

BUENOS AIRES AND THE CHICAGO JEWISH COMMUNITIES: DEVELOPING LINKAGES

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This article describes the evolution of a linkages between the Jewish communities of Chicago and Buenos Aires that enabled Chicago to respond quickly and proactively to the Argentinian crisis. This relationship was fostered by professional and volunteer exchanges, solidarity visits, and missions. It has yielded many mutual benefits and rewards for both communities.

Twinning relationships between American Jewish communities and Israeli communities have been promoted for two decades through Project Renewal and Partnership 2000. This success has led to efforts to pair American Jewish communities with Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union. Although the process is different, the concept is similar: communities formally collaborate on a range of programs and projects. Though twinning involves the dedication of staff time, processes for allocating funds, and community development on both sides and there are many barriers to overcome—including distance, culture, language, and differences in communal structure and roles—the rewards have been substantial in the connections that have developed among individuals and between communities.

For more than a decade, professional and lay leadership from the Chicago Jewish community have developed personal and professional connections with their counterparts in Latin America generally and more specifically in Buenos Aires, Argentina. These are both large Jewish communities with comparable populations; today, Chicago's Jewish population is projected at 271,500 and Buenos Aires at approximately 180,000.

This article differentiates between twinning, which involves a formal relationship

and agreement between communities, and linkages, which can be created by volunteers and professionals on an ad hoc basis. It describes the evolution of a linking relationship among the professionals and lay leaders in Argentina (primarily Buenos Aires) and the Chicago Jewish community. The existence of relationships between the professionals and volunteers enabled the Jewish Federation/Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago leadership and community to react proactively to the crisis that was developing in Argentina before it "officially" became a major issue on the North American Jewish agenda. Chicago's Jewish United Fund provided funding and advocated for an active role on the part of United Jewish Communities (UJC) in supporting a broad communal response to the crisis.

DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS

Two intersecting paths facilitated the development of relationships between the Jewish communities of Buenos Aires and Chicago, one professional and one volunteer. The seeds were planted during the mid- and later 1980s.

At that time, both the Buenos Aires and the Chicago Jewish communities had Jewish populations estimated of 200,000 or more. Both had a strong middle-class constituency.

Both were thriving Jewish communities—Buenos Aires, renowned for its strong day school movement, thriving community center movement, and commitment to Israel; and Chicago as a leading Jewish community with a strong federation, leaders who had a profound international commitment, and a community that provided both substantial support for local and overseas services. Both were Diaspora communities facing issues of how to ensure Jewish continuity and inculcate a strong connection with Israel while simultaneously addressing local needs, particularly those of a stratum of poor Jews in the midst of both communities, despite the fact that both were overwhelmingly middle class.

The professional path was developed through the vision of the long-term director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Latin America, Alfredo Berlfein (z"l). Nearly fifteen years ago, Berlfein decided to use the CJF General Assembly in Miami as an opportunity to engage North American Jewish communal professionals in learning about one another and in exchanging information to facilitate the development of Latin American Jewish communal structures based on models more comparable to those of successful American Jewish communities.

Berlfein communicated a vision of professionals and volunteers who could learn from one another through participation at General Assemblies in both Latin and North America. The presence of an Argentinean director of Miami's Jewish Community Center at the time helped with the interpretation of similarities and differences between North and Latin American Jewry. For example, Latin American Jews feel like transients in their own communities rather than as invested members of their Jewish communities, a view in contrast to that held by Jews from North America (Burbinksi et al., 1997/98).

The meeting in Miami was followed up by a visit to Argentina by the Chicago Jewish Federation's Director of Planning, who

gained an understanding of the communal environment and shared with professional colleagues views of communal planning that might serve as a stimulus for comparable approaches in Argentina. While there, he participated in discussions about planning and developed relationships with some of the professionals from the community and the JDC.

Fortuitously, a volunteer path was being initiated around the same time. Chicago Jewish leadership involved in JDC thought a mission to Buenos Aires would enable Chicagoans to learn first-hand about this sister Diaspora community.

And so a Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation mission was organized in 1988. It brought lay leadership in contact with all levels of the Buenos Aires Jewish community, leaders and non-leaders alike, and deepened their appreciation and understanding of both the similarities and differences between the two communities. Further, it established the basis for a continuing relationship among both lay leaders and professionals.

