

## Jerusalem Letter

No. 124 24 Kislev 5752 / 1 December 1991

# THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF SAO PAULO, BRAZIL

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The city of Sao Paulo in southern Brazil is a megalopolis with 17.4 million inhabitants in a country of 144 million people. Sao Paulo is unique in Brazil because of its size, economic power, and variety of cultures. While the city is known for its widely dispersed neighborhoods, intense traffic and smog problems, its reputation rests on being the largest industrial, commercial and financial city and state in Brazil.

Sao Paulo is a kaleidoscope city, populated by Africans whose grandparents came to the country as slaves; whites from Portugal, Spain, Italy and other European countries; Japanese (Sao Paulo has one of the largest Japanese communities in the world); Arabs (with whom the Jewish community used to maintain good relations); a Korean colony; a large number of Brazilians from other states (about 2 million from the northeast of the country); and some 76,000 Jews, the largest Jewish community in Brazil. Most in the Jewish community belong to the middle and upper classes, in a city where much of the population is lower class.

## **Origins of the Jewish Community**

The ancestors of the present Jewish population came to Sao Paulo in successive waves of immigration. Before the First World War there were major waves of immigration from Poland and Russia, and another major wave after the war from different countries of Europe. During and after the Second World War another wave from Germany and Poland arrived, comprised primarily of Yiddish and German-speakers. During the mid-1950s a wave of French and Arabic-speaking immigrants arrived from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and other Arab countries, to become the main source of today's Sephardi communities. They are represented in Sao Paulo today by Congregacao Mount Sinai, Congregacao Mekor Haim, and Congregacao e Beneficencia Sephardi Paulista. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the immigration of Jews from elsewhere in South America (Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile), as well as some Israelis. Nowadays there is an internal migration from the smaller communities of the state (Santo Andre, Santos, Vale do Paraiba, Campinas, Sorocaba) to Sao Paulo city. With decreasing numbers, most of these smaller communities today require assistance from the larger Jewish organizations in Sao Paulo city.

Until the 1950s the immigrants from different countries or regions organized themselves as distinct groups in synagogues and other organizations, a factor only partially reflected today. There are clear connections within the Jewish community between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, but there is a visible separation between the Orthodox and the other members of the community (Conservative, Reform, and secular Jews).

## **An Organizational Overview**

The Jews of Sao Paulo have built an extensive and diverse system of services and organizations that operates in many settings. Some 65 organizations affiliated with the Sao Paulo Jewish Federation focus on such areas as religion, education, welfare, culture, politics, fundraising, youth, media, sports, medical services, an old age home, and a cemetery. Some organizations are involved in many of these sectors, others in one or a few.

Sao Paulo does not have a Chief Rabbinate and there is no recognized Orthodox conversion in Brazil. For many decades a single, overpriced butcher held a monopoly on all kosher meat. In 1990, at the initiative of the Jewish Federation and under the supervision of Orthodox rabbis, kosher meat began to be sold at reasonable prices in major supermarkets in the city. Some 21 different synagogues are affiliated with the Jewish Federation, while a number

of organizations also have their own synagogues, and yet others are unaffiliated. Within this varied group one can see an interesting variety of religious manifestations. Beit Chabad has four synagogues, a monthly magazine, book editions in Portuguese, a summer camp, children's club (Tsivot HaShem), and youth group.

Congregacao Israelita Paulista (C.I.P.), founded by German Jews, holds Conservative and Reform services and has the largest synagogue membership in Sao Paulo. The congregation has a well-organized library, Sunday School, and facilities in two locations in Sao Paulo, one of them dedicated to Jewish studies. It also maintains a youth department, strong relations with a Zionist youth movement (Chazit Hanoar), a Jewish Boy Scout group, and a children's home. The congregation offers lectures, courses, and organizes frequent exhibits and other cultural activities.

Another representative congregation is Comunidade Shalom, a small organization maintained by Jews who came from America and affiliate with the Reform movement. It includes a synagogue, bar mitzvah program, sisterhood, lectures and courses, and runs a day care center for handicapped adults.

