

Ensuring Jewish Continuity A Position Paper

By
The Jewish Agency Taskforce
On the Future of the Jewish People

Members:

Ms. Carole Solomon, Chairperson of the Board of Governors and Member of the Executive of the Jewish Agency

Dr. Misha Galperin, Executive Vice President and CEO, Jewish Federation of Greater Washington

Mr. Marc Gold, Associate Member of the Board of Governors and Executive of the Jewish Agency and Co-Chair, Development and Community Building Subcommittee

Mr. Robert Goldberg, Member, Board of Governors and Executive of the Jewish Agency; Chairman of the United Jewish Communities (UJC)

Mr. Mendel Kaplan, Member of the Board of Governors and Executive of the Jewish Agency, Past Chair of the Board of Governors

Mr. Alan D. Hoffmann

Acting Director General, The Jewish Agency for Israel

Director General of the Jewish Zionist Education Department

The Jewish Agency for Israel

Mr. Brian Kerner, Member of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency, Co-Chair World Income Committee

Ms. Julia Koschitzky, Member of the Board of Governors and Executive of the Jewish Agency; Co-Chair of the Education Committee and of the Pincus Fund

Mr. Daniel Soloduch, Member of the Board of Governors, Jewish Agency for Israel

Mr. Jacob Solomon, Executive Vice President, Greater Miami Jewish Federation

Coordinator: Brig. Gen. Ephraim Lapid, *Director of the Israel Region, Jewish Agency for Israel*

Assistant Coordinator: Yehuda Weinraub, Ph.D., *Israel Region, Jewish Agency for Israel*

The Jewish Agency for Israel

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The Challenge

The Jewish People constitute an important element of Israel's National Strength from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective. Their contribution includes, among others: political influence, economic assistance, and demonstrations of solidarity. The Jewish People also constitute a most significant population reserve for Israel (as witnessed by the wave of immigration from 1990-2004) and sources of intellectual and cultural vibrancy.

However Jewish continuity cannot be taken for granted. The Jewish People are confronted with a formidable existential challenge. Negative population growth and loss to assimilation in the Diaspora, constitute a two-pronged menace. World Jewry continues to be close to "zero population growth," While the growth rate of the Jewish population in Israel is positive, it is negative throughout the Diaspora.ⁱ Moreover, the inverted triangle age structure in the Diaspora, is particularly worrisome since it will result in a pronounced negative population growth after 2020ⁱⁱ

The world Jewish population was estimated at the beginning of 2004 at a little over 13 million. An extended Jewish population of some 5.44 million lives today in Israel, and an additional ca. 7.82 million Jews reside in the Diaspora.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Prof. Sergio DellaPergola, at the conclusion of the Second World War, in 1945, the World Jewish population numbered approximately 11 million.^{iv} Since 1970 there has not been any significant annual increase in World Jewish population.

Major causes for the decline in Jewish Population in the Diaspora include out-marriage, estrangement of the younger generation from the Jewish way of life^v and from Jewish education, assimilation,^{vi} and the trend of having smaller families.^{vii}

The Jewish Agency has set for itself three long-term strategic goals: Bringing a substantial number of Jews to Israel and ensuring their successful adaptation; connecting the next generation to Israel and "Jewish Peoplehood" as a core part of their Jewish identity, and involving World Jewry with Israelis in shaping the future character of Israeli society.^{viii}

Among the means for realizing these goals are: increasing *aliyah* ("immigration to Israel") *by choice*, deepening Jewish Zionist education while focusing on Israel educational and experience programs designed for Jewish youngsters and young adults who reside in the Diaspora, encouraging the establishment of larger families and increasing the number of conversions among immigrants, performed within Israel.

Aliyah by Choice

Though Israel is the only country in which Jewish population growth is positive, it is imperative for Israel (and for the Jewish People) to augment the level of *aliyah* (“immigration to Israel”). Approximately 3 million immigrants have come to Israel since 1948 (ca. 300,000 from Western countries), some one million during the recent wave of immigration, of 1990-2004. They have come from 102 countries and speak 82 languages. The vast majority of immigrants have come to Israel not by choice but out of constraint, or in the context of rescue operations.

However, with the amelioration in living standards, improved security and social conditions of Jews throughout the world (even in areas which had been flashpoints for Jews such as the former USSR), it is unlikely that economic or political considerations will be to be major factors behind mass immigration to Israel in the near future.^{ix} It is the Agency’s assessment that immigrants who will come over the next generation will do so out of free choice rather than due to political or economic conditions.