EVOLVING LINKAGES

Maintaining a relationship between communities on a continuing basis without a formal structure is difficult. Episodic events (e.g., missions) tend to become ends unto themselves. However, for the next decade, both the volunteers and professionals of the Argentinean and the Chicago Jewish communities developed various linkages that were mutually reinforcing:

- *Leadership missions:* In the 1990s, there were several volunteer fundraising missions to Latin America from Chicago. Participants included leaders who previously had been to Argentina, as well as new leadership. For the Chicago community, these missions provided an opportunity to involve leadership who had been to Israel many times and were looking to discover other areas of the Jewish world receiving funding from overseas agencies. They also reinforced the ties of those who

had gone on earlier missions and expanded the base of concern of those who had never been to Latin America. The active participation of leadership in the JDC and its Latin America area committee was a contributing factor to the success of these missions.

- *Meetings at the General Assembly:* Delegations of Latin Americans (volunteer and professionals) came to CFJ/UJC General Assemblies where they continued to exchange information about the respective communities and to familiarize other volunteers and professionals with one another. Further, Chicago Jewish communal professionals participated in two Latin American General Assemblies, conducting workshops and reinforcing their relations with both volunteer and professionals from all over Latin America.
- *Response to the tragedies of the bombings of the Israel Embassy (1992) and the AMIA (1994):* The Chicago Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) held memorial events after each of these events. Further, JCRC held an event in 1998 commemorating the fourth anniversary of the bombing of the AMIA. This provided the community with an opportunity to reach out to Latin American Jews in the Chicago community, many of whom participated, including a rabbi from Buenos Aires.
- *Solidarity visit:* In the aftermath of the AMIA bombing in 1994, several federation executives were called upon through the offices of the World Conference of Jewish Communal Service, to participate on a solidarity visit, visibly demonstrating the concern of North American Jewry. The executive of the Jewish United Fund/Federation of Metropolitan Chicago participated in that mission, along with several other federation executives. His participation and expressions of solidarity with the community reinforced the view of a special relationship between Chicago and Argentina.
- *Professional visits and exchanges:* These

exchanges continued in both directions. In 1997, the Endowment Director of the Jewish Federation was invited to Argentina to explain the value of endowment development for a community that had relied to a great extent upon current fee payments and purchase of cemetery plots. While continuing to consult with Argentina, he subsequently has worked with two other Jewish Latin American communities, Guatemala and Panama, to create the first Jewish communal endowment programs in Latin America. There was also interchange among professionals about the Tzedaka Foundation of Buenos Aires, which seeks to incorporate a different role for lay leadership in resource development.

RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT CRISIS

These linkages and awareness of the events in Argentina set a framework for responding to the unfolding events in Argentina before they were recognized as a national and international crisis for the organized Jewish community. As part of the new national process for allocating funds overseas—which allows local federations to designate part of their funds for specific programs of the beneficiary agencies—in 2000, leadership of the Jewish United Fund targeted funds toward meeting social service needs in Argentina. Further, a representative of the DAIA (the community relations arm of the Argentinean Jewish community) who came to Chicago was immediately granted financial assistance to pursue putting on trial the policemen accused of being involved in the AMIA bombing.

As the Argentine financial crisis unfolded, lay and professional leadership were vocal in advocating support for the efforts of JDC and the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) to implement programs that would address the consequences of the fiscal crisis within the Argentinean Jewish community, as well as promoting aliyah. The community did not hesitate to accept its responsibility to provide funding. Professional and lay leadership ea-

gerly participated in the Argentina task force established by the United Jewish Communities. Further, with the assistance of local rabbinic leadership, there was an outreach effort to Chicago Jews from Argentina and Latin America mobilize their support for the communal effort.

The federation leadership recognizes that this is not a short-term crisis, that it is both the culmination of events preceding it, and that it will profoundly change the nature of Argentina's Jewish community. However, there is a continuing commitment in Chicago to work with the overseas organizations and the Argentinean community, and this commitment has a strong foundation, based upon more than a decade of formal and informal linkages that have been developed.

CONCLUSION

Through a series of linkages, a significant relationship has been created between two great Jewish communities. While not a formally defined twinning relationship, there have been multiple connections developed over years. This relationship has had mutual benefits and rewards for both the lay and professional participants. The Jewish communities of both Chicago and Buenos Aires

have now shared their knowledge and expertise and created good, helpful friends at a most critical time. The experience prepared the Chicago Jewish community to take a leadership role in advocating during the current crisis.

As a model, these informal linkages can be a wonderful tool to further engage Jewish communal volunteer and professional leadership in the work of our overseas agencies, the JDC and JAFI. They also reinforce the importance of providing for world Jewry through this powerful international system of services.

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