concerns, the opportunities for those of wealth to give elsewhere, and the changed nature of the players have all contributed to JAFI's weakened state. Unfortunately, this has not weakened JAFI as a place for dealing with continuing power shifts between and among affected organizations. Much of what has engaged us has been the fact that it is easier to struggle over organizational titles and roles than it has been to focus our efforts on redefining and refining our purposes for a new phase of Jewish life - David as new Goliath - with all the problems facing it that are the inevitable consequences of Westernization and materialism. In that spirit, let us turn to the future of JAFI and its missions.

JAFI as Nexus for Building Jewish Peoplehood

The role of Zionism and the WZO as part of JAFI is entirely different in other diaspora communities than in America. The Zionists in Israel function in narrow gauged, politically inspired and driven terms. The result is that the emphasis on peoplehood may resonate in the minds and writings of the intellectuals and philosophers among us, but it does not manifest itself in JAFI per se. The fight which does exist is in the context of how best to deliver services to Jews in need, and how to share powers as the central focus of our efforts. The writings and proposals of Hirsh, Burg, Elazar, and others focus on various ways to make JAFI a representative platform for the Jewish people. These visions of finding functional ways to bind Jews worldwide through JAFI get increasingly short shrift. Ironically, most thoughtful activists recognize that JAFI's present role in rescue and renewal continues to be important in the short run but will phase out in the long run. In the former Soviet Union, those Jews who still remain have no intention to leave for Israel (or elsewhere). There is thus a finite number of Jews truly at risk and their numbers will

shrink dramatically in the next decade due to mobility and mortality. We have the responsibility to reshape the JAFI agenda and organization so that serious diaspora-based *and* Israel-based issues have a venue for discussion and action.

In the short run, our priority continues to be rescue, but the roles we must expand in the future are in the arena of providing a venue for discussion and action on issues which grip Jews worldwide. At the heart of this new focus must be education that is beyond the conventional.

The major issues of structure and governance now under discussion approach JAFI's mission in the context of four areas of activity: 1) aliya, 2) immigrant absorption, 3) activities in the former Soviet Union, and 4) Jewish-Zionist education. The new proposed governance structure is skewed to focus mainly on immediate problem-solving. JAFI's strength has been in its ability to respond with almost strike-force rapidity in dealing with Jewish hot spots around the world and this must not be lost.

One thing we cannot know from the intended structure is how or if it will capitalize on the needs and desires of increasing numbers of donors to be related in more personal terms to the services they are asked to support. Mega-givers get their names on plaques. This phenomenon is not new as the pillars of the Copernican synagogue confirm. What we have not yet done successfully is to continue to maximize the human dimensions of connecting giver and service recipient.

The universities and hospitals in Israel are increasingly successful in their fund-raising, even as the UIA-Keren Hayesod fund-raising system has at best bottomed out. This proves that Israel has not receded in the hearts and minds of everyone in the diaspora. It also proves that meeting a particular scientist, doctor, or professor has a thrill and personal dimension to it that giving in order to "rescue" Jews does not.

The programs in the past which most gripped diaspora Jews had a human face. Project Renewal truly matched neighborhood leadership with Jewish community representatives worldwide. Operation Exodus struck a chord of identification because of the seeming urgency of needing to literally save Soviet Jewry. Little thought was given to how to replicate the dynamics of Project Renewal within the framework of Operation Exodus.

Individuals and organizations who were asked to save Jews responded in a more focused way when asked how many Jews they could underwrite,

rather than being asked for dollars per se. How great it would have been to match families to families, giving names, following the painful process of absorption, writing letters, visiting, making human contacts.

The phase at which we still find ourselves needs expansion beyond money to prepare us for the transitions in the period ahead. The model of personal engagement and involvement must push beyond the obvious satisfaction of the mega-giver and provide the same opportunities for all Jews who wish to relate to Israel and Israelis in new and personally satisfying ways.

For the longer run, the bond between the diaspora and Israel can only be intensified through JAFI by recognizing the need for JAFI to transform itself into a different kind of force.

