



Members of the Jewish Agency executive — the “caretakers of worldwide Jewish philanthropy” — meeting in London earlier this year

Israel's black joke

David Elias on the urgent need to overhaul the “anachronistic” Jewish Agency

ONE OF Israel's most powerful bureaucracies is under fire and, while it may survive this first round, its days in its present form seem numbered.

Before the establishment of the State, the Jewish Agency and its sister body, the World Zionist Organisation, together with the national funds, were the government of the Jewish people inside Mandatory Palestine. When sovereign Israel was born and David Ben-Gurion, the Jewish Agency head, became the first Prime Minister, many Israelis thought the Agency and the WZO would disappear. But they are still there today, to many Israelis a black and expensive joke, to others an anachronism.

The Agency survived to act on behalf of the Jewish people for the “advancement and welfare of the State of Israel,” taking on, with the approval of the Government, responsibility for the absorption of immigrants, the establishment of settlements and the support of education in Israel.

The World Zionist Organisation is supposed to work primarily outside Israel, supporting Zionist organisations and activities, encouraging aliya and Jewish education and disseminating information.

Between them, the two organisations are spending something in the region of £400 million a year. The charge in Israel, and now

heard increasingly from fund-raisers outside, especially in the United States, is that the Agency is top-heavy with officials, wasteful in the use of its resources (most provided by diaspora Jewry), disastrously politicised and in urgent need of overhaul. Even more so the World Zionist Organisation.

Paradoxically, it is one of the Agency's own initiatives to involve diaspora Jewry more directly in the work of social rehabilitation in Israel which has opened the eyes of some of the leading fund-raisers to the costly and cumbersome administrative machine which lies at its heart.

“Project Renewal,” the imaginative scheme to enable a direct input from diaspora communities into underprivileged areas of the country, has brought fund-raisers face to face with the politics, red tape and sheer inefficiency of the Agency and the WZO, in some respects worse even than that which characterises so much of the Israeli governmental apparatus.

One of the founders of Project Renewal, Professor Eliezer Jaffe, a social work expert and lecturer at the Hebrew University, became so incensed by what he found in the Jewish Agency and its associate organisations that, a few years ago, he embarked on what was then virtually a one-man crusade to achieve reform.

To the Agency and its leaders he was, and is, anathema, but a growing number of young American Jewish fund-raisers have been impressed by his informed and well-marshalled arguments, to the extent that, last year, funds for some projects were retained in the United States until the fund-raisers could be satisfied that the money would not be misused.

This year, at his own expense, Professor Jaffe published a book*, compiled from articles by himself and others, in which he argues cogently

that the major challenge to the new diaspora Jewish leadership “is to avoid compromising the charitable funds of tens of thousands of persons who contribute so generously to the United Jewish Appeal and Keren Hayesod by agreeing to the politicisation of the Agency that receives these funds.

“Such acquiescence is irresponsible and unworthy of the caretakers of worldwide Jewish philanthropy for Israel, and especially of the new leadership abroad.”

Agency officials welcomed this publication with the same kind of enthusiasm the Soviet Government reserves for a new *samizdat* from disaffected citizens.

Jaffe's “bottom line” is that there is something inherently rotten about a system in which the budgets of the Jewish Agency and the

* “*Givers and Spenders: The politics of charity in Israel*,” available from Professor Jaffe at 37 Gaza Road, Jerusalem, Israel.

World Zionist Organisation are decided by a Zionist Congress in which the largest proportion of delegates are elected by a Zionist party key which, in the case of Israeli delegates, is directly related to Knesset representation, and in which the various Agency departmental chairmanships are distributed through a process of coalition bargaining.

The inevitable outcome, he argues, is that "millions of dollars raised abroad specifically for non-political purposes are simply hijacked by political parties in Israel to fund a spoils system . . ."

Just an inkling of what Jaffe means by the "spoils system" was illustrated by Judy Siegel-Itzkovich in the "Jerusalem Post" in November, 1982.

