



המכון לתכנון מדיניות עם יהודי
(ESTABLISHED BY THE JEWISH AGENCY FOR ISRAEL) LTD בע"מ (מיסודה של הסוכנות היהודית לח"י)

Jewish People Policy Planning Institute

Annual Assessment

2006

EXECUTIVE REPORT No. 3

Major Shifts – Threats and Opportunities

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The Southern Hemisphere

19. CHALLENGES FACING LATIN AMERICAN JEWRY

Background

Latin American Jewish communities are characterized both by common elements and by diversity of experiences. The crystallization of a shared and distinctive Latin American culture and the patterns of collective identity-building have determined the shaping of social boundaries, the ongoing construction of national identity, and the dynamics of social integration of minorities. Jews never had to fight for emancipation on this continent; freedom and equality were granted, although national societies have had to deal with “otherness” as a legitimate component of their community.

In recent decades, Jews have witnessed profound changes in the way they are perceived and accepted in the national arena. Starting in the 1980's, the continent underwent a process of economic liberalization linked to democratization and exogenous ideological influences. The dynamics of globalization processes brought about an overall decline in the standard of living: low income, recession, unemployment, under-employment, and the growth of a “black”, unofficial, informal economy. Close to half the population of Latin America now lives below the poverty level. The top 5% of the population enjoy 25% of the total income, while the bottom 30% receive less than 8% of the income.

The Jewish communities of the continent

have especially felt the impact of this crisis, which varies in scope and intensity according to the size of the middle class, the place of the community in the social and national arenas, and the ability of groups and leaders, both national and communal, to operate in a particular country.

Paralleling the diversity of social settings, cultural milieus and political arrangements, the overall Jewish presence points to a variety of demographic trends, models and scope of organized communal life and identity processes. While on the one hand the Jewish presence on the national arena points to different ways and degrees of incorporation as individuals and a group, Jewish life reflects the dual dynamics of diminishing communities and signs of revitalization.

External challenges

1. New governments — new challenges

In the last few years, the governments of Latin American countries have shown a strong pattern of turning towards the left-center left. This started in Brazil and Venezuela and continued to spread to Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Bolivia. Analysts believe that this trend will continue in the coming elections in Mexico, Peru, Ecuador and Nicaragua.

This change should be understood as something more than a simple development of populist governments; it is the quest of the people in Latin America for a democracy of higher intensity.

People are asking to be more involved as participants, to equal access to health and education, more active public policies, more credibility, and social responsibility by private industry and the media. Moreover, the inability of citizens to use the power of the ballot box to promote democratic solutions for their most pressing needs may in itself constitute a threat to democracy.

On the regional level, there is a visible tension between the populist governments that seek to build new autonomous hegemonies and the more liberal regimes that have moved closer to the U.S. along the lines of Free Trade Agreements.

The Latin American continent has been experiencing a “paradoxical poverty”, i.e. although it is blessed with impressive natural resources, it is one of the most inequitable areas of the planet. The affluence in natural resources has

brought about the renewed interest of China, South Korea and the Arab world in developing new strategic alliances with the countries of Latin America.

Unfortunately, there is no similar attention to Latin America by the Jewish People, despite the fact that both the local and global political-economical situation influences Jewish communities in several

ways. The Jewish community is now compelled to develop a new dialogue with parties that have not previously been seen as “natural” partners. Furthermore, American Jewish interest in the Hispanic population of the United States has grown and is likely to strengthen in the foreseeable future. All the Hispanic groups show

evidence of a transnational character, therefore the needs of the Hispanic U.S. population are affected by the developments occurring in Latin America.

2. Changing dynamics of inclusion and exclusion

Latin American Jews are experiencing the opportunities offered by democracy and pluralism, but they still live in the shadow of the traumatic events experienced by the Jewish community in Argentina. Since the year 2000, they have been the object of what both researchers and Jewish leaders have termed “the new antisemitism”, in which Jewish communities, individuals and Israel are perceived as a single, evil entity.

The connection between hostility toward Israel, antisemitism and anti-Americanism constitutes an important trend in Latin America. Although there is no substantial level of antisemitism, there is evidence of anti-Israel attitudes. In order to cope with these dilemmas, Israel should opt to export its unique experience in voluntarism and “social technologies” to Latin America.