Folding the Joint Authority for Jewish-Zionist education more directly into JAFI with structured accountability, while eliminating the existing informal and formal education departments, is a beginning. At the same time, the education focus cannot be so narrowly gauged as is presently proposed if the needs of Jewish-Zionist education of our people are to be energized by JAFI's efforts. At best, JAFI will be an energizer for innovation and experimentation throughout the Jewish world, including Israel.

Jonathan Sarna has wisely noted that the most innovative ideas for "revitalizing Jewish life" often flow from the bottom up rather than the top down, and very frequently from so-called outsiders, not insiders.

JAFI's role must be to reach in, reach out, reach down, and reach up in providing a connection for the experimentation, evaluation, stimulation, and replication of those forays into the unknown. Those programs which are most likely to serve Jews of all ages in offering expanded opportunities for informal and formal Jewish experiences need to be shared in all appropriate languages and in all appropriate modalities. The Israel Experience cannot be the end all and be all for rejuvenating Jewish life.

Confronting Tomorrow's Issues

JAFI *must* confront the fact that the most needed functions in the future are those dealing with the issues which now confront the world Jewish

communities. These include: 1) assimilation and cosmopolitanism, 2) pluralism, 3) inclusivity vs. exclusivity, 4) psychological xenophobia and ghettoism, and 5) authentic and meaningful venues for representativeness to come to life.

Assimilation and Cosmopolitanism

By far the greatest majority of Jews have gorged themselves with the opportunities available to them in open societies. Western values have often been substituted for Jewish values. For most Jews, being Jewish in a significant way is a matter of little moment.

Some Jews have struck a balance, embracing modernity while also engaging in diverse and meaningful ways of being Jewish, recognizing that the path to modernity and the path of significant Jewish engagement combine to make a significant road for life's travels.

Pluralism

Most of us are respectful of differences, even as we realize that beliefs and practices are not shared. Indeed, the unshared are matters of grave concern as they are manifest in the public arena. The potentiality for paralysis and worse, the fracturing of the Jewish body politic worldwide, is an ever-present danger. Often, because of our respective backgrounds, we find it difficult to appreciate the other's concerns or beliefs. We are living through one such moment at the present time as the Knesset ponders its response to the power of Israel's clerics in defining the legitimacy of the majority of world Jewry.

Inclusivity vs. Exclusivity

Bitter, often bruising, debates are taking place today in relation to the priority and consequences of evolving responses to modernity. They embrace those who advocate as wide a spectrum of self-identified Jews as possible as opposed to those who favor increasingly strict interpretations and application of those interpretations to define who is a Jew. The ramifications of a loosely defined set of criteria in applying the

Law of Return have yet to be confronted in their fullness in Israel. One grandparent does not make a Jew in some circles, even though it makes one eligible to get Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

Patrilineal descent, as one example, has its adherents and opponents, and the consequences, both negative and positive, have yet to be fully apprehended.

Psychological Xenophobia and Ghettoism

The full consequences of power and anti-Semitism as manifest in its most dramatic form - namely Israel and Israelis growing up surrounded by hate - has been too little appreciated as it shapes the psyche of Israelis. In turn, most Jews outside of America often compare the American Jews' situation to German Jewry before Hitler's rise.

The turn of a growing number of Jews worldwide to medieval manifestations of separatism, and the political power in Israel and elsewhere of such groups, is another reality affecting world Jewry in manifest ways which needs a venue for open discussion.

Authentic and Meaningful Venues

As organizational Jewish life has evolved, an irony has also evolved. As the power of Zionists worldwide has waned, their system of responding to issues has increasingly provided venues for full and open debate about issues confronting them. Most often the venues have related to the consequences of power-sharing and not to the mega-issues which will confront world Jewry increasingly in the decades ahead.

Elsewhere in Jewish life the organizational structures are increasingly pragmatic and elitist. Anonymous committees of six or eight have often redirected priorities and structures, operating within increasingly small spheres of decision-makers. The Jews we seek to involve as bearers of continuity are often absent at the higher levels of decision-making.

