

## Poverty Among the Jewish Population in Latin America: A Challenge for Communities in the Region

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### • A Disturbing Picture

An entire Jewish family was discovered living in a public square in Buenos Aires. The father and mother, both middle-aged, are two of a vast and growing multitude in Argentina and throughout the region who, discouraged, have given up the long and fruitless search for work. They are not even included in the unemployment rolls since they are no longer actively looking for work. Every day, an AMIA bus takes Jewish children living in a shantytown to a community school. These are random cases in a widespread process of social breakdown. In Venezuela, requests to the community for social assistance have been growing at an ever faster pace. Formal and informal labor exchanges are established in all communities. The Jewish community in Latin America has not been left unscathed by the social crisis sweeping the region. As it spreads, families are gripped with silent anguish in a fight for their very survival which Jewish institutions are doing their best to address. There is no place for "gilded" myths on the situation of Jews in Latin America. A significant and growing portion of these communities have been caught up in the pressing social problems besetting the region.

According to ECLAC, between 1980 and 1990, the number of people living in poverty in Latin America increased by 60 million, and has continued to swell. It is estimated that nearly one half of the region's 500 million inhabitants live below the poverty line. Every day about 10 million people of working age are unable to find work, and another 54 million are employed in jobs with low productivity in the so-called informal sector, in a hand-to-mouth existence. The outlook for the new generation is extremely alarming. The open rate of youth unemployment is estimated to exceed 20%.

A report prepared by a blue-ribbon commission established by the UN, the Inter American Development Bank (IDB), and ECLAC, and headed by former Chilean President Patricio Aylwin, shows that the social gap is not due to a lack of potential resources, because strategic raw materials and natural wealth are abundant in the region. The main causes include a dearth of policies, extremely high levels of inequity, weak social policies, rising unemployment and

**AMIA-** Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina, the social service agency of Argentinean Jewry

**ECLAC-** Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

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declining real wages.<sup>2</sup>

Warnings about the situation have been sounded. The final declaration issued at the Presidential Summit of the Americas (Chile, 1998) declared that "overcoming poverty continues to be the greatest challenge confronted by our Hemisphere".<sup>3</sup>

The Secretary General of ECLAC, Jose A. Ocampos, has cautioned that "absolute poverty continues to grow, levels of inequality show no signs of diminishing, and employment in the informal sector is on the rise".<sup>4</sup> The President of the IDB, Enrique V. Iglesias, has noted that "in most countries the process of change has left unresolved the pivotal issues of critical poverty and unequal income distribution"!

How has this picture affected the almost 450,000 Jews living in Latin America? This is a question that needs to be properly investigated in order to shape suitable community policies. A number of efforts are under way in this direction. The following sections describe some of the major problems that seem to be part of the daily routine for growing cohorts of Jews in the region and that should be studied.

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<sup>4</sup> Report of the Latin American and Caribbean Commission on Social Development", UNDP, ECLAC, IDB, 1995.

Presidential Summit in Santiago, Declaration of Santiago, Chile, 1998.

Ocampos, Jose A., Conference at the OAS Special Assembly in Bogota, 1998

<sup>5</sup> Iglesias, Enrique V., "The role of education and culture in development" in Iglesias, Enrique V., *Change and growth in Latin America 1988-1998. Ideas and actions*. Washington, 1999.

## • Trends in the Social Situation of Jews

### *The Decline of the Middle Class*

The economic evolution has had an acute impact on vast segments of the middle classes in most Latin American societies. One study in Venezuela found that "the middle class presently accounts for 13.65% of the population (compared with over 20% a the past) and its resources continue to dwindle. Allowing for national differences, the outlook is much the same in many other countries as well. Enrique V. Iglesias refers to the victims of these developments as "the new poor", who are losing their economic and social status. The rank and file of some of the larger Jewish communities in the region share these characteristics. In Argentina, Uruguay, and other countries, Jewish professionals, merchants with small and medium-sized businesses, small manufacturers, self-employed persons, and other groups have been severely affected by the general decline of the social strata to which they belong. For instance, Jewish families have traditionally devoted all of their efforts to preparing their children for a professional career in the belief that professional credentials would guarantee employment, reasonable remuneration, and an opportunity for social advancement. This notion has been thrown on its head. What is known as an extensive "proletariat of professionals" has developed in the region.

This ranges from the open unemployment afflicting many who have chosen a professional career in the humanities philosophy education liberal arts

are among the increasing numbers of people who approach community organizations for assistance. They and their children, who keenly feel these wants, have great trouble meeting their basic daily needs.

### ***The Creation of an Impoverished Community Periphery***

The small middle classes experiencing a decline in their circumstances are now joining the ranks of the poor in having to severely cut back on the cost of "belonging to the community". A large Jewish periphery unlike the traditional one is quickly growing up. The term periphery in the communities has been used mainly to refer to Jews with very weak community ties, who were either in the process of assimilation or uninterested in belonging to the community. There is now a growing number of families whose withdrawal is linked to the ongoing social *crisis* discussed here. The impact is felt directly in Jewish schools. Paying preschool and primary school fees is beyond the means of many of these families. Also, they are forced to give up monthly contributions to community centers and the other contributions that were a traditional part of belonging. The gravity of the economic situation imposes a further constraint. Families must focus all of their energy and time on seeking sources of sustenance and, accordingly, are in no position to volunteer their energies to community organizations.

