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# The Right to Influence or Change Each Other's Social, Moral, and Human Rights

*A Presentation*

ELIEZER JAFFE

**I**n my opinion social and religious issues are of more consequence to Israel and other Jewish communities than many other subjects. Now I have been asked to discuss what American and Diaspora Jews can do to influence social matters in Israel and what Israelis can rightfully demand of Americans.

Let me first take a brief look at the history of your philanthropy and involvement in our social issues.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the mechanisms through which organized world Jewry give to Israel have to some degree stifled Israeli initiative and hindered close relations from developing with you. Private philanthropic enterprises are rare because government

ministries have cornered the funds given through such organizations as United Jewish Appeal (UJA), Keren Hayesod and Israel Bonds.

Further, for the past thirty years American fund-raising for Israel has consisted of what I call "chore and shnorr." UJA and major independent organizations such as Hadassah, Mizrachi, and so on, tend to present Israel's welfare needs in stereotyped group terms like "the aged," "the poor," "the children," without explaining or investigating just what people are included in these categories or what their needs are. For many of you, giving to Israel became mechanical; it was a means to gain status in the local community rather than to

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build a partnership between yourselves and Israel.

As part of their technique, fund-raisers developed heart-rending stories about indigent Israelis. No one, however, spoke about drugs or prostitution or crime. No one talked about ethnic strife between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim. In your astounding ignorance, you passively accepted the package of welfare items presented to you without ever investigating the darker side of Israeli life.

During the past decade citizens expressing their dissatisfaction have made their voices heard in Israel and in the Diaspora. The emergence of a group called the Black Panthers was seminal to this.

In 1971, the Panthers, then just a street corner gang of young people from a Jerusalem slum, assembled in front of City Hall to demand better housing, education and jobs, as well as acceptance into the army. (Youths with police records are usually rejected from service.) The Panthers, however, had been denied a permit to demonstrate, so municipal social workers tried to get them off the street into a clubhouse. They refused and their demonstration turned into a violent confrontation with the police.

American, not Israeli, television aired to Diaspora Jewry for the first time this glimpse of Israeli social strife. Many people, including Mayor Teddy Kolleck, claimed that, I, an *oleh* from America, had imported the Black Panthers to Israel during my tenure as Director of the Jerusalem Welfare Department. Nonetheless Prime Minister Golda Meir convened a committee of 129 experts who prepared the first nationwide report on social conditions. Despite the significance of this report, I would be very surprised if any of you in this room have read the translation of the *Prime Minister's Report on Disadvantaged Youth*.

The Black Panther affair was also important in that it was an ethnic protest. Sephardi immigrants from Arab lands were demanding equal treatment and opportunity in a Western-dominated, Ashkenazi society. They were rejecting assimilation into the Ashkenazi culture and demanding a place of their own in the life of the country. Although the Panthers have died politically, they have left a legacy of ethnic self-awareness and respect for social action led by underprivileged citizens.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 was also important in the creation of what we might call the Sephardi lobby.

At the end of that war Motti Ashkenazi, a military commander of the Suez Canal Bar Lev Line, demanded that then Defense Minister Moshe Dayan resign from his Cabinet post. Ashkenazi felt that Dayan's negligence was the cause of the 1973 fiasco. A Cabinet-appointed Committee of Inquiry found that Dayan was not specifically to blame for the events of 1973, so Dayan did not resign. At that point, Ashkenazi set up a vigil demanding "ministerial accountability" in front of the Prime Minister's office. The following weeks, hundreds and then thousands joined him in peaceful protests. In the end, Golda Meir and her entire Cabinet resigned.

The Black Panther affair and Ashkenazi's protest highlighted the power of citizens to influence social policies and the political system. They have led to significant changes in government, although the realities of governing by coalition have disappointed many activists who hoped to bridge social gaps in Israel with all due haste.

This brings me to what you can do for us in the 80s. From the turmoil of the 70s emerged not only a new awareness of our problems but also specific programs. The most significant of these is Project Renewal, a program sponsored by the Israeli government and Diaspora Jews to rehabilitate Israel's worse slums. This program is significant because it demands more than your money. It demands intelligent participation and involvement.

