THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

MEMORANDUM

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Attached is the first of a series of reports on "Social Aspects of Israel," prepared by the AJC Office in Israel.

I am sure you will be interested in this frank and authoritative discussion of Oriental Jewish communities.

Please note that this material is confidential, and for your information alone.

Warm greetings.
SOCIAL ASPECTS OF ISRAEL

I. INTEGRATION OF ORIENTAL JEWISH COMMUNITIES

A. An Immigrant Society

After the State of Israel was established, it was inevitable that the ingathering of peoples of many different backgrounds and origins would create social tensions and frictions. In spite of the unifying factors of the Hebrew language and an accepted Jewish identity -- however diversely the latter is expressed -- Israel is an artificially created new-immigrant society which, except for the native-born element, has experienced little organic growth. Its social problems are therefore more acute than in other modern societies which have slowly developed their national personalities.

To some extent, the social development of Israel has been similar to that of the United States at various times in its history. Israel's pioneers may be compared with the Founding Fathers who gave the United States its basic ideals of freedom and its democratic government, but whose descendants' privileged position was challenged by new waves of immigrants proclaiming their right to become full partners in the building of the nation. In Israel, as was true in America, many newcomers have had limited experience with -- but great aspirations for achievement of -- a democratic way of life.

It must also be expected that original community patterns and customs of most immigrants will persist for many years in Israel. As in the United States, each immigrant group in Israel maintains some of its characteristics while adapting to the prevailing culture, and tensions have developed not only with regard to the dominant group, but also among various groups of new immigrants. Again repeating an element of the American experience, there have been conflicts between the "old country" generation and the younger one seeking swift access to the new society. New citizens generally constitute a relatively underprivileged group which often expresses its feelings in some kind of social protest.

In contrast to the United States, Israel is faced with the necessity of solving these problems in a comparatively
short time. And while the United States in its formative period possessed great natural riches, was protected from potential enemies by vast oceans, and developed during a time when international tensions were not as acute as today, Israel is a small country with meagre resources, surrounded by unfriendly nations, in a time of almost constant crisis. Israel today has two compensating advantages: the positive and permanent factor of a common Jewish heritage, and the negative and possibly transitory threat of Arab enmity, which in itself is a unifying force.

Founded by men and women of European extraction, Israel has found it difficult to integrate newcomers whose social values, beliefs and forms of family organization are, at best, only partially derived from the Western world. In their turn, the newcomers from underdeveloped societies are often subjected to pressures to conform to Western norms, while their cultural and economic limitations often tend to confine them to the lower strata of society.

Although new immigrants from European countries also meet with difficulties in rebuilding their lives in Israel, they usually have reached a level to technical and professional proficiency which enables them to make their way in the modern industrial society emerging in the country. Furthermore, they have fairly broad areas of identification with the veteran society in similarity of cultural backgrounds and religious observance. The conceptual framework of Western life which predominates in Israel is not new to immigrants of Western origin, and does not require the acquisition of new values. Their traditional emphasis on education and respect for individual accomplishment, as well as their small, restricted family pattern, fit naturally into the stream of Israel life.

The situation is quite different for most newcomers of oriental origin who emigrated from the Afro-Asian countries. Many still live in a clannish, almost tribal pattern with a patriarchal cast, and place great stress on the solidarity of the family. This form of family life frequently clashes with that prevailing in Israel, and creates acute tensions between the parent generation and the youth. Since the family and the school seem to stand for different values, the children lose respect for, and even become ashamed of their parents.

The religious concepts of oriental Jewish immigrants also make it difficult for them to identify with many of their fellow Israelis. Belief in the coming of the Messiah, the worship of Holy Places and Holy Rabbis, elabora e rituals, and certain superstitious practices are still important forms for the expression of their Jewishness. Some oriental Jews believe — although they do not openly say so — that the state of Israel came into being through a miracle, and that the veteran Ashkenazi (European)
population which established it was no more than an instrument in God's hands. It is held to be proof of God's inscrutable design that He chose the Ashkenazi -- who, in the judgment of the newcomers, have lost much of their Jewishness since they are not strongly religious -- to bring about this miracle. Many feel that, for the love of God, they must be forbearing toward Ashkenazi arrogance, and trust that the Messianic mission of Israel will be accomplished by the "real" -- the truly religious -- Jews, through whom and for whom the highest Jewish aspirations toward equality before God, realized in a just society on earth, will come to pass in Israel.

