

## JEWISH CULTURE

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*Two new books offer different perspectives on the Jewish Agency*

# The Politics of Charity

By Jesse Zel Laurie

**T**he conflict between those who raise hundreds of millions of dollars a year for the United Jewish Appeal and the Jewish Agency political appointees who spend most of the money has been going on for many years. Money talks and the fund-raisers are gradually winning out. But not fast enough to satisfy Eliezer Jaffe, Professor of Social Work at the Hebrew University. "The handwriting is on the wall," writes Prof. Jaffe in this slim collection of essays by him and several Israeli reporters. "If the Jewish Agency cannot satisfy the needs of the fund-raisers for an efficient, non-political, professional, philanthropic social service agency, they will surely take their money and find a better way to do the job."

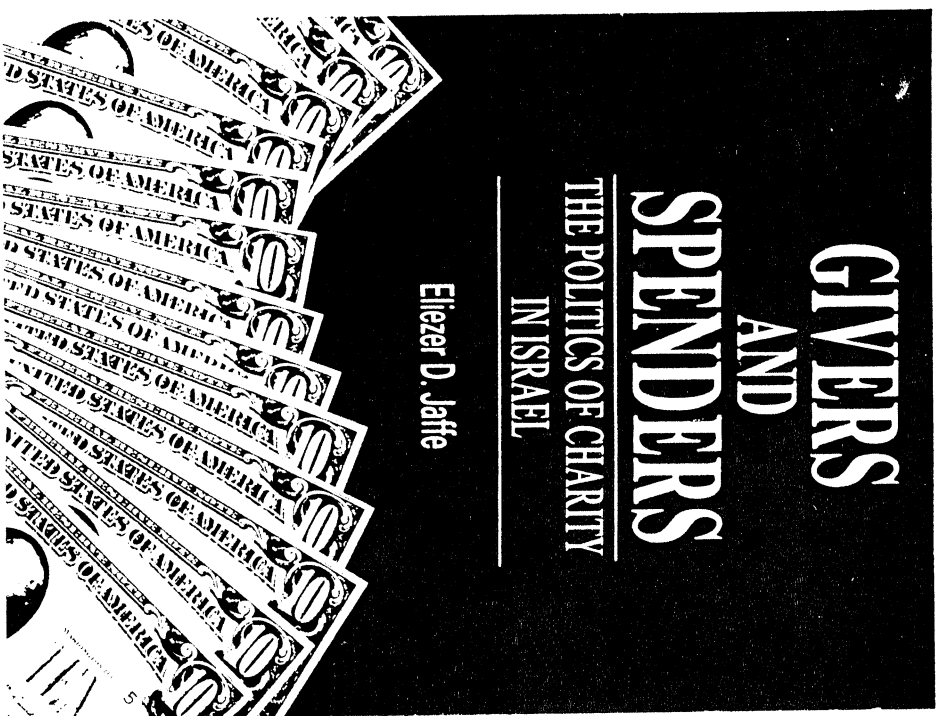
UJA and Federation fund-raisers are not going to take the bulk of their money elsewhere. But many contributors, seeking a more personal involvement in

Israel, and disgusted with the political machinations of the Jewish Agency, are finding more satisfying charities such as the New Israel Fund.

The fund-raisers are succeeding in making gradual changes in the management of the Jewish Agency. The recent meeting of the Agency's Board of Governors in New York is an example. This was the first time that the Jewish Agency Governors had met outside of Jerusalem. The meeting was attended by 200 UJA-Federation fund-raisers and major contributors from all over the country.

But a substantial reform in the Jewish Agency may have to await the arrival of the Messiah.

Jaffe is not suggesting that American fund-raisers run the Jewish Agency. He says: "Israel has an abundance of talented citizens who can serve on the Agency's board and dispense its funds and hire staff together with the Diaspora



fundraisers, without any of the political circus that exists today."  
Sounds reasonable. Why won't it be done tomorrow?  
Because, Jaffe says, politics and political parties are major factors in the management of Israeli institutions. If you want an executive position in Israel,

you have to meet two criteria: first you must belong to the party that controls that job. If you pass that test, your qualifications for the job can be considered. If the best qualified person does not belong to the right party, too bad. In Communist countries, all top and middle-level positions are filled by

members of one party. Israel is a democracy with many parties. Positions are allocated according to a "key" and the "key" is based on the voting strength of the parties in the most recent Israeli elections.

