

The Jewish Agency and Israel-Diaspora Relations: Some Concrete Steps for the Improvement of Jewish Agency Programs

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Assembly delegates and friends: My assignment today is a very difficult one -- to talk about Israel-diaspora relations in a manner that does not repeat phrases that have now become banalities, that is more than exhortative, and that does not propose undo-able actions or unattainable goals. Let me try in this forum to overcome these perils endemic to the subject by focusing very specifically on Jewish Agency functions and governance as elements which make Israel-diaspora relations real. My intention is to suggest ways and means to strengthen those relations through improvements in carrying out the functions of the Agency.

What I am going to say is based on premises I have articulated elsewhere -- to wit:

1. Israel-diaspora relations have moved in the past 20 years from a situation in which a few top leaders from each side would meet with each other periodically, to a relationship in which there are hundreds if not thousands of continuing ties on all levels of Jewish activity -- public and private. Project Renewal was both a manifestation and a cause of this sea-change.

Put more graphically, we have moved from a situation where Israel and the diaspora were two separate institutional pyramids with only the tips touching occasionally, to one in which for some purposes we are all part of a common mosaic or matrix composed of larger and smaller cells, in communication with one another in a wide variety of ways, so that activists of all kinds, as well as the top leadership, are increasingly linked to one another.

2. Both Israel and the diaspora -- especially the American diaspora -- have basic ideologies, needs and politics of their own which are built into their respective situations, are unlikely to change very much, and which must be taken into consideration by the other party if we are to live and work together successfully. More specifically, in terms of ideology, Israelis, no matter how committed to working with the diaspora, deep down in their heart of hearts inevitably question its legitimacy as an equal partner with the Jewish state. American and certain other Jews, no matter how committed spiritually and otherwise to Israel, deep down in their heart of hearts see Israel as no more than first among equals in a network of permanent, secure Jewish communities around the world.

Beyond that, each has its survival needs which, at times, will lead it to take actions that upset, anger, or just plain puzzle the other side. The Pollard case is a case in point.

Finally, each has its own brand of politics. In Israel, it is a highly partisan politics in which every public decision and many private ones are subsumed within the party political framework. In the diaspora, it is the politics of personalities and organizational interests jockeying for position, often by emphasizing public relations over less visible solid accomplishment.

3. We have an institutional structure in place, a network of functional authorities, some single purpose like ORT and some multi-purpose like the Jewish Agency, that are in the process of developing relationships with one another, already forming a package, but one that is not yet tied up. It is the task of this generation to transform that network into a properly functioning world Jewish polity, just as it was the task of the last generation to secure Israel and the individual diaspora communities that make up that polity, after a century of upheaval and destruction.

Some Necessary Conditions

We also know something about the conditions that we believe are necessary to achieve the results we seek. They include:

1. Maximum accountability within the institutions of the Israel-diaspora partnership.
2. As much of a "hands-on" approach as possible, enabling those involved in Jewish Agency programs, either as donors or as recipients, to be involved in determining the character and functioning of those programs.
3. Minimization of bureaucracy and waste to the extent possible.
4. Improved cooperation between the Jewish Agency and the Israel government, recognizing that however much separation of their functions in the same field may be desired, in fact it is difficult to impossible to implement, for objective as well as subjective reasons.
5. The Jewish Agency must reassess its present responsibilities with an eye to reassigning priorities and even some responsibilities themselves as the world changes in the last generation of the 20th century.

Moving to the Project Renewal Model

In concrete terms, the most successful Jewish Agency-related effort to strengthen Israel-diaspora relations since the establishment of the State is Project Renewal. It has not only proven itself in connection with urban revitalization in Israel where its record is "world class," but it has given us all an indication of what can be achieved in the Israel-diaspora relationship.

The key to Project Renewal's success were the twinings of diaspora and Israeli communities. Hence, my recommendation is that the Jewish Agency commit itself to build comprehensive twinings, including and cutting across other Agency functions, so as to build in the interactive component which has made Project Renewal so great. To that end, I would recommend that a significant percentage -- say, up to 20 percent -- of the Israel allocations of diaspora communities be set aside for Jewish Agency programs based upon such twinning or in some cases on direct diaspora responsibility for particular projects in Israel.

Furthermore, I suggest that the Jewish Agency be concerned with encouraging the development of a broad-based Magbit in Israel whose proceeds in part would be used both on a local community and a countrywide basis to match diaspora contributions and, in part, to go into a common pool for Jewish Agency activities in the diaspora.