With your help, Project Renewal will refurbish 160 neighborhoods by raising a billion and a quarter dollars. The Project requires that within a five-year period we raise fifty percent and you raise fifty percent.

In addition, Federations in America will seek to "twin" an American city with an Israeli city slated for Project Renewal aid. American twin citizens will make site visits and meet their clients face-to-face. You will have the opportunity to learn about and to participate in the solution to our problems.

Now you Americans may be turned off by what you see or, on the other hand, become so enthusiastic you'll do things you never dreamed of. It is a risk and an opportunity for Israel. This opportunity radically alters the classic roles of

"giver" and "shnorrer" now dominating our relations.

Another major innovation of Project Renewal is the creation within the Jewish Agency of a separate budget line. This means the funds will go directly into the Project and not into a Ministry where they would become mercilessly entangled in bureaucratic knots. Funds will not be released to a neighborhood unless its residents have become involved in developing a plan for the neighborhood's refurbishment.

Thanks to this rule, local leaders have been catapulted into partnership with City Hall and Diaspora leaders, and are suddenly holding key positions on steering committees. This marks, then, the end of paternalism on behalf of both you and the Jewish Agency. You along with local Israeli leaders can now face the politics and the bureaucracy of Israel and demand accountability and involvement.

You can also use the money you donate to Israel to influence policy. For example, you could ask that ten percent of your UJA donations go to the creation of now non-existent private non-profit groups, such as: legal aid; university scholarships; adoption and foster-care agencies; civil rights organizations; or to one of the few existent citizen lobbies concerned with welfare services.

I would like to repeat at this point—and I do not think this can be said too often—that it is immoral to engage in careless and impersonal philanthropy.

I also want to make it clear that we are not asking for your help because the problems that Israel faces are too great to be handled by us alone. We are asking for involvement because Jewish peoplehood means that the State is the collective enterprise of the Jewish people. And when we talk about influencing one another, we are talking about personal involvement of one kind or another. Conducting dialogues and writing checks and touring in Israel are not substitutes for involvement.

Now what is Israel's claim on the Diaspora? We have the right to insist on Jewish education for all Jewish children in the Diaspora. And we have a right to insist that that education embrace Jewish knowledge in depth. I lectured a few weeks ago to a group of children, college students of top USA leaders who were on a tour of Israel. The students didn't know what the word "Diaspora" meant. They were incredibly ignorant. It

was utterly depressing. They didn't know what Jewish history was, they didn't know what Jewish culture was, they had no links with their past.

We have a right as Israelis to expect participation by Diaspora Jews, rich and poor, in the Jewish community. We have a right to ask for wider opportunities for all American Jews in Federations and for a fair representation from all groups in developing institutions abroad. We have the right to ask that you abandon the rule that the size of one's gift is the major ticket to power and leadership roles in the communities.

We also may ask that Diaspora Jews raise larger families with community support and without social stigma. We have the right as Israelis to condemn mixed marriages which lead to losses to the Jewish people. We have the right to criticize Diaspora leaders who abuse high community positions for social standing or personal power. We have the right to ask Diaspora Jews to define the purpose and the Jewishness of their lives. We also have a right to ask fellow Jews in the Diaspora to see themselves as Jews

first and citizens of various countries next.

The most important task is for Diaspora parents to pass on their heritage. It is not enough to save your own soul. You have to be able to pass it on to your children. We've been through much as Jews; your children have not. That poses a problem in terms of impressing them with the urgency of preserving our Jewishness.

I think we Israelis have a right to insist that only Israelis are Zionists and that others are sympathizers. *Ivrit* and aliyah make Zionists. We have the right to ask you to reject Diaspora life and to influence you with every argument at our command to have you and your children come to Israel. Israel is not solely a land for refugees. It is a Jewish homeland, and aliyah is a major communal goal worthy of *you*, and not of somebody else. Your communities have the obligation to facilitate and promote aliyah. The greatest Jewish tragedy of post-war time is your rejection of a homeland. Ultimately, this is a rejection of Jewish peoplehood.