Israel must hence attract Jews from the West, countries of affluence and other countries, who will come out of their own volition. Even in areas where there are objective economic, political difficulties and even concerns for personal security confronting members of the Jewish community, Israel must compete with different Diasporas (as witnessed, for example, by numerous South African Jews who preferred to immigrate to Australia and Canada, or Jews from the Former Soviet Union who opted for Germany or the USA). The Jewish Agency has prioritized the USA, Canada, South Africa, and Latin America as areas in which to concentrate effort in promoting *aliyah*.

This requires a new mindset. Since we are speaking of a situation akin to a “free market,” Israel should consider adopting a marketing approach to *aliyah* promotion.^x

Indicative of the feasibility of attracting Jews from countries of affluence, is the fact that the year 2003 saw increases in immigration from the USA and from France beyond the numbers of the previous two years.^{xi} In France there is a tendency for Jews, who have not made *Aliyah*, to purchase apartments in Israel out of concern for the future.

Even though *Aliyah* is a national priority as well as a requisite for Jewish viability, responsibility for *aliyah* should not be left to official institutions. It is essential that a positive attitude be developed among the public. Such an attitude is essential for facilitating the social absorption of new immigrants.

The active involvement of Israeli society on the grass roots level in the social and professional absorption of new immigrants is an essential ingredient for success of this enterprise. The Jewish Agency’s “At Home-Together” program, which the Agency initiated together with the Ministry of Absorption and the Council of Local Authorities and in whose context, immigrant families have been adopted by veteran Israeli families, on the grass roots level is an example of such involvement.

The successful model of the *Nefesh B'Nefesh* program in North America, which involved a local non-profit organization, and enjoyed the support and assistance of the Jewish Agency, should be studied and perhaps adapted to the needs of *olim* from other countries. The Jewish Agency believes that such initiatives will have a positive effect on *aliyah*.^{xii}

Jewish-Zionist Education

Broadening Jewish-Zionist education is crucial for strengthening Jewish identity and connecting the next generation of Jews with their People and heritage. With variations throughout the world relatively small percentages of the Jewish youngsters receive a day school education.^{xiii} While most Jewish youth especially in major areas of Jewish concentration, (e.g. the USA, France, Argentina) are exposed to some form of Jewish education, the rate of estrangement among those who do not have a day school education is worrisome, and the rate is extreme among the progeny of mixed marriages.^{xiv}

According to Prof. DellaPergola 2.3 million members of the younger generation in the Diaspora (of a 4.5 million total, including Israel^{xv}) under the age of 24 are at risk due to declining birthrates (1.5 per family), rising out-marriage (53-56% since 1990) and decreased communal involvement.

Research has shown strong positive correlations between intensity of Jewish education and Jewish affiliation, and a very sharp negative correlation between Jewish education and the rate of marriage with non-Jewish partners.^{xvi} In particular researchers have demonstrated that graduates of long-term Israel educational experience programs have dramatically higher rates of marriages with Jewish partners, and stronger communal affiliation, than those who did not attend such programs.^{xvii}

Israel's cultural resources can, and hence *should*, be mobilized to contribute to remedying this situation. In response to a Jewish Agency initiative, the Government of Israel, on the highest level, has made the historical decision of recognizing the importance of furthering Jewish education in the Diaspora as a national imperative. The Prime Minister directed that the Government enter into a strategic partnership with the Jewish Agency to actively support Jewish education abroad.^{xviii} This led to the inception of the *Masa* ('Voyage') project for long-term programs in Israel. The goal of the project is to bring 20,000 participants per year on long-term programs to Israel by 2010. In addition, the Agency is striving to bring an additional 50,000 participants (e.g. 50% of a given annual age bracket!) to Israel on short-term programs. An initial pilot program has already begun in 2004.^{xix}

After having been almost completely cut off from any affiliation with Jewish tradition and education, the Jewish communities of the Former Soviet Union in recent years have begun to rebuild communal institutions. A formal Jewish education system is evolving. The Jewish Agency has been a pioneer in the renaissance of Jewish education in the FSU. In addition to its vast operations which have included *ulpanim* and courses in Judaism attended by tens of thousands, summer and winter camps, leadership training and Israel experience programs, the Agency has trained local teachers and dispatched emissary teaching fellows to serve in Jewish schools. As of

the 2003-2004 school year, the Jewish Agency has been responsible for the formal Jewish Education programs in the FSU.