Let me be more specific, program by program:

1. Aliya and Klita

In my opinion, the time has come to apply the Project Renewal model to immigration and absorption through the establishment of "Project Aliya". Without overburdening you with specifics, let me suggest that it could work in the following way:

First we would distinguish between aliya from free countries and aliya from oppressed countries. In the case of the former, the communities from which the olim come should have a major share of the responsibility for their successful aliya and klita. They should take responsibility for enabling the transition to occur with a minimum amount of conflict and misunderstanding and in such a way that there can be maximum preservation of those aspects of life deemed essential by different people coming from different cultural backgrounds. In doing this, they will work with the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Absorption, or preferably for a joint authority established by the Jewish Agency and the government of Israel that replaces the two, as local communities work with the Jewish Agency Project Renewal Department and the Ministry of Housing and Construction.

The diaspora communities should be involved in everything from the appointment of the appropriate joint committees to diaspora leadership running interference for "their" olim. Their local counterparts on the Israeli side should be the associations of olim from particular countries and/or communities, that shall be recognized as such and strengthened accordingly.

In order to carry out this task, the Jewish Agency or the joint authority will establish a computerized system of information on aliyah matters and reassign resources from other activities for the maintenance of a current data base. In turn, each diaspora community should commit itself to provide computer terminals in central locations within the community (if successful, ultimately in every major synagogue and community center),

where the latest readouts can be obtained on job opportunities, immigrant's rights, mortgages and other subsidies available, etc. The number of shlichim should be drastically reduced in accordance with this new system.

This new system of providing support for klita can be used to move to a system which has already been widely discussed, of providing a general grant to each oleh or family of olim to dispose of as they see fit in the klita process, rather than the provision of extensive services by either the Agency or the government. Since his or her local community will be involved, should the oleh return to the diaspora, he or she could be held responsible by contract for either returning all or part of the funds provided, as agreed in an initial contract, thus substantially reducing the problem of exploitation of rights which has plagued the aliya system since the system of privileges for olim was introduced.

With regard to olim from countries of oppression where there are no local communities to provide them with support, twinings can be arranged with diaspora communities in the free world to provide similar services in conjunction with the Jewish Agency and the government.

In sum, the aliya and klita system will be transformed into the same kind of quadripartite partnership that has worked so well in Project Renewal, involving the diaspora community, the Jewish Agency, the immigrant associations in Israel, and the Israeli government.

Since aliya is a never ending project, this is one in which we can expect the Jewish Agency to continue to be active for the indefinite future, and it should be structured accordingly.

2. Rural Settlement

In my opinion, the Jewish Agency should phase itself out of this function as soon as possible for two reasons:

A. At this stage of the country's development, it is most suitable for the exclusive control of the Israeli government, especially since command of the settlement activity is beyond the Green Line where the Agency cannot be involved even now.

B. Hard as it may be to confront this reality from a Zionist perspective, the old notions that settlement on the land is the highest form of Zionism are utterly obsolete. As it is, there are far too many rural settlements at this time, which is one of the main reasons why so many are in economic crisis. At some point, the question of these existing settlements will have to be confronted head-on, painful as that may be, or else either the government and the Agency will continue to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into a bottomless pit -- in what is euphemistically called "consolidation" -- to save what cannot be saved and

has not been saved anywhere in the world. Hence new rural settlements are really no longer necessary, nor should they be encouraged. Rural settlement was one of the glorious aspects of the Jewish Agency's history. That glory should not be diminished by continuing an obsolete activity after it has lost its usefulness.

It must be recognized that such a phase-out may not be immediately do-able. In that case, the Agency must do two things:

1. Concentrate any new settlement activity in the direction of the new forms of community settlement which are essentially suburban or exurban in character, not designed to be agricultural, but rather to provide the benefits of settlement of the land while at the same time recognizing present economic, social and geographic realities. Since the founding of each of these settlements is estimated by the Rural Settlement Department to be less than half the cost of the founding of a traditional kibbutz or moshav, this is a more economical way of dealing with the issue.
2. The Jewish Agency must live up to its responsibilities as a funding agent and prepare a plan for true consolidation of settlements.

None of this has a direct Israel-diaspora dimension, except to the extent that here a diaspora leadership cut loose from old ideological presuppositions may be able to help the Israelis overcome their own sentiments in this regard.

Beyond that, it is possible to look into whether or not diaspora communities can be twinned with rural settlements as they have been twinned with Project Renewal neighborhoods. The problem here is that the rural settlements need economic assistance, not community centers or day care -- assistance beyond the capabilities of diaspora community fundraising and, as I have suggested, even beyond the capabilities of the whole Jewish people to sustain.