"Departments have been established — at the cost of millions — to accommodate politicians whose parties must be paid off for joining the Zionist Executive coalition," she wrote. "Chairmen, who are given the same fringe benefits and pensions as Cabinet Ministers, are encouraged to go abroad because of their generous expense accounts of \$100 a day. They receive it even if they stay with relatives, or with local Jewish dignitaries, during their tours and have no outlay.

"The Agency owns a fleet of over 200 vehicles and every department chairman or director-general rides around in a chauffeur-driven car. Recently, top officials have refused to drive in French, Italian or Japanese cars and insist on a luxury American car. Or else they settle for the less prestigious Volvo. Various Agency budget cuts have not cramped the department chairmen's style."

Last year, the Israeli weekly, "Koteret Rashit," took this indictment much further. The writer, Aryeh Dayan, told Israelis what most of them suspected: "The condition of the Jewish people, the Zionist movement and the State of Israel would not be affected if the Jewish Agency were closed and its funds applied to more vital needs. Even if its budget were to be slashed by half, hundreds of millions of dollars would be available for other purposes. These cuts would never be felt outside the vast Jewish Agency jungle teeming with executives, delegates, emissaries, heads of departments, sections, branches, officials, and more and more officials."

Dayan argued that the United Jewish Appeal and Keren Hayesod, which operate as separate fund-raising agencies, did not need the Jewish Agency machinery or the Zionist organisation.

"Moreover, if the Agency were dismantled, the appeal money would be channelled to its primary purposes instead of to the upkeep of an organisation with about 4,000 employees, most of them officials, in addition to 760 emissaries abroad."

Department by department, Dayan went through budgets, staffing and achievement and came to the conclusion that, with the reassignment of certain vital responsibilities to analogous government ministries, the loss from eliminating the Agency would be minimal.

In a burst of anger, he charged that "there is no more redundant, wasteful and ostentatious body in Israel than the Jewish Agency, whose officials are constantly going abroad, staying at luxury hotels. Last year, each member of the executive spent an average of 50 days outside Israel."

It has been in the light of reports like this and their own on-the-spot experiences that an ever-increasing number of diaspora leaders working for Israel through the national funds have demanded that the rot be stopped. They have been inhibited in public expressions of anger by their fear of the impact on fund-raising activities. But the indications are that this will not inhibit them much longer and, behind the scenes, they have been flexing their muscles.

Leon Dultzin, the chairman of both the Agency and the World Zionist Organisation, has been displaying some of the nervousness which is spreading through the administrative ranks. A couple of weeks ago, he and Prime Minister Peres agreed — for political reasons common to both of them — that the Zionist Organisation had to be reformed if they were to stave off mounting diaspora pressures to reduce the WZO to not much more than a department of the Jewish Agency, simultaneously reducing the power of the Israeli and Zionist political machines.

This most certainly will not satisfy critics like Dr Jaffe. He warned two years ago the "danger of winning a skirmish and losing the battle for control over the Agency is still very real."

And, he found, there were "worrisome signs that diaspora leaders are willing to settle for far less than they deserve or can obtain." If they accept the principle of political appointees, "the result is continued politicisation of the Agency and the perpetuation of Israeli party fiefdoms over charitable funds raised abroad."

His view, one no longer as revolutionary to fund-raisers as when he first articulated it, is that if the Jewish Agency is to be salvaged as the conduit for effective philanthropy, there can be no room for political appointees on the board of governors and that "employees at all levels should be selected by public tender," a process he would extend to the Keren Hayesod, the Jewish National Fund and all other charity-funded operations.

What he would like to see is the establishment of a "task force" by the fund-raisers and diaspora lay leaders to re-examine the Jewish Agency and determine their own master plan for reform. "And, if the Israeli political establishment balks, the fund-raisers can pack up their marbles and look for more amenable partners and efficient ways of spending their money in Israel."

It is this advice which Mr Dultzin and Mr Peres would now like to obscure. The extent to which they succeed will have a lasting impact on the nature of the relationship between diaspora fund-raisers (and the diaspora itself) and Israel.