The Jewish Agency will focus on projects that build stronger Jewish identity and global “peoplehood” among young Israelis, as well as on others that connect emerging young Jewish leaders from Israel and around the world to one another. On the North American continent, the Jewish Agency, in partnership with the Jewish community has created NACI--the North American Coalition for Israel Education. NACIE is employing a systematic strategy to revamp Israel-focused education in North American communities. This model may be valid elsewhere.

Inasmuch as education is not only formal, it is essential to strengthen non-formal Jewish-Zionist education as well. Jewish and Israeli content in synagogue groups, youth movements and camps leave indelible impressions on youngsters. These experiences are even more important against the backdrop of the Palestinian terror, which has reduced the participation of high school-aged youth in Israel experience programs. To compensate, in part, for this negative occurrence, the Jewish Agency this year dispatched some 2,000 educators to Diaspora communities, where they serve as camp counselors teaching emissaries and fellows as well as community resource people. The Jewish Agency also runs an educational website entitled *Building a Jewish World* (www.jewish-world.org.il), to strengthen Jewish consciousness and ties with Israel.

Encouraging the Expansion of the Jewish Family

The reasons for negative population growth in the Diaspora are multiple: out-marriage, postponement of marriage for career concerns, the growing trend to stay single, reluctance to have larger families due to social pressure, convenience, or desire to maintain a higher living style, and, in many cases, due to inability to financially support a larger family. With the exception of the Orthodox, Jewish couples in the Diaspora are having fewer children.

Jewish communities in the Diaspora should examine ways to facilitate social encounters between Jewish men and women, to encourage Jewish couples to marry earlier and to find means to assist those Jewish couples who wish to have larger families to realize their desires. Thought should be devoted to exploring ways to reduce the age of marriage among Jewish adults since postponement of marriage is a major factor responsible for demographic decline.

The importance of organizing social encounters for Jewish teens and college-aged youth cannot be overstressed. In addition to the educational impact and the creation of ties to Israel, programs such as the *birthright*, *Hillel*, *WUJS*, long-term Israel experience programs for college-aged men and women, and Information Technology (e.g. “Jewish dating services”) facilitate such encounters and each have produced many examples of Jewish marriages.

In Israel, Government subsidies to large families may have to be further rescaled *to favor those couples, who choose to have three-four children* (a larger percentage) over those who have five and more. Other means of encouragement and assistance (information and pecuniary assistance) should be explored.

Conversion within Israel

The decision to convert to Judaism is a personal one. It is not only the ultimate expression of embracing the Jewish *religion* but also of embracing and becoming an integral part of the Jewish *People*, as is beautifully enunciated in the Book of Ruth.1:16: “Thy people shall be my people and thy G-d my G-d.” The Jewish People has traditionally shunned proselytism. However, the influx of large numbers of non-Jewish FSU immigrants into Israel has created a problem, which must be resolved by the religious Establishment in Israel.

Some 300,000, of the approximately million immigrants who came to Israel in the recent wave of immigration are not Jewish according to *Halacha*.^{xx} Though these immigrants see themselves as Israeli, adopt Jewish lifestyles, have borne the responsibilities and burdens of native-born Israelis (they serve in the IDF and, unfortunately, as soldiers or civilians, have fallen in the line of duty and in terror attacks), they are not considered Jewish. They are affected in matters of personal status (marriage, divorce, burial) and have often encountered difficulties by the religious Establishment in their efforts to convert to Judaism. The perpetuation of such a situation will create a profound social cleavage in Israel, dividing the country into two castes: one marriageable to the totality of Israeli Jews and the other ineligible for marriage in Israel.

The Jewish Agency, as the global Jewish partnership of World Jewry that embraces all streams of Judaism, together with the Government of Israel, has since created an ‘Institute of Judaism,’ headed by Prof. Binyamin Ish-Shalom. This institution gives basic and advanced courses in Judaism to military personnel and civilians, who are new immigrants, and prepares those students, who so desire, to take the (Orthodox) conversion examinations administered by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. The courses at the Institute, which are taught by instructors from the three streams of Judaism, exceed the number of hours required by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate to qualify, for the conversion examinations.^{xxi}

The Government, aware of the seriousness and urgency of the problem, created a National Conversion Authority in the Prime Minister’s Office, headed by Rabbi Chaim Drukman, to oversee conversions. The Prime Minister has designated the Cabinet Secretary to work in tandem with the Agency in solving this most sensitive and cardinal problem for Israel.

