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The small group of destitute Jews that immigrated to Peru in the first decade of the 20th century developed into a flourishing prosperous community by the 50s and 60s of the century. However, since reaching that pinnacle, there has been a steady decline and it now stands at a crossroads. One path calls on the Jews to fundamentally reorganize their community as quickly as possible in order to adapt its institutions and resources to the contemporary economic and demographic reality. The other path hopes to retain the community's institutions and activities as they were, with the danger that within a few years the community will no longer be able to guarantee that it can maintain its organizations along with their activities as before. The danger is that in only a few more years the Jewish community will lose its strength and will no longer be able to assure that its Jews will remain in the community framework, especially with regards to their synagogues and the prestigious León Pinelo School.

How did this situation come about? We will examine it decade by decade through the 20th century.

The 1910s

The first Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews arrived in Peru in this decade. They joined the few German Jews who were members of community institutions dating from the 19th century and also utilized their cemetery. This was a difficult period of exploring their possibilities and some of the immigrants tried their luck in Lima. By the decade's end the city had 400 Jews.

The 1920s

This decade saw the continued emigration of young people, especially Ashkenazim who sought their fortunes. Many of them went to outlying cities and developed businesses operating on credit. When the number of Sephardi Jews increased, they separated from the Ashkenazim and founded the Sociedad de Beneficiencia Israelita Sefardita in 1920. The Ashkenazim founded the Unión Israelita del Peru in 1923. Peru's Zionist organization Organización Sionista del Perú was established in 1925. In the end, the German Jews assimilated and by the end of the decade, the Jewish population reached 1,000.

The 1930s

This was the period when the original Jewish families realized financial security. There was plenty of work and the immigrants had many opportunities to become wealthy. A new wave of immigration from Germany and Austria began in 1933 and the Sociedad de Beneficencia Israelita de 1870 (The Jewish Beneficial Society of 1870) was re-established. During this time, the first families whose children were born in Peru strengthened. The Maccabi, Hashahar, Hashomer and Betar youth movements were created. The Sephardi synagogue consecrated in 1933 and the Ashkenazi synagogue consecrated in 1934 were housed in buildings owned by the community.

In 1938, the Peruvian government completely banned Jewish immigration. By the end of this decade, Peru had some 2,500 Jewish residents.

The 1940s

This was the decade of stabilization and consolidation of the Jewish community enabling it to both fight the outside enemy and to provide for local needs. The Directorio de la Colectividad Israelita del Perú (The Directorate of the Jewish Community of Peru) established in 1942, was the representative body of all of Peru's Jews. Communal services were created and consolidated: the cemetery was enlarged; a home for the elderly was established and in 1946, the León Pinelo Jewish School was founded. At the same time, two Zionist youth movements, Hanoar Hatzioni (Zionist Youth) and Betar, supplanted the earlier Zionist youth groups and three women's Zionist organizations Wizo, OSE and Pioneer Women were organized. Groups formed at this time were the Comité Peruano Pro Palestina Hebrea (The Peruvian Committee for Jewish Palestine) through whose efforts the Peruvian government voted in favor of Partition of the Palestine Mandate in 1947, the Asociación de Crédito Israelita del Perú (The Jewish Credit Union of Peru) and the Asociación Médica Israelita del Perú (The Jewish Medical Association of Peru). The daily news bulletins of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency were published and measures were taken to aid the victims of the War. During this decade, the relationship between Jewish education and Zionism significantly intensified. By the end of this decade, despite the restrictions on immigration, the number of Jews reached about 4,000 people.

The 1950s

This was the decade of achievement for the community. The Jewish families were financially well off and the Jews in the outlying areas moved back to Lima in search of a Jewish social and educational framework for their children. Many tracts of land were purchased for the construction of Jewish institutions: a building was acquired for the Jewish Beneficial Society of 1870; the Leon Pinelo school as well as the Unión Israelita Synagogue were enlarged; buildings were purchased for the Israeli embassy. Additional buildings were purchased for the cultural center, for the sports club Hebraica and for the Bikur Holim and Hevre Kadisha (visiting the sick and burial society). The Zionist Youth Movement was relocated to the old school building, an old age home Afilantis was established and the Adath Israel Synagogue was built. The Jewish population exceeded 5,000.

