THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Committee on Israel Meeting

Monday, February 5, 1962
Institute of Human Relations, New York City

MINUTES

Present:

Maximo Yagupsky, Director, AJC Israel Office - Speaker
Alan M. Stroock, Chairman
Harold E. Beckman
Harris Berlack
Arthur D. Berliss, Jr.
Irving M. Engel
Clarence E. Israel, Cincinnati, Ohio
Louis Lober
Harold Riegelman
Alexander E. Salzman
John Slawson
Burton Strauss
Ben Touster

Staff

Hanna F. Desser
S. Andhil Fineberg
Paul Friedman
Simon Segal

The Chairman introduced Mr. Yagupsky, stating that, after 15 years as director of the AJC's Latin American activities, he had been appointed to conduct the AJC's new program in Israel. Mr. Yagupsky had arrived in Israel in November, the Chairman said, and, following an initial period of observation, had come to New York for a brief period to present his first report on activities and plans and to confer with the Committee on Israel and AJC officers and staff. The Chairman welcomed Mr. Yagupsky and expressed the interest of all AJC members in his findings.

Mr. Yagupsky said that the experiences of his first 72 days in Israel convinced him that the AJC program is being launched at a propitious time, for many of the questions which deeply interest the AJC are also being raised by thoughtful Israelis. Among them are key persons in intellectual life, education, press and communications media, and the government, with whom he had exploratory talks. In these discussions, he stressed the AJC's concern about the relationship between Jews in Israel and elsewhere in the world who are linked by culture and tradition but have different loyalties in terms of citizenship and Jewish community life.
The AJC's initiative in launching an Israel program was applauded by most of those with whom he conferred, and pledges of cooperation were given by a number of them. Yet, even among some leaders of thought and opinion and certainly among Israelis generally, Mr. Yagupsky found that -- while there is awareness of AJC as an organization which seeks to aid Israel, and some of the AJC's leaders are known -- apparently little knowledge exists about the AJC's aims, activities and many efforts and achievements over the years in relation to Israel. In order to be able to conduct its program effectively in the future, one of the immediate tasks of the Israel office therefore will be to disseminate information about the AJC as widely as possible.

The basic problem at present, Mr. Yagupsky reported, is the lack of understanding or outright misunderstanding on matters of importance not only to Israelis but also to Jews everywhere, especially in the United States. This is particularly true among Israeli youth, the most vital element in the population.

Mr. Yagupsky summed up the outlook and attitude of many Israeli young people -- and some of their elders -- as follows: To them, Israel is "the center of the world," surrounded by Arab enemies, with such nations as the United States, the Soviet Union, France and Italy looming large on the horizon and such areas as Latin America and Africa perceived dimly in the distance. Jews outside Israel are regarded as in "the galut." The 2,000 years of Jewish history in the Diaspora are relatively unknown, and there is little interest in them. The youth are focussed inward and many have no contact with important aspects of present-day Jewish life. The common concept of American Jewry is that it is rich, powerful and on the brink of assimilation; ignorance of the scope and variety of Jewish life here is widespread. A feeling of superiority, based largely on Israel's success in coping with rigors and dangers for many years, is often demonstrated -- and creates a further barrier to understanding.

Another major question is the integration of Israelis of "oriental" origin, who now constitute about one-half of the population. The differences and even tensions that divide this group from those of European origin have become increasingly evident, and government officials, sociologists and others are becoming increasingly concerned about this thorny problem.

Development of knowledge of democratic principles and practices on a broader scale than at present is another area where action is urgently needed, Mr. Yagupsky stated. Not
enough is known in Israel, especially among the native-born and the youth, about the American way of life and its impact on American Jews. This in turn produces misconceptions about the American Jewish community and its relationship to Israel.

The approaches and techniques developed by the AJC in handling questions such as these will be applied by the Israel office, Mr. Yagupsky said. The major objectives of the program, as he sees it, are to create a thorough understanding of the status and philosophy of the American Jewish and other Jewish communities, to open up new channels of communication among them, and to serve as a "bridge" for cultural and other exchanges. In the process, it is expected that Israelis in all walks of life will gain a clearer picture of our democratic system, and will apply some of the lessons we have learned to their own problems.

In carrying out his task, Mr. Yagupsky will use materials already published by the AJC and other organizations, and will also prepare and produce other aids especially "tailored" for different groups in the Israel public. The Israel press and radio will be provided regularly with information, through a bulletin to be issued by the AJC office, and other source materials. Radio programs such as "The Eternal Light" in the United States, putting stress on the founding and development of Jewish communities here and elsewhere, will be arranged. Booklets, pamphlets, study guides, films and other material will be distributed to schools, youth groups and government and private organizations concerned with education. Forums, seminars, and other forms of discussion designed to focus public attention on specific problems, will be organized.

Mr. Yagupsky reported that two round-table discussions on the attitudes of the "sabras" (native-born Israelis), one of which was broadcast, and a public panel discussion on the attitude of Israelis toward "oriental" immigrants, all promoted by the AJC office, created widespread interest in January. Additional programs of this kind are being planned for the near future. Another project of major importance is a study of the attitudes of Israeli youth to be launched soon with the cooperation of leading intellectuals, which is expected to serve as the foundation for many of the AJC's future activities with and for young people. A survey based on interviews with leaders of Arab and Christian groups will also be undertaken, to determine the attitude toward the State of non-Jews living in Israel and to provide background for approaches to these elements of the population.

The first issue of a Hebrew-language magazine similar to Commentary which the AJC office will publish is now in preparation, according to Mr. Yagupsky. A small staff has been assembled and several major articles have already been secured.
It is expected that the magazine will be ready for distribution in late April or early May, and will serve as an outstanding medium for the achievement of the AJC's basic goals in Israel.

In the discussion which followed Mr. Yagupsky's report, gratification was expressed at the interest and encouragement given by intellectual leaders and others to his exposition of AJC views and plans. It was predicted that the integration problem would become increasingly serious, and that AJC help in solving it would undoubtedly be sought.

In response to questions, Mr. Yagupsky made the following points:

With regard to the Arabs in Israel, more concern has been shown lately about their situation. The major question at present is whether military government restrictions should be eased or dropped. The country is divided, some persons favoring no change, but moves for further concessions are gaining increasing support. The fact that Communists took the lead in urging an end to military government created a delicate situation for the government and other political parties -- but the government has been making various efforts to improve the situation of the Arabs, and some amelioration of present regulations can be expected.

The AJC's education program concerning American democracy and the place of Jews in American society will have the cooperation of the United States Embassy in Israel. The feeling is that such a program will be useful in strengthening the relationships between Israel and the Western world.

The integration problem revolves around the absorption of the Sephardim who have been coming to Israel in great numbers in recent years and who will play an increasingly important role in the country's life. Since, with the exception of a small percentage, educational opportunities have been extremely limited, it is essential to reach and teach many thousands of these newcomers in a relatively short time. The AJC has an excellent opportunity to bring its message to this group and thus to encourage improved understanding.

It would be helpful if, after the AJC program is in full operation, an AJC mission visited Israel and establish direct contact with Israelis in all walks of life. Such an approach would carry the message of the program forward in an effective personal way.

Respectfully submitted,

Hanna F. Desser, Secretary
Committee on Israel