

# Funding the Jewish Agency

David S. Bedein

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## Givers and Spenders: The Politics of Charity In Israel

Dr. Eliezer Jaffe

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The increasing controversy and rancor about the Jewish Agency's allocation policies of Diaspora-raised funds for charitable purposes is the subject of this succinct and helpful collection of articles and essays backed by graphs and statistics that reveal the deterioration of relations between Diaspora Jewry and Israeli political and charitable institutions.

One of the items on the agenda of the Jewish Agency Assembly which convened in Jerusalem recently was the Ethiopian aliya and what had come to be called "Operation Moses". Representatives of almost all ethnic groups in Israel were invited to discuss aliya and the rescue and relief operations that the Jewish Agency had engaged in during the past several years on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. "Almost everyone" was there. But not one black face was in sight. No one in the Jewish Agency had thought to invite at least one representative of one of the Ethiopian Immigration organizations.

A mistake? More likely the traditional paternalistic way of handling situations on behalf of an immigrant group without bothering to ask them what they are feeling and thinking.

Eliezer Jaffe, Professor of Social Work at the Baerwald School at the Hebrew University believes that the Jewish Agency is in need of basic reform and depoliticization. In past decades it has gotten out of hand for lack of checks and balances, with the "donors" left in the dark as to the political trade-offs and interests in which their contributions are involved. This is the subject matter of Jaffe's short reader. The subject is so sensitive that no one else had dared to write about it. Some fear that the tax exempt status afforded to American donors will be jeopardized. Others fear a drop in support and funding for Israel. Professionals in Jewish community service and Zionist organizations fear that their generation-long effort to systematize fund-raising through one efficient and well-known channel will be in danger of challenge and change.

None of these fears bother Jaffe. He sees his role as educator and forewarner whose task it is not only to observe, but to ask questions about policy—essentially, about how the funds are being used and as to whether this cynical dichotomy between "Spenders and Givers" should continue to exist.

Jaffe reflects the deep frustration of many Israeli citizens concerned about social change when they confront the enormities of the Jewish Agency. Each week, investigative journalist Gidon Alon of Israel's afternoon newspaper,

*Ha'aretz* publishes a well-researched column on the waste, and at times, corrupt use of funds by the Jewish Agency. Judy Siegel of the *Jerusalem Post* is sometimes equally caustic, but she must be careful: The Jewish Agency owns 10 percent of the *Post*, according to authors Salpeter and Elitzur in *Who Rules Israel* (1974). After all, the *Jerusalem Post* cartoonist, Yaakov Kirshen, was reprimanded and permanently lost one of his "Weekend Dry Bones" comic strips in the magazine section of the *Post* following a cartoon in which he showed the officials of the Aliya office in Jerusalem sleeping or tossing paper airplanes while reading an investigative report about their department's failings.

The frustrations of the irate Israeli citizen is clearly justified. To whom can he turn when he is outraged at Jewish Agency policy? When upset with the executive branch of government, he can turn to the legislative or the judicial. In addition to the government, he may also choose to call on the State Comptroller's office which monitors government functions, or even on the police, which in Israel is a separate arm of the government. However, the Jewish Agency remains outside of the reach of the Israeli citizenry. It is also bound up with the World Zionist Organization, whose members are selected on the basis of political party. Jaffe, therefore, contends that change at the Agency must be initiated by the donors and the supporters of the service, who play the role, in a sense, the taxpayer plays toward the Israeli government.

Jaffe does not regard everything that the Jewish Agency does as wrong. It was the "state-in-waiting" before 1948. It mobilized the resources of the Jewish World to receive and absorb an aliya that was three times the size of Israel at its inception. Nor has the Jewish Agency lacked responsiveness to recent grass-roots initiatives toward partnership and growth. Witness the case of Project Renewal started in the late 1970s with the idea of twinning Israeli's neighborhood committees with Diaspora communities. The Jewish Agency would act as a catalyst to stimulate and maintain the relationship.

The project was designed to reinvigorate sagging communities through the spirit of partnership that Diaspora communities would provide as their very own deep and personal link to Israeli society. Agency personnel and donors realized that the mistakes of the 1950s might have led to dependency, preventing responsible constituencies from developing self-help frameworks of their own and assuming responsibility for their neighborhoods themselves. With outside help not coming from above, but from a Jewish spirit of collective effort and action, an effective and enduring work-partnership would be established.

For all these good intentions, Jaffe emphasizes in *Givers and Spenders* that the "Renewal Model," tragically,

seems to have been a flash in the pan rather than a precedent for Agency policy. The most blatant example is "Operation Moses." According to Jaffe, no separate channel was created with a separate budget. Nor was the highly sophisticated Ethiopian community involved with the allocation process except on the receiving end. At the same time, the creation of numerous indigenous Ethiopian immigration groups would have given the Jewish Agency and the thousands of Operation Moses donors the opportunity for direct contact and cooperation in community planning.

For these reasons, and more, Professor Jaffe issues his call for the reconceptualization of the Jewish Agency which is so universally recognized and accepted in the organized Jewish World. Why should the World Zionist Organization's political purposes be joined with, and compromise the Jewish Agency's philanthropic service goals? This problem and methods of solving it are clearly presented in *Givers and Spenders*.

Have the various departments of the Jewish Agency ever discussed their overlapping and, at times, competitive goals? For example, the Youth Aliya Division absorbs children from the same families that the Project Renewal Division is trying to strengthen within their own neighborhoods.

Should donors to projects such as Operation Moses establish their own representatives in Israel to monitor the use of funding? A precedent was established by the Los Angeles and San Francisco Federations who have hired their own people to monitor how their money is spent, while developing programs of creative cooperation between their home communities and their adopted Project Renewal neighborhoods.

*Givers and Spenders* is a call to the international and especially the American Jewish community to introduce a concept of diversified funding as policy: To see the Jewish Agency/UJA-Keren Hayesod as a single recipient of their support, and converting the Jewish Agency into a foundation-like avenue for Israel's development, devoid of direct manipulation by Israeli politics.

Jaffe essentially warns: If the organized Jewish world does not accept officially-adopted, diversified funding, the trend of more Jewish communities making their contributions outside of the established framework will continue. Since many hospitals, social welfare institutions, and other areas of service deserve public aid, the Jewish Agency and private donors will then have to take up the slack.

*Givers and Spenders* should also be of significant interest to non-American readers. Americans give exclusively to the Jewish Agency though the conduit of the UJA to gain a tax writeoff for a contribution to a charitable organization. However, the non-American donor gives his checks to Keren Hayesod, and much of it goes to the WZO, a political body constituted on the basis of Israeli elections. Fifty percent of the Jewish Agency is made up of representatives from the WZO who were appointed by political parties. As one Canadian contributor recently said, "It is nice to know which pork barrels our funds are going to. But now, it is high time to carefully monitor the Israeli system for what it is—a normal political animal."