Five Jewish schools, one of them religious, accommodate more than 5,000 students from elementary to high school, although there remain an estimated 3,000 Jewish students who do not receive any formal Jewish education. There are also a number of very small Orthodox schools. The Jewish Federation holds a teachers' seminar, now in its fourth year, with about 70 students. The Renascenca School, one of the two largest Jewish schools, offers programs in literature, pedagogy, data processing, and hotel administration.

UNIBES (Uniao Israelita Brasileira de Bem Estar Social) is the most important Jewish welfare organization in Sao Paulo, working in four main sectors: family services (food and clothing distribution, occupational therapy); basic medical and dental care; the aged (three recreational and cultural groups); and children (day care and audiological diagnosis and treatment). About a dozen organizations work toward the development of Jewish culture. The Sao Paulo Jewish community has some active libraries (in Hebraica, C.I.P., and Circulo Macabi), two theatres, Israeli folk dance groups, Hebrew ulpanim, and a children's arts workshop (Oficina das Artes).

Local branches of Israeli political parties, once the basis of Jewish politics, now constitute a declining presence in community activities. A trend can be seen to depoliticize public and social affairs and transform them into "technical" problems. Local politics is a central function of the Jewish Federation, which aims to represent and coordinate the Jews of Sao Paulo and the organizations affiliated with it. Countrywide Jewish politics is considered the main function of the National Confederation (CONIB), whose headquarters are also located in Sao Paulo. B'nai B'rith and the Zionist Organization also have traditional roles

in this sector. There are a few Jewish politicians active in the city, state and federal arenas. While they do not represent the same parties, they do work together on Jewish issues. There is room and need for more such representatives. There are also some non-Jewish politicians who have a tradition of friendly relations with the community.

Every organization conducts its own fundraising, as does Keren Hayesod. Brazilian laws are very restrictive about sending funds abroad.

Maintaining Jewish identity among the youth is a great problem for the community. Jewish organizations fail to attract youth, who seem to be "turned off" by the community. None of the six Zionist youth movements, university groups, community centers or organizations are successful in attracting large numbers of Jewish youth. By university age, intermarriage is a visible symptom of this identity problem. Some interesting new programs for young people are being developed by Hebraica, and the Jewish Federation is creating more places for youth in every Jewish organization (e.g., the Youth Forum).

*Resenha Judaica*, the only community newspaper, appears twice a month. It contains reserved pages for the most important organizations, others dedicated to social and business life, and articles about politics, education, religion and other Jewish issues. There are four monthly magazines: *O Hebreu and Shalom* — the latter with long articles of political content; *A Hebraica*, published by the Community Center; and *Chabad News*. *A Hebraica* gave room to the Arquivo Historico Judaico Brasileiro and the latter is going to have its permanent home in the Community Center. For the past twenty years the weekly television program "Mosaico na TV" has appeared, devoted to Judaism, Israel and Jewish community issues.

The old age home Lar dos Velhos is a major institution that takes care of every aging Jew who can afford it. More than ten other small groups provide recreational activities for those elderly people who continue living with their families.

The Jewish community provides some of the best sports facilities in Sao Paulo city. The Associacao Brasileira A Hebraica de Sao Paulo, founded 38 years ago, today has 30,000 members and is the largest Jewish organization in Brazil. Its activities include sports, leisure and entertainment, culture, education, and religious teaching. With its auditoriums, art gallery, ampitheatre, restaurants, discotheque, two theatres ("Arthur Rubinstein" and "Anne Frank"), tennis courts, swimming pools, gymnasium, kindergarten, civic center, playgrounds, fitness center, children's art workshop, etc., it is an obligatory visit for those who want to learn about the Sao Paulo Jewish community.

The Albert Einstein Jewish Hospital makes proud not only the Jewish community but all of Brazil, being one of the leading hospitals in South

America. It was built by donations from the best-known families of the community.

In Sao Paulo are located the national headquarters of the Associacao Beneficente e Cultural B'nai B'rith, Na'amat, Wizo, Organizacao Sionista Unificada, Confederacao Brasileira Macabi (community centers of Brazil), and Confederacao Israelita do Brazil (CONIB) — the national umbrella organization. Sao Paulo is also home to the presidents of the Maccabi World Union and the Congreso Judio Latinoamericano.