The 1960s

This was a period of general change. The second generation of Jews, most of whom were born and educated in Peru assumed the roles of leadership. The community continued to prosper, ties with Israel intensified, the activities of Keren Hayesod were augmented and Aliya increased. More than 80% of Lima's Jews were connected with the Jewish school that had attracted emissaries (shlichim) who served as teachers and as well as the principal. The Hebraica Organization hired a foreign co-ordinator for its activities and three new rabbis were engaged by synagogues. While the outlying communities declined in numbers, Lima's increased and reached 5,500 people.

The 1970s

This decade was a turning point in the life of the Jewish community. It marked the decline in the community from both a demographic and an economic standpoint. The military coup of General Velasco (1968-1980) affected landowners because of agrarian reform, industrialists in the wake of setting up workers' organizations and real estate investors because of a leasing law. The national economic crisis, the politicization of the universities, the students' strikes and the decline of the standard of living, all alienated Jewish youth who began to go abroad especially to Israel and the United States to study. The increase in intermarriage, the beginning signs of open anti-Semitism that manifested itself in an anti-Zionist slant with support for a Palestinian state, the increase in crime and the lack of urban security all stimulated the immigration of Jewish families who either came on Aliya or sought other destinations on the continent. By the end of the decade, the Jewish population had declined to some 4,500 people.

The 1980s

This period saw the weakening of the community. The immigration rate increased spurred on by the economic crisis caused by foreign debt, crime, kidnappings and terror perpetrated by various groups (MRTA and The Shining Light) all of which created a pessimistic view of the future. The Jewish birthrate decreased which along with the other factors saw a decline in the number of school pupils from a peak of 1,014 in 1976 to 540 students in 1990. The Jewish institutions were also in difficult economic circumstances. The "Who is a Jew" question was raised because of the increasing number of children of intermarriages. At the end of the decade, the Jewish population of Peru had fallen to 3,200 people.

The 1990s

The community's deterioration was clearly felt in this decade. The economic situation in the country and in the Jewish community continually worsened and unemployment and poverty among Jews increased. The dictatorial regime caused tension, fear and great uncertainty. Aliya also decreased because of internal problems in Israel and the feeling that those who came from South America were pushed aside in favor of those arriving from Russia. Intermarriage increased further, immigration to the United States intensified while the number of pupils in the

school steadily declined to only 430. After continuing for 18 years, the annual trip of high school graduates to Israel ended until the end of the decade because of local economic difficulties and internal problems in Israel. The number of financial contributors to the Jewish community also dwindled. In some sectors of the community, notably among the elderly, a religious revival began to manifest itself, which resulted in a Habad rabbi locating in the community. He was supported partially through contributions especially from those affiliated with the Union Israelita Synagogue. The Jewish population dropped to 2,700 people.

It should be pointed out that the religious revival that also appeared in many other places around the world is understandable in the case of Peru. It is a historic given: whenever the Jews began to feel insecure about their future, experience economic pressures and other problems, they draw closer to religion and seek in it refuge and answers.

The Decade of 2000

This period urgently requires the reorganization of the community that will enable it to transmit its legacy and to continue its services, as its future depends on them - this be done in the framework of national optimism with the restoration of democracy in the country following the election of Alejandro Toledo. However, we do not have much time. We will have to put aside unnecessary internal disagreements and function utilizing professional criteria. In addition, answers will have to be found for three types of conflict that threaten the community's existence. One is the disparity between the cost of maintaining the community and the benefits and the services that its members expect. The second is how much weight will be given to English studies in contrast to Jewish culture in the education provided to the children. Thirdly, is the organization of the community as a single, united body rather than the current four separate communities each with its own rabbi – the Ashkenazi Orthodox, the Sephardi Orthodox, the Conservative and the Habad.

Conclusion

The Peruvian Jewish community faces a great danger, the elitism that splits its members, with regards to what their expectations are concerning services, education and group interests. If the Jews will be divided into rival groups as in Argentina, the wealthy will solve their own problems and leave in the fringes all the others. These people in turn, without any protection and being poor, will not find the energy and initiative to maintain their affiliation with the community that does not include them in its self-vision and does not accord them equality. Thus, Peru's Jewish community may lose the historic values that united it and for many it will lose any relevance to their lives. Let us hope that God provides its leaders with vision.

Note: The Internet site <http://www.salamon.net/surnamelist.htm> includes a list of all of the

Jewish families of Peru including the names of locations connected to them.

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