This concept represents a transposition from a passive belief in deliverance by the Messiah to the acceptance of Israel as the place where the Messiah will manifest himself. It is felt that by actively participating in the building of a just society in Israel, each Jew hastens the coming of the Messiah. But to the extent that the Messianic idea operates in the official ideology of present-day Israel, it is on the basis that the State itself realizes the Messianic aspirations of the Jewish people. To most oriental Jews, this seems somewhat sacrilegious, but they do not have the dialectical skill to argue the point. The lay Zionist ideology makes it difficult for them to formulate their motivations and incentives in passing from a traditional way of life to the wider Israeli society and to the modern world.

The problems involved in the integration of immigrants of oriental origin are compounded by the fact that they now constitute more than half the population, and their numbers will grow proportionately higher in the future as a result of increased immigration and their high birth rate. Therefore it is highly possible that Israeli society will be divided into two groups, separated not only by economic and social differences but also by ethnic and cultural ones. The existence of "two Israels" threatens national unity and might lead to social conflicts which the nation could ill afford.

B. An Underdeveloped Society

Jewish oriental communities not only present striking similarities with the populations of their countries of origin but have many characteristics in common with other contemporary underdeveloped, developing, or transitional societies. Their cultural and economic handicaps, their lack of modern skills and concepts are barriers to rapid assimilation with the dominant Western group.

In Israel, as elsewhere, the relationships between a dominant Western group long since transformed by the Industrial Revolution and populations just beginning this stage of development are fraught with doubts and tensions. The dominant group teaches and
uplifts but feels a certain contempt for those it guides, and the latter admire, envy and resent the dominant group. A common Jewish identity hardly serves to alleviate the tensions -- which, indeed, become even greater when members of both groups recognize that they are, or ought to be, one people. The more advanced group tends to regard the other as a burden, and the less advanced is wounded to be considered a liability.

In earlier years, oriental Jewish communities produced a small Western-educated middle class, particularly in the urban centers of the Mediterranean area. Under colonial regimes, this middle class tended to identify with the dominant Western group and its culture, especially since the Western powers were traditional protectors of non-Moslem minorities. But, while Moslem and other native Westernized elites served as a catalyst to bring their people into the modern world through various "liberation" movements, a number of factors arrested the growth of a similar development among oriental Jewish communities.

Hostility to Israel gave Arab nationalism an increasingly anti-Jewish content, and brought about the liquidation of whole communities in the Middle East and North Africa. Most of the westernized Jewish middle-class settled in the Western world, while the poor, tradition-bound mass of these communities emigrated to Israel. Thus, in contrast to the populations in many of the new nations, oriental immigrants in Israel have lost the benefits of guidance and stimulation which their own educated middle class could have provided. Their religious leaders are seldom prepared to face the challenges in the new social milieu, and they have become "a flock without a shepherd." In addition, few among them are equipped to serve as intermediaries with the dominant group of Western origin.

Whether a strong and vigorous leadership will emerge among these newcomers in Israel is uncertain, because the initial impetus has been lost by the very fact of immigration. In Moslem countries, the Jewish families which had begun the process of Westernization were better educated than the average Arab, and thus could secure better jobs and enjoy a higher standard of living than the Arab population. Many were able to invest in their children's education, and Jewish community schools often were of better quality than the Arab schools. In Israel, the wage-earners in semi-Westernized families cannot compete on equal terms with fellow citizens who enjoyed a more advanced European type of education. Since incomes are lower and little or nothing can be spared for education of the traditionally large families, the social and cultural levels of the oriental communities inevitably declines. These families cannot understand why their situation deteriorates when they had expected it to continue to improve, and they tend to attribute this fact to discrimination. "In Arab
countries, we were considered Europeans because we are Jews," they frequently say, "but in Israel, we are looked down upon as Arabs because we are Sephardic Jews."