Israeli organizations in Sao Paulo also have a strong presence. Departments of the World Zionist Organization that are active include Youth and Hehalutz, Education and Culture (maintaining the unique Jewish Pedagogical Centre), and Aliyah. Other Israeli organizations represented include Keren Kayemet LelIsrael, Keren Hayesod, the Friends of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Technion, Israel Bonds, the Medical Association of Israel, ORT, Wizo and Na'amat. The JDC used to have a representative based in Sao Paulo.

## **Stages in the Community's Development**

Many of the first immigrants to Sao Paulo city lived in the Bom Retiro neighborhood in the commercial area near the railway station. They arrived by ship at Santos port and came by train to Sao Paulo seeking work. Once settled, they created synagogues, schools, social welfare and medical services, and a burial society. At that time, they shared Bom Retiro with the friendly Italian community. Jews there built bakeries, kosher restaurants, and their first homes and shops (*lojas*).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Brazil enjoyed an economic boom and the Jewish community of Sao Paulo prospered. As a result, they began to spread throughout the city, moving to such neighborhoods as Jardins, Itaim, Vila Mariana and Higienopolis. They expanded their businesses, enlarged their community organizations, and sought higher standards in communal services. They erected new buildings for their organizations, new homes for their families, traveled abroad frequently, and were successful economically. It was a modern community, based upon a generation born in Brazil, living during the military regime, and successful in business, industry, and the liberal professions. Jewish students occupied high places in all the preferred universities, where the GUHB (Grupo Universitario Hebraico Brasileiro) was successful in attracting a large number of youth of varied political and religious affiliations.

"Yuppies" are one of the models or styles of present Brazilian society. With the

youthful and smartly dressed Fernando Collor, the Brazilian president, appearing in the media surrounded by modern technology, having meetings in two or three countries in the same day, exploring the Amazon jungle, or racing cars above the permitted speed limit, he is a prime example of the Yuppie model among the Brazilian elite. Included in this elite are, of course, many Jews.

At the same time, Brazil is trying, with difficulty, to live as a democracy and achieve a First World lifestyle for the larger part of its population. The current economic difficulties of recession and inflation are a challenge to the community. The leadership has responded with the professionalization of communal work and efforts to improve quality in services and organizations, together with fostering deeper Jewish content in every communal activity.

The community seems aware of its problems. The subject of "youth" is the focus of an ongoing discussion among the leadership, and between them and the young people. Voters and candidates to the Jewish Federation must be at least 18 years old, and in past elections youth have largely participated. Another controversial community issue is Jewish education, with different groups very critical of the present state of the schools. The high cost of kosher food, and assimilation and continuity are other concerns of the community. The leadership is worried about improving formal Jewish education and the educational content of every Jewish organization, trying to redress the balance between secular and Jewish culture.

## **The Sephardi Community**

As noted earlier, the Sephardim arrived in Brazil under different conditions and during different epochs than the Ashkenazim. Many arrived during the 1950s and 1960s from Arab countries, bringing with them money and French-style education. They established very active synagogues, organized by land or region of origin. They sought the kind of good education the upper class enjoyed in the places where they came from. As was common in their Arab countries of origin, the teaching of Judaism was a goal primarily undertaken by the family and not by the school. Among this sector of the Jewish community with its rich Jewish tradition can be found some of the most prosperous families, including the leaders of two major banking groups. The inequality between Ashkenazim and Sephardim found in Israel and in some diaspora communities does not exist in Sao Paulo. In status and standard of life, level of education, and participation in communal organizations, the Sephardim are similar and sometimes superior to the Ashkenazim. There is a climate favorable to increasing integration between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in the Sao Paulo Jewish community and the boundaries between the two sectors

permit increasing exchange. Efforts are made to bring in more representatives of the Sephardi sector to collaborate in communal governance.

The tendency to put the synagogue first from the organizational point of view is characteristic of the Sephardi sector. All services are bound to the synagogue, as may be seen in the three main Sephardi congregations. Congregacao Mekor Haim sponsors the studies of some yeshiva students and their families, religious book publication, philanthropic and social assistance for the poor, and grants for some Jewish school students. Congregacao Mount Sinai maintains an audio-visual resources center on religious subjects and organizes social help for the poor. Congregacao Beneficente Sefaradi Paulista supports Netzach, a Zionist youth movement, as well as an exclusive group for university-age people.

