

The Changing Role of the Shliach

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THE *shliach*, as an intermediary between two cultures, is affected by changes in either of them. The ever changing relationship between Israel and the diaspora has therefore had a profound impact on his role.

It is with the nature, causes and effects of these developments that this article is concerned.

Shliach: Mark One

Classical Zionism painted a highly negative picture of Jewish life in the diaspora. Post-exilic history was seen as a series of anti-Semitic outbursts — expulsions, *auto-da-fes* and pogroms. Few communities had escaped them. None, however safe they may appear to be, were immune. Hatred and terror could, and in time would, strike everywhere. The Jews were indeed a ghost nation, haunted though, not haunting.

The creation, or to be more precise the recreation of an independent state, was regarded as the only viable solution of the Jewish problem. National self-determination would eliminate the whole *raison d'être* of anti-Semitism. Prejudice and persecution were attributed to the abnormality of the Jewish people. Normalization would therefore preclude the possibility of future atrocities.

However, emigration to Palestine was not only the surest escape route from the vagaries of anti-Semitism. It was the *sine qua non* of the Zionist programme. *Aliya* was the basis of both national and individual renaissance. Thus the early pioneers' song "We are going up to the land to build and to be built."

Various youth movements were established at the turn of the century to pro-

mote *aliya*. They tried in particular to encourage the setting up of *kibbutzim* and other collective settlements. Members over the age of 18 were expected to join a *garin* and make a firm personal commitment to *aliya*. Those who wavered were forced to drop out of the group in accordance with an agreed set of rules or as a result of more informal social pressures. After completing a year of *hachshara* the entire group emigrated to Palestine.

This practice led to a constant turnover, and at times a marked shortage of leaders. On the other hand each movement had a large reservoir of alumni in Palestine itself. The idea therefore gradually grew up of sending an ex-member back to his country of origin to organize the movement there for a period of two or three years.

The role of the *shliach* mirrored that of the movement: to promote *aliya* in general, and to the movement's collective settlement in particular. The *shliach* was ideally suited to this task. His past involvement enabled him to understand the local situation; his personal experience of life in Palestine made him aware of the difficulties to be faced and how best to overcome them.

The *shliach* was therefore faced with a clearly delineated task and was highly qualified to tackle it. Both these aspects of the situation have since changed. It is to those developments that we now turn our attention.

Shliach: Mark Two

Just a quarter of a century after the most callous and concerted attack on the Jewish people, anti-Semitism is no longer regarded as a major threat to

most diaspora communities. For Jews in the Communist and Arab worlds Israel still acts as a place of refuge. Those elsewhere, however, feel no need for a haven. An alternative *raison d'être* for *aliyah* therefore has to be found.

Assimilation is now regarded as the major threat to Jewish survival. The growing intermarriage rate may, it is widely believed, lead to the eventual demise of diaspora Jewry. Only those living in Israel can avoid the danger. *Aliya* therefore provides the only assurance of a continuing Jewish identity for oneself, and perhaps even more important, for one's children. The threat is different, the response the same.

As before *aliya* has both positive and negative aspects for individuals — to avoid the dangers of the diaspora and to achieve self-realization — and in parallel ways on the national level — to prevent assimilation and to develop the State of Israel. Hence the persistent campaign to interest people in *aliya*; the granting of a vast array of financial privileges to entice them to Israel, and the establishment of a new ministry to ensure their successful integration.

This sustained effort to encourage Western *aliya* met with some degree of success in the period after the Six-Day War. Even then, however, the proportion of Jews who decided to emigrate to Israel was depressingly small. Since then the numbers have declined still further. The flow of *olim* is now little more than a trickle. Russia is the only significant source of *aliya* at the present time. As in the past persecution is the major force driving people to Israel.

Nevertheless the Israel-diaspora relationship appears stronger than ever before. As a result of the '67 and '73 wars both sides became increasingly aware of the extent of their interdependence. Israel's diplomatic isolation has led to the realization that with few exceptions only World Jewry can be relied upon in times

of crisis. Jews in the diaspora realized that the wars did not only pose a threat to the existence of the State. They endangered their own individual identity. The crises were of a personal as well as a national nature. Hence the overwhelming response.