In practice, therefore, Israelis who voted for Menachem Begin to be Prime Minister of Israel, were also deciding who was to head the Jewish Agency Aliya Department.

At a Board of Governors meeting in Jerusalem in 1983, the American members succeeded in ousting a Herut

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## Book Review

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loyalist as head of the Aliya Department on the grounds that he was unfit for his position and unable to communicate with Diaspora Jewry. This was the first and only time that the Americans were able to fire a political appointee for cause. But the job belonged to the Herut Party and the choice of his successor was made by the executive of that party.

The first choice of the Herut executive was Ariel Sharon. The Agency board let it be known that the man judged by the Kahane Commission to be indirectly responsible for the massacres at Sabra and Shatila was unacceptable.

"Finally," writes Jaffe, "a third Herut-Likud candidate, a relatively unknown political appointee serving as Israeli Ambassador to Colombia, received the nomination for the Aliya Department and the Agency's Board of Governors approved it without a whimper."

Jaffe goes on to ask the same question about charity and politics in the Jewish Agency that he has been asking for a decade:

"Why on earth should donors' charitable dollars, over \$400 million to the Jewish Agency every year, have

anything to do with the Israeli political parties and their internal squabbles? . . . Any why has the UJA leadership allowed this situation to go on for nearly thirty years?"

Jaffe has been a voice crying in the wilderness, but in the last two years, since the essays collected in this book were first published, more and more American Jewish leaders have been casting a critical eye on the Jewish Agency. In a recent article in the *St. Louis Jewish Light*, a Jewish Federation-owned paper, Alfred Fleishman, who is listed as a communications consultant to the Jewish Agency and is the former head of a large public relations firm, writes that Americans "are concerned" about Agency allocations to *yeshivot* "that do not fully support the State of Israel or recognize its existence."

Elihezer Whartman, one of the Israeli reporters whose work is reprinted in this book, reveals that 10 percent of the funds spent in Israel by the Joint Distribution Committee go to *yeshivot*. Like the Jewish Agency, the Joint gets its money from the UJA.

Critics raise the question whether this largesse to non-Zionist *yeshivot* has any connection with the coalition politics of the Israel Government. Americans, writes Fleishman, "do not believe the Agency Executive ought to be actively involved in party politics."

Some Jewish Federations have established their own offices in Israel. One Federation is considering a direct grant to Neve Shalom for its outreach program in conflict resolution. Neve Shalom is the only settlement in Israel

in which Arabs and Jews live together in harmony and almost equal numbers. In its \$400 million annual budget, the Jewish Agency has never been able to find a shekel for Neve Shalom.

The Jewish Agency, which was founded under the British Mandate as the self-governing body of the Jewish community, was once a glorious institution without which the Jewish state would have been still-born. It was run, to be sure, by politicians who always kept interests of their parties in mind, and executive positions were allocated according to the coalition party key. But the party leaders were first-rate people: David Ben Gurion, Moshe Sharett, Golda Meir, Zvi Lurie, Levi Eshkol and others who in 1948 formed the first government of the State of Israel. Later, however, political hacks were not considered good enough for the government; they were relegated to the Jewish Agency.

How the Jewish Agency financed the War of Independence and the absorption of hundreds of thousands of destitute immigrants in the first two years of the state is told in a fascinating memoir by Gottlieb Hammer, who was the top-level Zionist professional in New York from 1939 to 1973. In the words of Elie Wiesel, Got Hammer's book is "about the lives and destinies of great men and women who shaped an entire generation's fears and hopes." He tells his story with verve and discipline. He had the editorial assistance of two veteran UJA professionals, Paul Kresh and Gene Jennings.

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