## **Community Trends and Prospects**

Some trends and prospects can be seen in the evolution of the Sao Paulo Jewish community: the concentration around a few organizations; the strong influence of technology in Jewish life; increased participation in Brazilian life; and the professionalization of communal service. The trend to concentration was exemplified in the establishment in 1976 of UNIBES as the result of the merger of three other organizations: Ezra, Ofidas (Organizacao Feminina Israelita de Assistencia Social), and Linath Hatzedek (Sociedade Israelita Policlinicas).

Advanced technology, together with the consumer lifestyle of modern society, is having a strong impact on family life, leading to reduced family time together; more flexibility of daily schedules; increased independence of family members; greater leisure time; less need for maid servants at home; easy and rapid contact with every place in the world via telephone, facsimile, TV news, cable TV, etc.; easy independent access to information via computer; decreasing need for recreational organizations; easy travel abroad; permanent stimulus to consume; isolation between families who live spread out over a big city, in apartments and homes equipped with everything needed.

These changes affect all of Brazilian society, but there are reasons to think the Jewish family and the Jewish organizations are more sensitive to them. For example, these changes are a threat to daily and weekly family encounters (Shabbat); to the sharing of festivals and leisure time activities of the Jewish annual cycle; to the use of Jewish services of all kinds; to the linkage between generations; to the transmission of values, behavior and information.

Clearly, there are also benefits to the community from the new technology. It

has allowed an increasing number of Jews in Sao Paulo, especially among the leadership, to fly quickly to any place in the world to participate in the activities of the world Jewish community, and to send their children to Israel for World Zionist Organization and university-sponsored study programs.

## **Jewish Participation in Brazilian Life**

There is also a tendency toward greater participation in general Brazilian society. However, this tendency has different sides, including assimilation and, sometimes, intermarriage. Assimilation and intermarriage are not interchangeable terms. In Sao Paulo, some important community leaders are intermarried. There are no specific data but estimates of intermarriage run to about 50 percent. The other side of participation in the general society is the provision of assistance and services to the entire society, not only the Jewish sector. For example, D.A.T., the Day Home for Handicapped Adults supported by Comunidade Shalom, the Centro Israelita de Assistencia ao Menor (CIAM) for disabled children, and the day care center of UNIBES all serve populations that are 95 percent non-Jewish. Other examples include the two kindergartens--Anne Frank and State of Israel--built by the Jewish Federation in lower class neighborhoods. Still another side of this participation are the contacts with political parties, politicians of different groups, members of the government, minority groups and labor unions.

The growing trend toward professionalization in communal service can be seen in the most successful, large organizations which have created positions for top executives and encouraged them to develop professional staffs to coordinate the volunteers in different areas. Other signs of this tendency were the creation of Eitan, a Center of Informal Education, in 1985 by the Jewish Federation, the Zionist Organization, and the Department of Youth and Hehalutz; the opening of a training seminar for Jewish teachers in 1987 by the Council of Education of the Jewish Federation and its ongoing campaign to increase the prestige of the teaching profession; and Keren Hayesod lectures for leaders and volunteers. A growing professionalization can be seen not only in the executive staff, but also among the lay leadership and in the inclusion of external advisory services. This could even lead to the establishment of an organized network of Jewish community professionals.

In recent years, the continuing socio-economic crisis in Brazil has had an impact on the Sao Paulo Jewish community, resulting in increased economic pressures on the social services system and the Jewish schools. Community leaders are working hard to develop organizational solutions to deal with the impact of these economic pressures. Overall, the evident efforts of a core of deeply committed Jews to ensure meaningful Jewish life in the community

provide good reason for continued optimism. Though times will not be easy, the Sao Paulo Jewish community has strong resources to weather the storms.

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The *Jerusalem Letter* and *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* are published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 972-2-5619281, Fax. 972-2-5619112, Internet: [jcpa@netvision.net.il](mailto:jcpa@netvision.net.il). In U.S.A.: Center for Jewish Community Studies, 1515 Locust St., Suite 703, Philadelphia, PA 19102; Tel. (215) 772-0564, Fax. (215) 772-0566. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.