The ongoing strain over diaspora Jewry's rights provides a context for varied and at times disparate visions of how to relate the community's views in Israel. Further opportunities are needed for careful examination

of the premises behind the various positions vis-a-vis diaspora Jewry's role as funder, partner in shaping the Jewish agenda in Israel, and advocate to the Knesset and government regarding issues of prime concern to Jews worldwide.

JAFI as Part of the Solution

JAFI must find ways to make full use of time, energy, and talent to deal with the issues identified here as examples and others which can be added. Venues throughout the Jewish world need encouragement from JAFI to examine and debate issues.

Support is needed for research as a backdrop to the debates, discussions, and decisions which ultimately must be engaged in. There are but a few premier think tanks under Jewish auspices. They must be supported by JAFI in a sustained manner. It is imperative that a thoughtful and planful process for identifying the issues in need of research be evolved and acted upon as a matter of high priority.

The annual JAFI Assembly must assemble the great minds of our generation to debate the issues which will be framing the responses of synagogues, Zionists, Jewish educational institutions, fund-raising and planning organizations, and service organizations in the next decade. It would become JAFI's responsibility to tape, record, place on websites, and find all manner of means to share these framing discussions and positions throughout the Jewish world.

Serious use of people's time at the Assembly meetings to consider longer range issues will more likely lead to their serious engagement in framing resolutions and, more importantly, their becoming involved in the ongoing examination and action needed to deal with the issues being discussed.

Internally, JAFI must begin to deal with the "post-Halukah" issues confronting Israel and the diaspora. Where and how will JAFI interact with the government when it embarks (or does not embark) upon dealing with issues of major concern to world Jewry?

In the future JAFI must become the source for driving the evolving action agenda of Jews worldwide. This means following up discussion and debate with action programs as appropriate. In some instances this

means sharing information, options, and scenarios for use. In other instances JAFI must be in the forefront of putting into place appropriate demonstration projects, monitoring results, and sharing outcomes with appropriate bodies. The programmatic ramifications for JAFI call for the appropriate staff to take the lead to reach out to Jews for purposes other than raising money.

All manner of organizations, ranging from the synagogue movements to Jewish organizations such as American Jewish Committee, WZO-related groups worldwide, and Jewish Community Centers worldwide, can work through JAFI for educational and action programs. This will only happen when JAFI is seen as relevant in what it offers.

Four Models for the Future

Four possible models should be considered which view JAFI's role in the broadest context: 1) JAFI as a transfer agent of social services to the Israeli government, 2) JAFI as a resource for the expansion of volunteerism and supporter of innovation in Israel, 3) JAFI as a venue for identifying and funneling issues of concern to Jews into Israeli society and its government, and 4) a combination of the first three.

JAFI as a Transfer Agent

The recent transfer of much of Youth Aliya to the Israeli government provides us with one model for consideration. The next ten to fifteen years will see a great diminution of the historic rescue role of JAFI. JAFI could enter into a planful and coordinated program of transferring its classic functions over to the government during this coming period.

This cooperative approach would result in fewer dollars and functions being retained by JAFI per se and, simultaneously, staff would be transferred as appropriate. Diaspora and Israeli lay people would play advisory roles to the government. The end of the process would have the Absorption Ministry responsible for all aspects of aliya and absorption, utilizing citizen's groups as advisors, and JAFI staff knowledge and skills folded into the government department.

JAFI as a Volunteer and Demonstration Resource

Regardless of how JAFI might deal with the first model, it is imperative that JAFI concentrate in Israel on identifying and dealing in a pro-active way with new concerns and needs. JAFI could contract with the New Israel Fund and/or buy it out while using the New Israel Fund model of governance and service delivery.

On the governance level, the New Israel Fund involves Israelis (including Israeli Arabs) and diaspora Jews in a mutual governance process. Board meetings take place in Israel and abroad. Broad-gauged policy issues are given serious attention.