In the daily life of the different Jewish communities across the region, there has been a noticeable increase in the size of this involuntary Jewish periphery.

### ***the Risk of a Polarized Society***

Various international organizations, including the UN, IDB, and UNICEF, have been warning that Latin America has become the region with the highest level of inequity in the world. Much of the analysis of this issue attaches considerable importance to the region's poor economic performance compared with the success of countries like the "Asian tigers" which started from a much lower level in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas the latter tried to narrow the differences in the social pyramid, in Latin America the differences between rich and poor have widened. In Taiwan, the income of the highest 20% exceeded that of the lowest 20% by a ratio of 15:1 in 1952. At the present time, the ratio stands at 4.2:1. In Korea, it is 8:1 (in the Scandinavian countries the ratios are lower still, at under 5:1). In Latin America, however, the differences have increased sharply. In Brazil, it is estimated to be 25:1, and in Argentina, 14.7:1. This trend appears to have become firmly entrenched. On the whole, social differences in Latin America appear to be the most pronounced in the world. The increasing polarization has actually had a strong impact on the socioeconomic stratification of Jewish communities.

These communities were all founded on the pioneering efforts of generations of immigrants who started from nothing and built up a network of world class institutions of excellence, making their families financially stable in the process. They represented a broad cross-section of the middle and lower middle classes. Today, these trends have been shaken, and are being seriously affected by the polarization that the

Second, innovative policies and programs should be adopted to prevent the spread of the above-mentioned periphery caused by impoverishment. Integration into the community, not exclusion, must be the highest mandate. The principle advanced by the pioneers of the network for Jewish assistance and education in Latin America—no Jewish child should miss out on school for lack of financial reasons—must become established practice. Also, institutions in general must adapt to the needs of the broad segments of the population in need rather than expect the contrary. Every effort must be made to seek methods so that once and for all and in a climate of dignity no person is excluded from the community network because of economic problems.

Third, the issue of social polarization must be addressed. For decades communities have built extended internal democracies of considerable merit despite their imperfections. Leading Jewish institutions in the hemisphere choose their authorities in direct elections in which everyone participates. The boards are clearly accountable to the members. Jewish public opinion holds considerable sway over the actions of those in positions of authority. This is all based on the firm belief in, and practice of, egalitarianism. The Talmud says that in the beginning God created a single couple, not several, in order to reinforce the idea that all human beings are equal. We all have a common origin. This idea of equality which permeates all aspects of Judaism has been turned upside down in the community democracy. It may be severely damaged by social polarization if it is not expressly protected and defended.

Lastly, it is important to note that the communities, in spite of their earnest efforts, which should be developed internally to address the issue of Jewish poverty, also have the moral obligation to help with social problems at the national level. We cannot remain neutral or distance ourselves from the situation described in Aylwin's report: 'Almost one half of the inhabitants of Latin America and the Caribbean are mired in poverty, are out of work, and experience social privation', that "is shocking from a moral standpoint, arrests development, and loses a serious threat to social harmony and political stability". Just as communities defended human rights in the past, so too must they sound the alarm on the serious social problems besetting us, propose solutions, and contribute concrete initiatives.

For Judaism, poverty is not an inevitable evil. It is written in Deuteronomy (4:11): "However, there should be no poor among You." Poverty must be eradicated, it is a roduct of specific societies. In Judaism, it is moral obligation to do so. There are no rewards, no compensation; it is simply the ight thing to do. Leviticus (25:35) admonishes: "And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he be a dtranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee." The Bible uses here the word "shalt" w hich implies that it is an order. Insensitivity to poverty is considered a grave sin in Judaism. The prophets repeatedly censured Jewish communities, demanding that collectively and individually they deal with the problem of poverty without delay or subterfuge.

Jewish communities in Latin America are invited to take up the challenge of working together in efforts to combat the widespread poverty afflicting the region and to keep strengthening and deepening efforts to address Jewish poverty.

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### Poverty in Latin America: An Institutional Priority for B'nai B'rith International

B'nai B'rith International views the issue of the growing pauperization of the Latin American population in general and of the Jewish communities in particular as a permanent threat to the encouraging democratic accomplishments of the last decade. With chapters throughout the region, from the very onset it has actively supported efforts undertaken by the Inter-American Development Bank and the local communities to explore strategies to face the problem and to ensure a viable future for their members. It was present in 1998 during the first encounter in Washington, DC which brought together representatives of Latin American and US Jewry to discuss the different dimensions of the issue and to craft - short and long term plans of action.

In addition, in July of this year, BBI leaders attended a second meeting in Montevideo which provided an update of programs implemented by Jewish communities in the area aimed at confronting socio-economic phenomena derived from the overall trend of impoverishment.

In January, 2000 B'nai B'rith's Board of Governors passed a resolution calling on its membership as well as on other Jewish organizations throughout the world to recognize increasing Jewish poverty in Latin America as a matter of institutional priority. B'nai B'rith is currently investing important efforts to sensitize and mobilize US and international Jewish organizations on the matter. The pressing needs of Latin America Jewry cannot be ignored and concrete actions based on the time-honored tradition

of supporting and standing by communities threatened by political, social and economic upheaval, are warranted.