This somewhat paradoxical situation has led to a narrowing of horizons. Jews in the diaspora cannot be persuaded to move to Israel. However their ties with the State can and must be strengthened. Israel needs the moral and financial support of world Jewry; the diaspora is searching for a new basis for Jewish identity. The role of the *shliach* must change accordingly.

The spectre of intermarriage has led to a growing emphasis on Jewish education, both formal and informal. Community centres for instance, have realized the absurdity of offering programmes totally devoid of any Jewish content. Activities specifically designed to strengthen Jewish identity are slowly being introduced. Suitable content and personnel must therefore be found.

The overwhelming response to both the 1967 and 1973 wars indicated that feelings of Jewish identity, albeit on an unconscious level, are much deeper than was previously believed. Thousands of unaffiliated Jews were prepared to stand up and be counted. To show that Israel does not stand alone communal leaders had to ensure that there was no waning of interest; that the enthusiasm engendered by the crisis would serve as the basis for a more permanent sense of involvement. Israel therefore became the impetus for, and the major theme of, Jewish programming.

Community centres suffer from an acute shortage of trained personnel. This is particularly so as far as Jewish-oriented activities are concerned. The idea therefore gradually grew of tapping resources of Israeli manpower. Since the Six-Day War an increasing number of

centres have introduced a *shliach* onto their staff. Not only do they fill an important gap in personnel; they enhance the Jewish dimension of the programme.

The primary function of the community centre *shliach* is to strengthen the Jewish identity of its members. Although often specializing in one particular activity it is hoped that his presence will have a beneficial effect on the general atmosphere of the centre. By a process of osmosis the *shliach* should lend greater emphasis and deeper meaning to the Jewish content of the overall programme. Israel provides him with his major resource materials. The State is no longer an end in itself. It is now the most effective means of inculcating a strong Jewish identity.¹

Towards the Future

The steady increase in the number of community centre *shlichim* testifies to the growing acceptance of the idea. Nevertheless a preliminary research enquiry identified two major problems — the lack of clarification as to the new role of the *shliach* and an inadequate understanding of the local situation.²

The *shliach* in the community centre is faced with a much less clearly defined task than his movement counterpart. The task of strengthening Jewish identity is much more nebulous than that of encouraging *aliya*. Lacking the requisite knowledge of the local community he is also less qualified to tackle it. Any train-

¹ The various summer schemes organized by the Youth and Hechalutz Department of the Jewish Agency are designed to serve a similar purpose. The Israel experience will, it is hoped, lead to greater identification with the State and in turn a stronger Jewish identity. However, one of the most common reactions of the participants is disappointment with the lack of identification with things Jewish in Israel itself.

² Bessie Pine, "The Israeli Worker as a Member of the Jewish Community Centre's Professional Staff" (unpublished paper, 1970).

with the same sense of urgency" as during the war itself. The latest crisis will, it is hoped, provide the basis for a more permanent sense of involvement.

However wars cannot solve the problem of Jewish existence in the diaspora any more than they can the Middle East conflict itself. Jewish identity cannot be equated with either moral or monetary support for the State; the relationship between Israel and world Jewry cannot be reduced to the level of emotional attachment or financial give and take. To ensure a meaningful identity and thus Jewish survival the diaspora must attain a greater degree of self-sufficiency. It must find a *raison d'être* of its own.

The *shliach* is less qualified than local personnel to achieve this objective.³ This is not to suggest however, that he no longer has a part to play. Rather than he should revert to the former task of offering an alternative Jewish life style. Israel will have to do a great deal of soul searching before the *shliach* can fulfill this role. The period of introspection since the Yom Kippur War may be a welcome move in that direction.

³ Postgraduate courses in Jewish communal service have recently been established at a number of universities in Israel and the U.S.A. They are the first step in an attempt to provide a constant flow of qualified local personnel.