Yet the fact that large numbers of Jews of oriental origin have settled in the Western world and integrated without undue difficulty indicates that similar results could be achieved in Israel, if a sufficiently great educational effort were made.

This is especially essential since, unlike deprived groups in emerging new nations, the oriental Jewish communities in Israel do not have the easy solution provided by a national liberation movement which gives people an emotional incentive to work at their regeneration. Whatever incentive may take shape here can only be in terms of a change within a society whose foundations are already established.

C. Cultural and Economic Gap

Although much has been done in Israel to help new immigrants of oriental origin, it has not been enough to narrow the cultural and economic gap between them and Israelis of Western origin. It was hoped that as children of different backgrounds attended the same schools and received the same education, the differences between them would gradually disappear -- but progress along these lines has been very slow. Their home environment often fails to provide children of oriental origin with the necessary stimulus. Many of the parents barely realize that education for life in today's world requires more than learning the "three R's" and the Bible. When parents with large families and no modern and professional skills find it difficult to make ends meet on their low wages, children are often sent to work at an early age, despite governmental regulations. The children in turn are deprived of better educational opportunities and earn little because they have not acquired useful skills. Therefore the gap becomes self-perpetuating, and even tends to widen.

In recent years, some grants have been made for young people who seek a high school education (which is not free and is expensive in Israel), or vocational training. But unless positive and broad-scale steps are taken to improve conditions for the oriental community, integration will be most difficult. The difference which now exists between the two main groups can be illustrated by a few figures on school attendance: In primary schools, children of oriental origin represent 60 per cent of the total registration. In high schools, this figure drops to 25 per cent, and only 12 per cent actually graduate. In institutions of higher learning, only 4 per cent of the students are of oriental origin.
The fact that these differences have persisted longer than expected has been a source of keen disappointment to educators and officials in Israel. The disappointment has been no less acute among the oriental immigrants themselves, many of whom had assumed that, by a sort of magic transmission, they would acquire the values of Western civilization. The youth now realize that a few years of schooling and service in the Israel Army do not necessarily put them automatically on the path to better jobs and a wider role in Israeli society, as they may have been led to believe.

Some Israeli authorities have expressed the view that more "high level western immigration" would help solve the problem, by compensating for the deficiencies of the culturally retarded elements. Obviously, this would not close the existing gap -- particularly since the numbers of such immigrants are dwindling. Still, oriental immigrants tend to interpret the appeal for more western immigration as a form of discrimination.

"Discrimination" is often the catchword with which oriental immigrants seek to gloss over the objective causes of their inferiority. Their relative backwardness actually provides some justification for a kind of intellectual prejudice, which in turn tends further to isolate them and to confirm their belief that they are discriminated against.

D. Prejudice and Discrimination

As in most "mixed" societies, where people from a variety of different backgrounds live side by side for the first time, prejudice among ethnic groups exists in Israel. An idealized view about the unity of the Jewish people makes it more difficult for people to become conscious of their prejudices -- which then cannot be effectively combated since, in theory, they do not exist. There is no legal discrimination in Israel; everybody is equal before the law. This principle is never questioned but it has little effect on day-to-day life, where social prejudice is felt most keenly.

Oriental immigrants are not immune to prejudice themselves. Moroccan Jews who speak French show contempt for Yemenite Jews who know no European language and "did not know what electricity was before coming to Israel." The Yemenites find the moroccos rough and riotous. The lighter-skinned or more Europeanized oriental Jews cruelly ostracize the "dark-skinned" (Indian) Jews, and the better-educated from any oriental community do not like to be identified with "backward orientals." Egyptian Jews who speak English even resent not being identified with "Anglo-Saxons."

Oriental and Sephardic Jews also express dislike for Ashkenazi Jews, especially those of East European origin, whom they call "vouss-vouss" (from the Yiddish, meaning "What?"). The facts that
old-timers from eastern Europe are usually the officials in governmental and other institutions — foremen, managers, administrators and bosses — and that practically no contacts exist between them and immigrants of oriental origin except in an official and usually unequal relationship, are in part the causes of the latent hostility and of the conviction that there is a deliberate intention to keep "the black ones" down.