Conclusion

The above are some of the elements and approaches that will contribute to ensuring Jewish continuity.

Some of these ideas are already in the process of implementation by the Jewish Agency, the Government of Israel and Jewish communities abroad.

However the task is a formidable one. Cooperation among all the elements of the Jewish People is essential in order to secure the future of the Jewish People in the next generation, and to ensure a connected, committed Jewish People with Israel at its center.

Notes

ⁱ Sergio DellaPergola, "The World Jewish Population 2004." *American Jewish Yearbook 2004* (in ms.): "The number of Jews in Israel rose from 5,094,200 in 2003 to 5,165,400 at the beginning of 2004, an increase of 71,200 people, or 1.4 percent. In contrast, the estimated Jewish population in the Diaspora diminished from 7,854,000 (according to the revised figures) to 7,824,300—a decrease of 25,700 people, or –0.4 percent." According to Prof. DellaPergola, Israel's core Jewish population reached 5,165,400, forming an enlarged Jewish population of 5,446,800 million. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, on the eve of the Jewish New Year (September 2004) the number reached approximately 5.5 million Jews and family members who had entered Israel under the Law of Return. (V. Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. Press Release, 14 September 2004).

ⁱⁱ Sergio DellaPergola, "The Jewish Agency's Demography Initiative," The Jewish Agency (February 12, 2002).

ⁱⁱⁱ Sergio Della Pergola, "The World Jewish Population 2004," *Op cit.*: The size of world Jewry at the beginning of 2004 was assessed at 12,989,700. World Jewry constituted 2.06 per 1,000 of the world's total population of 6,314 millions. The previous estimates, as of January 1, 2003, were published in AJYB 2003, vol. 103, pp. 588–612. See also Sergio DellaPergola, Uzi Rebhun, and Mark Tolts, "Prospecting the Jewish Future: Population Projections 2000–2080," AJYB 2000, vol. 100, pp. 103–46; and previous AJYB volumes for further details on earlier estimates. Cf. Sergio dellaPergola in Sergio DellaPergola and Amos Gilboa, eds. *Between Thriving and Decline: The Jewish People 2004* The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute Annual Assessment No.1 Executive Report (Jerusalem: JPPI: 2004), p.12. estimate the core Jewish population in 2003 at 12,950,000. In 1970 the world core Jewish population had been estimated at 12,633,00. The projected world Jewish population for 2020 is 13,548,000. Sergio DellaPergola, "The Jewish Agency's Demography Initiative," The Jewish Agency (February 12, 2002). For projections to the year 2080 see (Sergio DellaPergola, Uzi Rebhun, and Mark Tolts, "Prospecting the Jewish Future: Population Projections, 2000-2080). The recently published National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001(hereafter NJPS) highlights this trend for the American Jewish population. The NJPS estimated that there are currently 5.2 million Jews in the US-- fewer than the 5.5 million Jews of the previous decade's survey. *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001 Strength Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population A United Jewish Communities Report in Cooperation with the Mandel L. Berman Institute- North American Jewish Data Bank.* [2003; Updated January 2004] p.4. Only in Israel is the Jewish population growth positive. By 2050 Jewish population in Israel may increase by three to five million. According to different projections (Sergio DellaPergola, "The Jewish Agency's Demography Initiative," *Ibid.*).

^{iv} V. Sergio DellaPergola, "The World Jewish Population 2004," *Ibid*, Table 2.

^v A manifestation of assimilation is estrangement from Judaism. However a precursor to this is the subtler, gradual distancing of *Jewishness* from a position of centrality in one's life. The NJPS drew attention to this phenomenon. According to the NJPS, only 45% of the younger (35-44) age bracket said being Jewish is important to them as compared to 55% among the older 55-65-age bracket. Similarly 45% said half or more of their close friends are Jewish as compared to 59% among the older bracket and only 22% donate to Federations as compared to 39% among the older bracket. (*Op cit.* p.9)