3. Youth Aliya

As we all know, Youth Aliya is another service that is presently being studied to see whether its strong commitment to residential education is still necessary in every case. An otherwise highly successful program, Youth Aliya has recognized this by moving in two directions -- one, by establishing youth centers which are daytime programs for disadvantaged youth who remain at home with their families and, two, by introducing programs to bring diaspora youth to Israel to study for limited time periods. The diaspora leadership should encourage this self-examination with a view to increasing the role of both of these new initiatives. At the present time, of the 17,650 students in Youth Aliya educational frameworks as of March 1987, only 2,500 were in youth centers and 600 in projects for youth from abroad, or less than 20 percent of the total.

With regard to direct diaspora involvement, the same twinning process can be implemented. The diaspora should be and to some extent already is involved in the

projects for youth from abroad and it can be twinned with youth centers that are, by definition, located in municipalities. Indeed, that twinning can be part of the comprehensive twinning I propose, whereby a particular diaspora community will acquire a wide range of responsibilities in a particular Israeli city neighborhood or town - for Project Renewal, for Youth Aliya, for Jewish Agency housing programs through Amigour, and for any locally-based social programs, thereby establishing a continuing, comprehensive relationship.

4. Education

The Jewish Agency's responsibilities in education are three-fold:

1. To provide supplementary support for Israel's institutions of higher education.
2. To provide an Israel experience for diaspora youth that will strengthen their Jewish identity and knowledge and hopefully encourage them to settle in Israel, and
3. To assist in the improvement of Jewish education in the diaspora communities themselves.

With regard to the first, since planning for higher education is in the interest of the state council for higher education, there is little to be done through the Jewish Agency in the way of increasing Israel-diaspora cooperation, even though the institutions themselves are major elements in the structure of Israel-diaspora relations. Every Israeli university is, in effect, a national institution, a university belonging to the entire Jewish people, governed by a board of trustees drawn from throughout world Jewry, with faculties and student bodies equally diverse. All obtain both their operating and capital budgets from Jews throughout the world. They deserve exploration in their own right with regard to their improvement as vehicles for fostering Israel-diaspora relations.

With regard to the second, the Jewish Agency can have an impact on institutions of higher education and others in Israel. The Agency's Jewish Education Committee is already hard at work exploring the possibilities of enhancing the Israel experience. No doubt they will have much to say about the subject, but we already know that there is nothing comparable to the Israel experience in strengthening Jewish commitment, no matter what the background of the beneficiary of that experience or where he or she will spend his later life.

Finally, it is only in recent years that the Jewish Agency has become substantially involved in Jewish education in the diaspora, although it always has provided funds to support some of the WZO Education Department programs. This new initiative is part of the reassessment and reassignment of priorities within the Agency initiated by the Caesarea Process. Because we are at the very beginning of the road in this process, this is the time to make crucial decisions with regard to what the role of the Jewish Agency should be in diaspora Jewish education.

It is clear that, with a few exceptions, the Jewish Agency should not be running schools. That is a responsibility of the communities. It is also clear that the Jewish Agency has a role to play, particularly in the smaller communities, in providing back-up assistance, whether in the form of teaching personnel, curriculum materials and guidance, or in similar areas. Now is the time for the ground rules to be set.

In my opinion, these ground rules must include an identification of those functions in which the Jewish Agency will have to play a significant role for all communities, those in which it should play no role at all or at best a minimal one for most, and those which are on the "it depends" list. The ground rules should also include some kind of classification of communities according to their Jewish educational needs and resources, since Agency involvement will have to be greater where the needs are greatest and the resources least.

Thus, in my opinion, the Jewish Agency must play a major role in Israel experience programs. However, in principle, it should not be involved in operating schools in diaspora communities, except where there are no possibilities for the local community to do so. Nor should the Agency play much of a role in the United States and other large, strong and prosperous diaspora communities; while it will obviously have to play a far greater role in Latin America, to give one example.

Because of the nature of education, the diaspora communities will have to be very much involved in the activities affecting their children. Thus partnerships will include that local dimension that we are seeking as the norm.

5. Social Programs

The new additions to the social programs -- Otzma and the Israel Forum -- are in themselves oriented toward Israel-diaspora relations. This is likely to be the trend in this category, and the category may lend itself to adding social programs with an Israel-diaspora dimension. Even the older programs in this category would lend themselves to a greater diaspora role. The Israel Education Fund already has. The regional development programs and the leadership development programs both could fit into the comprehensive twinning arrangements mentioned in connection with Youth Aliya. They should be moved in that direction.

6. Housing

It is generally agreed by all that the Jewish Agency's role in providing housing should be phased out, but it is also recognized that it will be a good while before that phase-out is complete. In the interim, since the Agency's housing programs through Amigour are located in specific communities and even neighborhoods, they should be folded into the comprehensive twinning arrangements.

