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Diaspora's modern dilemma

By Aryeh Dayan

The tiny but flourishing Jewish community of Costa Rica was tossed by a stormy debate. The main meeting place of the 3,000-strong community is the Maccabi Country Club, a spacious facility in the suburbs of Costa Rica's capital, San Jose, which houses swimming pools and sports clubs and serves as a center for both community and cultural activities. The dispute that caused tempers to flare stemmed from a decision by the club's managing board a few years ago that the kitchens of all four of the club's restaurants would operate according to the kosher food laws.

Most of Costa Rica's Jews follow a secular way of life, although they attend services at the Orthodox synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and also have bar mitzvah ceremonies and weddings there. Costa Rica has a small Reform congregation, composed mainly of Jews from the United States. Everyone - secular, Orthodox and reform - respects one another and lives in peace with one another.

Dr. Simon Mermelstein, a dentist and secular Jew who is also one of the heads of the club's managing board, says the initiative of the community's Orthodox minority was accepted with understanding by the secular majority, "which in no way wanted to distance the Torah observant Jews from the joint club."

The storm erupted a short while later, when the club's secular members realized something they had never been aware of before - that according to halakha (religious law), a kosher kitchen cannot operate on Shabbat.

"People come to the country club mainly on Saturdays and Sundays," says Mermelstein, "and of course there was no logic behind a decision that meant the closing of the restaurants on Shabbat. It is clear that was not the intention when we decided on the koshering of the kitchens."

The decision outraged most of the club's members, many of whom even threatened to cancel their memberships.

"We found a compromise," says Mermelstein. "Two of the restaurants would be kosher and remain closed on Shabbat, while the others would operate according to what is known in the U.S. as kosher style."

The food is kosher and there is no combining of dairy and meat products, but there is cooking on Shabbat."

The Orthodox accepted the compromise, but the problem was not really solved. After a few weekends during which the solution was implemented, many club members began to complain that the food at the club's restaurants, both the kosher and the "kosher style," was very different to that which they were accustomed and was "simply not tasty."

"Most people contended that their children were not willing to eat the food and would no longer come with their parents to the club," says Mermelstein. "We actually did see that a lot of people who came to the club on Shabbat morning or afternoons were traveling a few kilometers to the nearest McDonald's, to bring food for their children."

Mermelstein hopes that since then a solution has been found to that problem, which threatened to reduce attendance at the club: About six months ago the club hired a chef "who cooks food that is both kosher and tasty."

Jewish framework

Mermelstein told the tale of the kashrut affair last weekend, when he came to Israel to participate in a conference organized by the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers (WCJCC). Under the heading "Jewish Identity in a Multicultural Society," the conference, which opens today at the Dan Carmel hotel in Haifa, will address issues facing many Jewish communities worldwide and which are also visible from this story.

The main issue stems from the question of how to create a Jewish framework that will foster community activities between all its various sectors on the one hand, while being sufficiently attractive to draw young people growing up in the consumer-oriented, modern, global Western world of the 21st century. This mission is particularly difficult since these young people are growing up in societies in which everything is open to them.

The dilemma between a Jewish country club that offers bland kosher food and a non-Jewish club that also has a McDonald's is only one of the dilemma's facing these young people's parents. Other Jewish activists who came to Israel for the conference say they often encounter an even more difficult dilemma. Attorney Annabella Yaroslavsky, who runs the JCC in Caracas, Venezuela, says Jewish parents are torn between their desire to send their children to a Jewish

school, where they can earn a matriculation certificate and also learn the basics of the Jewish culture, and the desire to send their children to one of the American schools operating in Caracas, where the children can acquire fluency in English alongside their matriculation certificate.

"The choice between these two alternatives," says Yaroslavsky, "is not something taken for granted."

In order to make the Jewish choice more attractive, the Jewish school in Caracas is upgrading its English studies.

Marcos Prist speaks of similar dilemmas. Prist is the leader of the Jewish community in Lisbon, Portugal, home to some 200 Jewish families. Since there is no Jewish school there, parents do not have the same problem as those in Caracas, but their dilemma is no less difficult. Portugal is a member of the European Union, and only in the past 10-15 years began to sense a true feeling of belonging to Europe. For members of the younger generation in Portugal, this feeling is still euphoric. Of course young Jews are drawn to the rest of Europe the same as their non-Jewish contemporaries, who are all exposed to the same media and influenced by the same trends. Like all young Portuguese, they want to live the new European experience to the fullest.