At the same time, the demand for the right to be different and the legitimacy of the other has become the province of many Latin American Jewish intellectuals. Local Jewish literature is distinguished by a recurrent emphasis on the heterogeneity that paradoxically both differentiates and merges the national Latin American experience and the Jewish one. Thus, the critical conditions of many Latin American communities do not annul the cumulative value of cultural creativity and Jewish education.

Local Jewish communities have already joined the commitment to social causes, the

No substantial level of anti-Semitism, but evidence of anti-Israel attitudes

fight against poverty, the attention to educational needs, and the fight for human rights in society-at-large. Their interaction with non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and diverse sectors of society has defined a new agenda in which citizenship building and collective identity seek to converge.

3. Relations with Arab communities in the continent

Although Latin America is predominantly Christian, the presence of Islam is growing. Nevertheless, the level of knowledge among Jews of their Moslem and Arab neighbors is rather meager.

One of the concerns of the Jewish community is the presence of terrorist organizations, such as Hamas or the Islamic Jihad, on Latin American soil. This presence is highly visible in the area known as the "Triple Border" between Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, and on Margarita Island (Venezuela). The strengthening of relationships between Islamic radical groups and governments could become even more problematic for the Jews, as in the collaboration of Iran and Hamas with the government of Venezuela and the potential opening of *Al Jazeera* offices for the transmission of virulent programming via cable TV in Venezuela and Argentina.

4. The Jewish World

The organized Jewish world is not fully acquainted with the inner diversity of Latin American Jewish communities and the nature and intensity of their lives; rather, it has extended its concern to the region mainly in times of crises. This concern has resulted in philanthropic assistance, but this type of relationship can lead to a sort of asymmetry and dependency that

weakens the local Jewish leadership by depriving them of the power of making decisions that affect their own lives. However, local representatives of the Jewish international organizations were able to devise methods and systems that regulate the allocation of financial support and social services. Although the number of Jews living under the poverty line in Argentina and needing assistance is still close to 25,000, the JDC decided to reduce its support by 20% per year over the next five years. This decision challenges the community and its leadership to develop new capabilities for finding resources and making the right decisions for their use.

Philanthropy alone, however, has not defined the relationship of Latin America Jews with world Jewry. On the political level, there has been a growing flux of interaction with North American Jewish organizations that aims to advance the interests of the communities. North American Jewry has become attractive not only as a source of support, but also as a model. This represents a change from the previous pattern of almost exclusive interaction with Israel and Zionist organizations, which have always played a central role in shaping Latin America Jewish life. While Israel's presence in the Jewish communities of the region continues to be high-profile, its attention to the relationship with the Latin America countries in general has decreased. Moreover, what might seem to be a lack of coordination of Jewish policy towards the region could, in fact, be a lack of policy altogether.

The Jewish community is concerned with the presence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad on Latin American soil

Internal Challenges

1. Migration

Over the past few years, a new type of Jewish migration has developed in the region. There is no longer a one-way movement towards a definite destination, but rather constant commuting between the place of origin and a chosen new residence, preferably in the U.S. This type of movement is illustrated by the commuting taking place between Bogotá or Caracas and Miami, or between Mexico City and San Diego. Dealing with this migration requires finding new ways of communal membership, both to maintain the links between the Jewish commuters and their original communities and to allow them to build bonds within the new communities.

2. Diversity of organized communal life

Demographic changes represent new challenges for organized communal life. The trend of expanding the non-core Jewish population and the growth of non-affiliated individuals characterize important Jewish communities such as Argentina and Brazil. These varying degrees of the ethnic dimensions of Jewish life show diverse qualitative and quantitative realities. Out-marriage, non-affiliation and non-membership in organized institutions represent the loosening of collective ethnic bonds required to structure the more individual and subjective dimensions of Jewish identity today.

The weakening of organized communal ties in some settings and the growing of structural density in others point to different challenges, varying according to the milieu and size of the Jewish community. It calls for the exploration

of bonds between individuals and their societies, both in territorial and cultural dimensions and an examination of institutional patterns of Jewish commonality that respond to new individualized trends and to the quest for meaningful identities and sense of belonging.