7. Other Functions

In many respects the most sensitive budget items in the Agency budget are to be found under "Other Functions" through which the Jewish Agency supports activities deemed worthy through other organizations and makes allocations to institutions that are not organically linked to it. As a result there are literally dozens, if not hundreds, of Israel-diaspora relationships on the micro level within this category, each of which needs to be assessed separately. I have neither the time nor the capability of doing so on this occasion. I will touch only on the issue of religious pluralism which has become such a critical issue in Israel-diaspora relations.

Here, too, we begin with different sets of premises operative in Israel and the diaspora, regardless of religious stance. That is to say, we can take for granted that for ideological and institutional reasons, Orthodox Jewry seeks to avoid recognizing non-Orthodox streams in Judaism as equally entitled to support for their religious activities (there is no question as to their Jewishness). Beyond that, however, Israeli expectations with regard to the Jewish religion differ from those of many diaspora Jews, certainly those in the United States and the other countries of the Emancipation. These differences have an impact on the critical question of "Who is a rabbi?" and "Who is a legitimate convert?" -- the two operative questions that have been most influential in shaping Israel-diaspora conflict on the issue.

It is equally important to remember that this is not a conflict between Israel and the diaspora. Rather it is, in the language of political science, a cross-cutting conflict, uniting and dividing people in both Israel and the diaspora.

It is also important to remember in this connection that while the Orthodox constitute a very small minority in the United States, they are far stronger in Israel and the rest of the world in sheer numbers. Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere, they have a plurality, no matter how the numbers of the various religious streams are measured.

The Jewish Agency will, willy-nilly, have a major role to play in dealing with matters of religious pluralism, whether it wants to or not, given the institution that it is. We must make it a proper arena for considering this issue in such a way as to be fair and to contribute to the maintenance of the unity of the Jewish people. Institutions do this by defusing conflict, by reducing issues to their most manageable components and then dealing with those.

The Governance of the Jewish Agency

You will notice that I have concentrated first on functions and only now am turning to governance. That is because, in my opinion, we have gone about as far as we can go in

addressing governance directly; that further changes in governance, which I believe are needed and will come about, will have to flow from changes in Jewish Agency functions that will then have their impact on the governance structure. I would mention three important dimensions of governance, however:

1. The Israel-diaspora relationship requires an improved relationship between the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization. This may indeed involve the separation of the major WZO and Jewish Agency offices. This will be necessary if the WZO and the Jewish Agency grow further apart. If, however, as already may be happening, the WZO and the Jewish Agency come to offer alternative ways for Jews and Jewish groups to be represented in the world Jewish polity, then what may be required are better means of cooperation and not necessarily more separation.

The Jewish Agency now represents essentially the State of Israel and the comprehensive community organizations (the framing organizations) of the Jewish world. The WZO has represented the Zionist parties almost exclusively, but in the last 15 years has given more space to the representation of other groupings as well, such as the synagogue movements, the women's groups, the sports groups, and such sub-groups as the Sephardim that are not directly represented as such in the governance of the Agency. If carried further, this bi-partite system may be a creative solution to the problem of representing Jews of differing orientations and interests within the world Jewish polity. If so, it will not eliminate conflict. That is part of life and certainly part of public life anywhere, especially in a polity which strives to live according to the principles of democratic republicanism. But it will make that conflict more productive, more useful, and more honestly reflective of the Jewish people the way we are.

2. There is need for a great deal more planning in the governance of the Jewish Agency. This includes both policy and strategic planning. The Jewish Agency is very much a creature of its Israeli environment in its lack of concern for such planning. This needs to be remedied.
3. A proper system of program monitoring and evaluation must be built into the governance mechanism. Programs should be monitored continually and fully evaluated every 5 to 10 years.

Conclusion

While the emphasis here has been on the greater involvement of the diaspora communities in the work of the Agency, we must remember that the Israel-diaspora relationship is a two-way street. As the Jewish Agency moves more into fields such as Jewish education, Israeli involvement in diaspora affairs will also grow. The question is how to best do this. Elsewhere I have suggested that one important way is to build a parallel body of Israeli civic leaders involved in Jewish Agency affairs in Israel, to work

along with those in the diaspora for the common good of the Jewish people as a whole. Another way is for these civic leaders to raise voluntary funds in Israel that will be part of the common pool.

To date we have only scratched the surface of Israel-diaspora cooperation. As we move toward a truly functional world Jewish polity based upon a network of Israel-diaspora relations, those relationships should both broaden and deepen, intensifying their texture and their quality.