People from European countries also express strong prejudices. Those who suffered from Nazi persecution often manifest a neurotic obsession in their attitude toward those whom they call "schwartze."

The veteran group itself is not immune. It has been reported that in country busses, kibbutz members are sometimes careful not to sit next to certain people, and workers of oriental origin have been known to ask ironically, "Would you like me to move away?"

Among more sophisticated Westernized groups, prejudice takes a semi-cultural form, as the word "black" is replaced by "Levantine." "Levantinism" is regarded as a threat to national existence, and the fear is expressed that "Levantinization" will "drag Israel down to the level of Arab countries."

Some Israelis recognize that any group which acquires a new culture adopts its external features before absorbing its higher values, and that even when people come to fully appreciate Western values they will retain some elements of their own culture. Since oriental Jews are bound to follow the usual pattern, it is this, perhaps, which makes them appear "Levantine" to Jews from other cultural backgrounds. (The cultural tug-of-war has its comic aspects. Women's organizations took great pains to teach oriental women to make cheesecake and "gefilte fish," which are considered civilized European foods, but the oriental women found this "Yiddish cooking" barbaric. On the other hand, oriental food is highly appreciated by the Ashkenazi population.)

The fear of "Levantinization" has affected oriental Jews themselves, and many have acquired the shamefaced defensiveness which is the least pleasant characteristic of many minorities. When children of oriental origin are asked what they would like to become when they grow up, they often reply, "Ashkenazim," and a similar attitude is evident among many adults. Israelis were formerly required to indicate on some official documents whether they were members of the Ashkenazi or the Sephardic community, and — since "Sephardic" and "Levantine" are nearly synonymous in the Israeli context — many Sephardic Jews were convinced the question was asked to humiliate and discriminate against them, when for instance, they applied for jobs.
The "Levantinization" issue actually disguised a conflict between two concepts of integration -- a monolithic, authoritarian one, and a freer, open one which allows for diversity. The authoritarian pattern requires that people who are considered inferior be "molded" to conform to a model represented and imposed by a dominant group. The other concept is based on the principles that people are capable of growth no matter what their origins, and that people from different cultural areas are bound to retain some of their specific cultural traits and are also bound to influence each other. In this view, the acceptance of cultural pluralism in this period of transition helps rather than impairs integration, and diverse expressions of Jewishness are regarded as equally valid and equally subject to reinterpretation and change. It is felt that a genuine Israeli culture and people may emerge from this dynamic exchange, this give-and-take in growing and living together, and that such organic growth holds more promise than the imposition of rigid cultural patterns by one group upon another.

These matters are frequently discussed in Israel, but the official policy of integration has contained some authoritarian features which are just beginning to be relaxed.

B. Authoritarian Aspects of the Policy of Integration

Authoritarian methods of settlement could not be avoided while mass immigration was under way. For instance, it was necessary to use pressure, as well as persuasion, to convince some oriental parents to send their children to school. But it was quite another matter when little girls were persuaded by their teachers to ask their mothers to shorten their skirts. Many oriental parents consider short skirts immodest, and they were outraged. It was some years, according to reports, before those in charge of absorption policies admitted that some aspects of modernization cannot be imposed too rapidly.

Because it was essential to develop the country's economy and to divert newcomers from concentrating in the already congested cities, hundreds of families were directed to new development areas under the "ship to village" plan -- but they were not always told where they were going. It was a shock to many to find themselves "settled" in huts in the Negev, without a light anywhere in the vicinity, surrounded by Bedouin encampments. Oriental Jews were not the only ones to be sent to development areas but they were the majority, and because they had large families, few skills and no savings, they were more completely dependent than others on the government organizations in charge of absorption of immigrants. They had been accustomed to the warmth and friendliness of the Jewish quarters in their native towns and villages, and their isolation made them feel abandoned, unwanted, "thrown away in the wilderness."
Of necessity, shopkeepers and artisans were set to clearing the land or given various training courses. They were told to emulate the veteran settlers by doing pioneering work to build up the nation. But few oriental Jews could absorb this ideology, for while they required both work and moral support, many of them considered physical work degrading. In so far as they had any social motivation, it was toward middle class status, and many oriental newcomers ran away from villages and became civil servants and peddlers. Another factor was that manual agricultural labor lost much of its glamour when Israel started to industrialize, and people with professional skills became the most valued members of Israeli society. This further convinced some newcomers of oriental origin that they were the victims of injustice, since they were expected to live according to ideals which better-favored groups had discarded.