^{vi} Reflecting the increasing rates of mixed marriage, a growing proportion of Jewish household members are *not* Jewish. In some countries, including the Russian Republic, the number of non-Jews (the "fringe") in the "enlarged" Jewish population is very similar to the number Jews (the "core"). In the United States, the proportion of non-Jewish household members is growing, and

surpasses one half of the total "enlarged" Jewish population. Only a negligible percentage of the progeny of mixed marriages are raised as Jews. According to the NJPS (p.18) among intermarried couples 66% of the children are not being raised as Jews (as compared to only 4% of the progeny in households where both parents are Jews)

vii See below.

viii The Jewish Agency for Israel, *A Strategy for securing the Jewish Future*. (Jerusalem: 2004), p.6.

ix The past year graphically illustrates this trend. Last year, immigration in general and especially that from the FSU fell to a "trickle." During 2003 ca. 23,300 immigrants came to Israel, 31% fewer than in the previous year. Of these, 12,423 were from the FSU^{ix} (Cf. 199,516 immigrants, of these 185,227 from the FSU in 1990 according to the Jewish Agency and Israel Central Bureau of Statistics). This reduction is due to the improved social conditions in the FSU as well as to the security situation in Israel, the recession of 2002-2003, and to the fact that *aliyah* population reserves in the FSU have diminished. The phenomenon parallels the gradual absorption of the 'Second World' into the First. There is currently no longer a vast reservoir of Jews from the Former Soviet Union ready to immigrate to Israel imminently.

x The marketing process is first and foremost consumer-oriented. This market model must be driven by meticulous market research: carefully studying the market; ascertaining the needs of the prospective *oleh*, determining priorities and goals for different segments of the "market"; examining how Israeli society ("the product") may be transformed into a magnet for attracting *olim* who come of their own volition, and producing conditions which will fulfill the specific needs of prospective immigrants, of different sectors, who come out of their own choosing.

^{xi} Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. 55th Statistical Yearbook (Jerusalem: 2004), Table 2.4

^{xii} *The American Jewish Yearbook 2003*. The Jewish Agency placed the number at 2.5 million (Jewish Agency for Israel, *A Strategy for Securing the Jewish Future*, Jerusalem, 2004), 14).

^{xiii} In the USA only 29% in the Former Soviet Union less than 15% and in France 40%. The situation has improved somewhat in Argentina, which had suffered a severe drop in the number of Jewish schools and enrolled students during the economic and political crisis. Countries as UK Mexico, Venezuela, England and South Africa have a better record regarding Jewish education.

^{xiv} Prof. Sergio DellaPergola, personal communication, 14 November 2004. Cf. NJPS in note iii above.

^{xv} 1,700,000 in North America, 2,182,000 in Israel 700,000 in Europe, 110,000 in Latin America. This averages at about 100,000 per year age –bracket.

^{xvi} According to the NJPS only 7% of day school graduates intermarried (as compared with 43% of those who did not attend any form of Jewish school, with 29% of those who attended school once a week and 23% of those who had a partial education).

^{xvii} Prof. Steven Cohen (1999) has shown that 91% of the graduates of year programs marry with Jewish partners (as compared to 48% of non-participants), they have stronger synagogue affiliation (79% to 43%), have a greater tendency to make at least two subsequent visits to Israel (71% to 20%), volunteer for Jewish causes (72% to 25%). Contribute to Jewish Federations (57% to 30%) and enroll their children in Jewish day schools (31% to 12%). . [Cohen, Steven (1999), "The 1998 Young Judaea Continuity Study;" Steven Cohen (2003)

“International Survey of Israel Program Graduates: Preliminary Findings”]. Cf. similar results in Dr. Alvin I. Schiff, (2003)“Post Day School Yeshiva Programs for American Students in Israel.

^{xviii} The Government has allocated an initial \$10m. for the project’s first year. The project calls for the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency to provide each \$50m by 2008.

^{xix} The Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency, *Masa: The Project for Long Term Programs in Israel-Project Overview*, October 2004.

^{xx} Prof. Binyamin Ish-Shalom, Director of the Jewish Agency Institute of Jewish Studied, in a paper presented to the *Sderot Conference on Social Issues*, Sapir Academic College, Hof Ashkelon, Israel, 1 November 2004.

^{xxi} In the 3 1/2 years of the Institute’s existence some 15,000 students have attended. Unfortunately only one third of the graduates were allowed to take the exam during 2003, due to “bureaucracy and lack of support from the State Chief Rabbinate.