While Brazil and Argentina represent models of centrifugal communities, Mexico represents a model of structural and institutional proliferation, with membership rates higher than 80%. The differentials in organizational and institutional order are highly reflected in education — a central realm of Latin America Jewry. Jewish education, mostly in day schools, is a core mark of Jewish life in the region. While in Mexico, 85% of children attend Jewish schools, the school system in Argentina and Brazil is weakening.

3. Cultural and religious trends

Religion shows a noteworthy strengthening among Jewish communities in Latin America, not only in the educational field, but also in the overall community life. The Conservative movement has continued to show a relevant presence in the region. Beginning in the 1960's, the Conservative movement spread to South America as the first model of a religious institution imported from the United States. As it adjusted to local conditions, the synagogue played a more prominent role.

In recent years, parallel to changing trends in world Jewish life, Orthodox groups have formed new religious congregations. Today, the spread of the Chabad movement and the establishment of Chabad centers in both large, well-established communities and smaller ones is striking. More

than 70 Chabad rabbis are currently working in close to 50 institutions.

While the extreme religious factions and the strategies of self-segregation are still marginal to the whole of Jewish life in the continent, their growing presence corresponds to developing processes and tendencies. Amid the global de-secularization process marked by the return of religion into the public sphere, both organized Jewish life and Jewish identities face new challenges. There has been a re-definition of external identification components, such as place of origin and the dilution of ideologies, which were the source for hardcore values, and the emergence of calls for spirituality.

A challenge shared by all the communities is the question whether Judaism in the years ahead will be characterized by religious polarization or whether there will be a return to the mainstream of Jewish life.

4. Profiles of leadership

While the tendency of communities to be exclusively governed by volunteer leaders has been slowly reversed and there has been a gradual incorporation of professionals, the rhythm of replacement of the traditional activist by younger cadres varies according to the community.

In Argentina, the presence of wealthy patrons as leaders of central institutions and the overlapping of personal and communal agendas signified the breakdown of institutional life and rejection of the leadership's moral authority. Efforts to renew the leadership have accomplished more substantial results in the field of professionals rather than in the field of lay leaders. In the vacuum created by the crisis in leadership, religious leaders have played an important role in

confidence-building and legitimization of institutions.

The incorporation of a new generation of activists with more pragmatic profiles and explicit commitment to efficiency may lead to awareness of the changes required for the re-organization of communities. Efforts are still required in order to create new paradigms through accountability that could articulate the whole spectrum of Jewish interests.

20. FROM DOWNTURN TO UPSWING IN SOUTH AFRICAN JEWRY

Over the past two decades, the Jewish community of South Africa has gone through a period of rapid decline. Its numbers fell from a community high of 120,000 souls in 1981 to 73,000 in 2005. The main reasons for this dramatic loss (40%) were the deteriorating economic and physical climate. The end of apartheid brought with it an increase in criminal violence and problems of personal security, economic depression and a severe fall in the value of the rand, as well as political uncertainty. Affirmative employment policies also made it hard for young Jewish graduates to find jobs.

Jews were also especially concerned about possible antisemitic violence (which largely failed to materialize), especially in the Western Cape Province, where there is a significant Moslem presence, as well as a decline in prosperity. They looked at Zimbabwe with alarm, as the government there confiscated farms and property from the white minority, including Jews, and violence reached intolerable levels.

The reaction of the Jews was twofold: Many chose to leave and migrated, either to Australia

(their first choice) or to Israel, Canada, the U.S. and Britain. Despite the long Zionist tradition of South African Jewry, relatively few chose Israel, partially due to the onset of the second *intifada* in Israel, the fear of terrorist attacks, and economic depression there. Those who left were primarily young and well-to-do families, resulting not only in a quantitative depletion, but also a loss to the communities of young blood, new leadership and sources of badly needed funding. Those who remained were mostly older families and those who could not afford to leave. This led to a greater burden on the communal welfare system and a reduction in giving. The IUA-UCF, one of the main communal appeal organizations, reported that it was losing some 400 contributors a year.

The second reaction of the community was “to turn in on itself”, i.e. to settle largely in Jewish concentrations, especially in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and to intensify Jewish involvement. One expression of this was increased religiosity, and indeed the *baal teshuva* movement in South Africa is especially strong. Attendance in Jewish day schools and synagogues also increased and more sprouted catering for fewer attendees. This created a new problem of an over-extensive infrastructure of services and facilities that became inefficient as numbers of attendees dwindled.

