

Argentina's Jews: A Community in Peril



As president of the Orthodox Union, I am deeply involved in American Jewish life, which affords me the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be an American Jew. We live in a society in which anti-Semitism, although not completely eradicated, represents the thoughts and actions of isolated bigots, not of the American government or the American people as a whole. Despite individual cases of hardship, we have a prosperous community that generously supports our Jewish institutions and organizations.

In our great American democracy the Jewish community has a seat at the table when affairs of state are being discussed, as we participate in meetings with the president and other leaders of the American government.

It is no wonder that in OU *shuls* we say the *berachah* for the government of the United States just as we bless the State of Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces.

Other Jewish communities are not so fortunate. Israel faces the current *matzav* of unrelenting terror on the part of a pathological Palestinian society in which babies are dressed up as suicide bombers. In France and elsewhere in Europe, the disease of anti-Semitism, forced to go underground after the Holocaust, has reemerged throughout the continent with a virulence that shocks the Jewish world. We in America must be deeply concerned about these developments, and ensure that we do what we can so that the Jews of Europe remain secure.

But in this article I want to focus on another Jewish community in peril—the Jews of Argentina, who, almost overnight, have gone from prosperity to deep poverty.

In the early 1990s, Argentina was the scene of brutal suicide bombings of the Israeli Embassy and the AMIA community center—perhaps perpetrated with the collusion of the Argentinean police and government—for which no one has been brought to justice.

Despite these tragedies, the Argentinean Jewish community remained prosperous, supporting a flourishing network of community institutions serving the country's 200,000 Jews. These institutions included outstanding yeshivot attended by half of the community's children; in Buenos Aires alone, there were eighty-two Jewish schools in the 1990s.

This is no longer the case. Argentina's recent economic collapse has brought on a crisis, which some have compared to the Great Depression. In the summer 2002 issue of *Jewish Action*, reporter Steve Lipman described the situation:

Argentina's economic problems, which began in the 1990s with government corruption and disastrous policies, escalated last December [2001] when the linkage of the peso to the American dollar was halted, bringing instant inflation, five changes of government in two weeks, street riots and looting. Hundreds of thousands of people in Argentina's middle class became instantly unemployed, and the country's... Jewish community, overwhelmingly middle class, was disproportionately affected. According to most estimates, a quarter of Argentine Jewry now lives below the poverty level, dependent for food and rent on the largesse of family and the aid of overseas Jewish organizations.

Lipman noted the rise of Jewish-financed soup kitchens, which for

many Jews provide the only meal of the day; he added that some children receive their only meal at school.

However, many schools are in grave danger. Families that were once able to pay tuition are now impoverished, causing an estimated thirty percent decline in yeshiva enrollment this school year. Several schools in Buenos Aires have closed, while others face deficits that may bring about the same result.

The Argentinean Jewish community has depended upon the assistance of Jewish organizations—for example, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which has provided food and other relief, and The Jewish Agency for Israel, which has facilitated the increasing level of *aliyah*.

Given the overwhelming importance of Jewish education in ensuring the survival of a Jewish community, the OU has established a campaign with the Rabbinical Council of America to raise \$250,000 to offset the deficits run by schools in Argentina. The OU will be working with our member synagogues to raise these vital funds, which will go to twelve schools—with almost 4,000 students—from across the Orthodox spectrum. The Jewish Agency for Israel has committed to matching fifty cents on the dollar for each dollar raised, making this a joint American-Israeli effort.

As has happened so often elsewhere in the past, Jewish communities are in danger. The bombings posed a physical threat to the Argentine community; but having been comforted by Jews from all over the world, Argentinean Jews vowed to remain strong. The spiritual threat represented by the closing of Jewish schools must also be met by an outpouring of concern from other Jewish communities. Those of us who are fortunate to live in America and have a wealth of Torah institutions to educate our young must regard the situation of the Jews of Argentina with great concern and do all that we can to support Torah education there. That is what the OU campaign is designed to accomplish. I am sure that we will succeed. **JA**