On their side, the veterans who preached the "pioneering" ideals of Zionism and socialism did not realize that, in their time, they had freely chosen their hard way of life, and that their ideals required some modification to be adopted by people from other social strata. If newcomers had actually witnessed the veterans doing manual work, they might have wanted to do likewise, but the veterans had become a managerial class which gave orders and was often openly contemptuous of others who could not live up to their standards. The veterans boasted of their past accomplishments to people who lived from hand to mouth. Nor, apparently, could the native-born Israelis grasp the difference between the circumstances of people who had been poor and miserable but enjoyed communal warmth, and the circumstances -- in Israel -- of people who felt themselves lost and rejected. "In Morocco, those people lived in filthy slums. Here, they have clinics, schools, work, houses. What more do they want?" the veterans asked indignantly. Between their values and mentality and those of large numbers of the newcomers, communication was impossible.

Authoritarian methods did produce good results in some areas. In a few years, Israel has almost completely eliminated diseases prevalent in the Middle East. Most children have received a basic education, and most adults have employment of some kind. But the use of authoritarian methods, coupled with the arrogant behavior of many officials, has created a good deal of resentment, bitterness and disappointment among many oriental newcomers.

A rigid approach to integration was perhaps inevitable under emergency conditions, particularly since there was comparatively little knowledge of the mores and attitudes of oriental communities. But the result is that Israel is now faced with serious contradictions, as the discrepancy between avowed ideals and social reality becomes more manifest.
People who had no choice about where they would be settled can hardly be persuaded that Israel is a free, democratic society. Agricultural day laborers who have no employment security cannot believe that the kibbutzim which hire them represent an ideal socialistic, equalitarian society. Those who work in Histadruth-controlled companies cannot regard it as a labor union which protects the worker, since it is also their employer -- and an employer against whom redress is not always possible. Some workers who have learned their trades at Histadrut expense have been fired and rehired, so that they do not receive the compensations and benefits guaranteed to permanent workers. While the contention that their productivity is low may be economically justified, it cannot be morally convincing to them. Nor are most newcomers convinced by the argument that Histadrut is not an employer like others, owing to its "unique" role in building up the nation. Here, once more, there is no common ground between the newcomers and their aspirations, on the one hand, and the institutions upon which they most depend, on the other.

A certain kind of segregation also prevents people from meeting in ways which would be useful in creating social understanding and equality. People in established kibbutzim, for instance, have few social contacts with those in adjoining new immigrant centers; they constitute two separate societies.

F. Resistance to Change

Newcomers, particularly those of oriental origin, tend to cling to their way of life, but the dominant group is no less stubborn in clinging to its ideology. The veteran leadership was understandably concerned about national unity, and adopted a narrowly conformist view of integration. Its strong sense of identification and its satisfaction with its own achievements tends to produce a fear of change and adaptation, as threats to the structure already built. This rigidity makes it difficult to adapt proclaimed ideals to social reality. The needs of an oriental sub-proletariat, which aspires to better living conditions, social promotion and acceptance, cannot be expressed through the official ideology.

G. Danger to Democracy

An official ideology which does not respond to social needs, as expressed by pressure groups, endangers democratic freedom and encourages the ruling group to maintain itself in power. Furthermore, in a new immigrant society, people are too confused, too absorbed in their struggle for existence, too divided into groups with diverse interests, to constitute a strong body of public opinion which could exert influence and control over the authorities. In Israel, power tends to be concentrated in a small group which
controls the majority party in the government (Mapai), Histadrut and the Jewish Agency. There are practically no checks and balances, not even strong opposition parties, and those in authority are becoming increasingly accustomed to doing as they see fit. Challenge, opposition, even criticism of such an organization as Histadrut tend at times to be interpreted as a threat to the nation.