However, in the last three to five years there has been a significant change in a number of spheres. South Africa has achieved political stability. After two decades of democracy and three general elections, South Africa has stable government, an independent and respected judiciary, and free media (often critical of the government). A recent study found that South

Africa is the sixth most patriotic country in the world, showing support for country and government and a positive atmosphere. Serious economic problems of disparity and unemployment remain, yet the creative course of the country is in the right direction, according to a recent survey in *The Economist*.

The economy continues to improve. The growth rate of the economy is high at 5% a year, the stock market has reached record levels, and foreign investment has returned. Jewish philanthropy has increased, according to the IUA-UCF, as young Jews attain wealth.

Jews continue to play a major role in the country. Tony Leon, the leader of the Opposition Democratic Alliance in parliament, is a Jew. Arthur Chaskalson, the retired Chief Justice, is Jewish, and a fifth of all the judges in Johannesburg are Jewish. Many young Jews have made fortunes in recent years.

Emigration has reduced to a trickle, from a high of 1,500 a year five years ago to a current level of only 300–400 annually, and indeed some young families have returned, mostly from the U.S. and the UK (but not from Australia). This is true not only of Jews, but of others as well. A sign of the times is the establishment of the privately funded organization called “Home Coming Revolution”, which encourages and supports re-immigration. The organization has had considerable success, with some 10% of all returnees being Jewish. Recent data from the South African Board of Jewish Education show that enrollment in pre-school education is increasing, a further indication that young families are staying.

The South African government has gone out if its way to make Jews feel at home. President

Mbeki attended the inauguration ceremony of new Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein. At all state functions, the Chief Rabbi is invited to make a prayer. Although the South African government has criticized Israel and supported the Palestinian cause, including extending an invitation to Hamas, it has also extended a hand to Israel. The visit in 2005 of Ehud Olmert, then Vice Premier and Minister of Industry and Trade, was well-publicized and served to improve relations. Since the disengagement from Gaza, the anti-Israel rhetoric has been toned down.

Jews are still able to feel comfortable in South Africa. Despite concerns, the number of antisemitic incidents in South Africa is among the lowest in the world.

One of the successful outcomes of the difficult period was the consolidation of the community. In Johannesburg, most of the social and welfare organizations were bought under the umbrella of the *Hevra Kadisha*, which became an effective and professional agency providing a wide variety of services to the community and is the largest welfare organization in all Africa. Similarly, most of the Jewish and Zionist organizations were brought into a common building called *Beyachad* in each major city. Thus the community has become leaner and more compact.

Another outcome of the last decade has been a lowering of the age of much of the communal leadership. The new Chief Rabbi is only 34 years old, the executive director of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues, the national vice president of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and the heads of the Zionist Federation and the Board of Jewish Education are also all in their thirties.

Israel continues to be the major theme

uniting Jews, although perhaps not as much as in the past. *Aliyah* has fallen from 595 in 1994 to around a hundred a year, having been affected by both the *intifada* in Israel and the anti-Israel media in South Africa. However, there is still considerable interest in Israel, where 80% of all Jews have visited. Youth movements, which declined in many Diaspora Jewish communities, are gaining strength. The religious *Bnei Akiva* movement remains the largest of the youth movements, but *Habonim* has also shown significant growth in recent years. The motto of the community, according to the Chief Rabbi, has become “either go home (to Israel) or stay home (in South Africa)”, indicating the strong Zionist nature of the community, as well as its commitment to Jewishness.

As part of the process of being involved in the governmental regime, a large number of outreach programs have been initiated. One of the main initiators was the late Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris, who was a co-founder of *Tikkun*. There are many such Jewish organizations that provide assistance to disadvantaged blacks, and most schools have outreach programs as well.

Political stability and improvement in the economic and security situation are the main explanations for the positive delta in the Jewish community of South Africa. With attendance at Jewish day schools of well over 80%, intermarriage at a low level of 15% or less, and an improved economic and physical climate, there is cause for being optimistic about the future of the more compact Jewish community of South Africa.

The South African government makes great efforts to help Jews feel at home