In Israel, incubator organizations concerned with a wide range of social issues are encouraged to apply for *temporary* grants. Some exceptions are made to this policy, e.g., the Association for Civil Rights in Israel and the Israel Women's Network, to name a few. But the premise is that new organizations need help in their start-up phase in learning how to organize themselves and become effective advocates and/or deliverers of services in addition to receiving modest grants. They are helped by NIF staff and monitored by staff and volunteers for a time-limited period. At the end of the period - three to five years - they are able to find sufficient funding on their own or from the government.

JAFI could concentrate on this model and in the process work with the Joint and other appropriate organizations in expanding demonstration programs and intensifying structured opportunities for volunteer engagement.

This personalization of focus would provide a scale of relationship beyond anything known today. It would recognize the ability of the Israeli government ultimately to underwrite services after demonstration and evaluation structures involving diaspora Jews and Israelis did their work. Thousands of people could be involved in the process, thus expanding the relationships between world Jewry and Israel.

JAFI as a Venue of Concern

JAFI can only be a venue for world Jewry, as it tries to relate to Israel, with a major revolution in its structure and focus. The JAFI Assembly fails to engage people because it does not take its participants seriously.

Drawing upon Jonathan Sarna's insight, we should examine the feasibility of having the Assembly meet biennially and coordinating the development of a series of mini-assemblies worldwide. They would engage representatives of all interested Jewish organizations and Jews to deal with recommendations, scenarios, and questions which grow out of our concerns as Jews, with special focus on our roles in Israel through JAFI.

The results of think tanks and the network of researchers who would be available through JAFI-driven and supported initiatives would be utilized to frame these deliberations.

The JAFI-sponsored demonstration projects in Israel would be examined for possible replication throughout the Jewish world.

Coordinated lay and professional leadership efforts will be circulated through e-mail, websites, books, and tapes (audio and video) in many languages to reinforce the new roles that JAFI will be capable of taking on if it truly restructures itself in its new mode.

A Combination of the Three

In reality, no one of these approaches subsumes or replaces the other. Serious consideration should be given to an evolving and flexible combination of the suggestions inherent in the first three models. Making JAFI relevant calls for focused and relevant approaches. Keeping in mind the turn to "Jewish renaissance" activities which the Joint Authority would be moving to address in ever more efficient and effective ways, these models and their permutations would accompany the needed organizational and functional changes within JAFI.

In Summary

Israel's centrality for Jews worldwide is no longer a given. JAFI's importance and power has peaked, even as many issues confront and

vex world Jewry. JAFI remains in potentia a vehicle for connecting Jews and continuing to make a difference in tomorrow's Israel.

No organization lives forever. The laws of entropy are applicable to organizations as much as to all of nature. The more creative and innovative JAFI's leadership can be, focusing its energies on answering the questions challenging the relevancy of JAFI, the more likely there will be a JAFI in the twenty-first century.

The future of JAFI will be decided in the marketplace of Jewish life. If change, where and when it is appropriate, is not forthcoming, JAFI will wither from lack of support and use.

The future power and relevance of JAFI lies in its ability to focus on what it can do best to serve the Jewish people, not the other way around.

J.J. Goldberg pointed out in his recent book on Jewish power, *Inside the American Jewish Establishment*(1996), that "most Jewish organizations exist to perform - or to influence the performance of - the responsibilities that have preoccupied Jewish communities in every time and place through history: conducting their religious life; helping their poor, sick and elderly and immigrants; representing Jews to their gentile neighbors; and defending Jews from their enemies at home and in other lands."

It is clear that JAFI must sort out what it should continue to do in Israel and the world, given that there now is a strong and economically stable Israel. It is not clear that the sanction to do so will remain in the future as it has in the past.

This past year we lost a giant in Israel - Rabbi Hugo Gryn (z"l). Hugo often told the story of how in Auschwitz his father took cubes of margarine which had been secretly hoarded and to everyone's horror used them to make Hanukkah candles. When challenged, he responded, according to Hugo, "We all know we can live without food for three days. We cannot live many minutes without hope." JAFI must live through its hopes. It is in JAFI's hands to do so.

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