When formally democratic institutions exist alongside such a concentration of power, people tend to become cynical or indifferent. They do not attempt to influence their own government, because they believe their complaints will not be taken into consideration or may cause them trouble. Verbal criticism, bitterness and resentment are frequently expressed privately, but have not produced any effective organized movement of public opinion, except the Communist Party.

Indeed, people in new immigrant centers have become accustomed to relying on the authorities to do things for them, and are vaguely afraid that criticism may harm their vital interests. For instance, people who depend for their livelihood on the number of working days assigned by the local branch of the Ministry of Labor tend to believe that they are "in bad" with the local authorities if the days are suddenly cut because there is not enough work to go around or for other reasons. It has been reported that irate groups have beaten up officials of the Ministry of Labor on occasion. Early in 1960, when riots broke out in the Wadi Salib (mostly Moroccan) quarter of Haifa, they spread to new immigrant centers with a high percentage of oriental immigrants, some of whom set fire to the local branches of the Ministry of Labor and Histadrut.

The time has come therefore, to redefine social ideals and goals in Israel. The country's main social problems derive from the need to create an open society, whose members share a common outlook on at least some fundamental issues, rather than a fragmented conglomeration of classes and ethnic elements moved by individual or group interests, which are bound to clash. The emergence of new classes and a wider social differentiation are to be expected in the development of a country such as Israel. This may have a beneficial effect, so long as it does not have ethnic connotations. If passage from one social group into another becomes possible for people of various ethnic origins, then Israel may become an open, pluralistic society where people have diverse interests but share basic values and ideals. This is a crucial problem for Israel. In this area, Israel could learn much from the American pattern of social development.
H. Facing the Problem

All the solutions which may be suggested can only be tentative. Not only do they affect one another, but they depend on how much Israeli society is willing to reform and transform itself.

Since there is general disapproval of prejudice and discrimination, they could be more easily eliminated once people become aware that they are being practiced. The better-educated strata of the population could do with a little honest self-criticism, and set an example that others would gladly follow. For instance, immigrants from Western countries should not be described by the country's authorities as "compensating" for the immigration of less fortunate Jews. Nor should Israeli publications or officials allow themselves to say that oriental immigrants require less than Jews from Western countries, because the former "are used to a low standard of living."

Clearly, there must be an intensified effort to equalize material conditions for different ethnic and cultural groups. This would require adjustment to some temporary sacrifices as a social investment in the future. The physical pioneering of former years could be succeeded by social pioneering today. Providing more jobs, better pay and security of employment for unskilled workers, training them in new skills, breaking through their isolation to establish human contacts are not unworthy goals in a country where an equalitarian ideal has not lost its appeal. Making secondary education and technical training available to children who are qualified but destitute would raise both their morale and the educational level of the entire community.

A socialist ideology can redefine itself. If kibbutz members who have become employers would strive to be fair employers and seek agreement with newcomers on what constitutes a just society, they would be living up to their own ideals. Such an exchange would help newcomers to evaluate their expectations in the perspective of the country's needs and would make for a more democratic education in citizenship. If Histadrut would objectively evaluate both its achievements and the reasons why many newcomers have failed to identify themselves with it, unskilled workers might more readily recognize and correct their deficiencies, in the assurance that Histadrut represents them as well as the veteran working class.

The social tasks confronting Israelis today are no less difficult than those of the past. A strong idealistic motivation is basic to the solution of many current social problems. But idealism cannot be imposed from above by those who consider themselves a super-elite.
Israeli ideology should disengage itself from its Eastern European setting and reinterpret itself in terms of Israel's present social context -- as the ideology of the United States has done at different times in its history. Accepting this free growth may lead to a new Hebrew-centered culture in Israel, just as it led to a new English-centered culture in the United States.

Oriental Jews have much to contribute to Israel if they can overcome their present handicaps and preserve their special qualities of mind and spirit -- qualities which some more advanced groups, regrettably, have lost.

A new spirit which could blend and harmonize the various elements of Israel's population will need to express itself through new means.

Tel Aviv, Israel
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