In such circumstances it is not surprising that Prist and his colleagues in the Lisbon Jewish community find it hard to attract the city's Jewish youth to the JCC. What makes it even harder, says Prist, is that the "traditional elements in the community prefer an empty Orthodox synagogue than a vibrant open community."

Recommended model

During the three days of the conference, some 150 JCC directors from the U.S., Europe, Latin America and the Commonwealth of Independent States will meet with about 100 directors and office holders from Culture, Sports and Youth Centers (known by their Hebrew acronym, MATNAS) in Israel. Despite their different goal, the conditions under which they operate and the problems they face, the conference's organizers hope to create a framework for mutual growth between the Israeli and the JCC from abroad. The Haifa MATNAS company, which is helping host the conference, has organized tours of the centers in the various Haifa neighborhoods, which will present the city and its community centers as a recommended model for educational and social activity in a multicultural community.

Even if there are some similarities, the problems occupying the heads of the community centers in the small Jewish communities abroad are very different from those facing the centers in Israel. There are also differences between the various communities, although conversations with Yaroslavsky, Mermelstein and Prist reveal there is one issue that troubles all three communities, and apparently most Jewish communities in the Diaspora: how to encourage the younger generation to develop strong ties with the Jewish community and to adopt a Jewish identity, without isolating them from the non-Jewish surroundings and still providing them with all the educational tools necessary for integration in the modern working world.

Yaroslavsky: "Our main problem really is how to give our children the tools that enable them to integrate into the modern world and non-Jewish society, while reducing the risk of their marrying non-Jews. We send them to Jewish summer camps, organize trips for Jewish singles, and all sorts of other things, but without convincing young people of the importance of the continuity of Jewish life, nothing will help."

"Children go to Jewish schools," adds Mermelstein, "basically growing up in a Jewish incubator, but the moment they go to university, that's over. They start meeting non-Jewish society and a new world opens to them. Then there's nothing we can do."

Mermelstein himself is married to a Jewish woman from the U.S., whom he met while in Jerusalem in the 1980s, when he did a pediatric dentistry internship at Hadassah hospital.

They do not know exactly what to do to instill a strong Jewish identity in their children, but do know that encouraging them to move to Israel is effectively out of the question. They know that living in Israel is already no longer viewed by young secular Jews as an attractive option. This is particularly prominent on the backdrop of the political reality in today's Venezuela. Ever since Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's leftist and anti-American president was elected in 1999, hundreds of thousands of Venezuela's wealthy have emigrated - mostly to the U.S., Spain and Germany. Yaroslavsky says some 2,000 Jews, or about 13 percent of the 15,000 Jews who lived in Venezuela up until six years ago, are among the expatriates. The overwhelming majority have immigrated to the U.S., Canada and Spain, while only a few have come to Israel.

"Even though most of the Jews who left did not come to Israel," says Yaroslavsky, half-jokingly, "no one ever boosted immigration to Israel like Chavez did."

Different blends

In their attempts to form a lasting Jewish identity for themselves and their children, Diaspora Jewry oscillates between three goals that are sometimes contradictory - nurturing their solidarity with Israel, nurturing their secular Jewish culture and clinging to religion and tradition. The various communities have created different blends of these components, suitable for the local conditions.

In Portugal, which until not long ago was a staunchly Catholic country, the strong attraction of the European dream has pulled the younger generation away from religion and emptied out churches. This phenomenon, it turns out, has not skipped over Jewish youth. Prist's attempts to draw them closer to Jewish life therefore have a clearly secular character.

In Venezuela the picture is different.

"The Jewish identity component in Venezuela," says Yaroslavsky, "is continually changing. Solidarity with Israel, which in the past held a central position in our Jewish identity, is declining. In its stead there is a stronger identification with Judaism and Jewish tradition. A great many Jews in Venezuela say Israel today is a strong, rich country that no longer needs help. Instead of being interested in Israel, as in the past, [today's youth] is interested in other aspects of Jewish identity. I see this everywhere. A few months ago, for example, our community center organized a discussion of Israel and the disengagement plan. Fewer than 100 people participated. The following week the same hall hosted a lecture by a rabbi who spoke about Jewish education, Jewish values, marital relations and family life according to halakha. Over 800 people came to hear him."