

# THE INTEGRATION OF ASHKENAZI AND SEPHARDI JEWS IN VENEZUELA THROUGH THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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*The development of the Jewish community in Venezuela and the integration of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews was made possible by two factors. The first is the democratic environment that had been present in the country since the arrival of the first Jewish settlers, which enabled the creation of the institutions of the community. The second was the effort of the Ashkenazi kehilla to create a Jewish educational system that offered "a little bit of everything" (Jewish history, tradition, Hebrew, Bible, and Yiddish) to every Jewish child, Ashkenazi or Sephardi, regardless of the economic or religious environment in the home.*

*The article begins by discussing aspects of Venezuelan life which help to explain the integration of the Jewish community in the country. The history of the community is reviewed as well as the behavior of the community and the Venezuelan government during the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel. The various immigrations, Jewish institutions, and decision-making processes are discussed, showing how educational and political issues and the structure of the Jewish community in the country have been shaped by the Venezuelan environment, yet reflect the continuity of Jewish history and culture. The Venezuelan Jewish community is seen to be organized following the constitutional principles of the Jewish political*

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*tradition. The article reviews published material about the Jewish community, discusses the theory and methodology used in the research, and presents findings, conclusions, and a discussion of directions for future research.*

## Introduction

Venezuela is one of the few stable democratic systems in the southern hemisphere. The country is a centralized federal republic with the president directly elected every five years.

Although Venezuela does not promote immigration and has no specific laws or regulations to protect the ethnic, cultural and religious minorities, their rights are safeguarded in the national Constitution. Generally, there is little xenophobic feeling in the local population, especially as compared to other Latin American countries. Venezuelan Catholics have a tolerant attitude towards religious minorities.

The Jewish population in Venezuela consists of about 25,000 people equally divided between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. However, recently there has been immigration from other countries with a majority of Sephardi Jews. In religious practice, the Jews are similar to Conservative Jews in the United States. The Chabad movement's sustained attempts to attract members of the community to their synagogues have been quite successful, as in many other countries. The predominant elements of Jewish identity in Venezuela are derived mainly from nationalistic and cultural aspects of Judaism. The most important institutions in the Jewish community of Caracas — the Hebraica recreational center and the Jewish day schools — are jointly owned by the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim, who share equal responsibility for them.

How did the community reach this integration? How does it share the decision-making process? Who are the leaders? Part One reviews the history of the Jewish community in Venezuela and describes the structure of its Jewish institutions. Part Two reviews the literature on community studies in Venezuela. Part Three explains the theory and methodology for this research. Part Four collects the findings, draws conclusions, and gives directions for future research.

There are some important features to be taken into consideration when studying any aspect of the Jewish community in Venezuela. First, the institutional history of the Jewish community is very recent — since 1926. The community does not have organized archives and most of the important documents are in private hands. In addition, there is very little written material about the history of the Jewish community in Venezuela. Professor Mario Nassi is one of the few people who has documented community history, having devoted over sixteen years to compiling documents, magazines, letters, and interviews of some of the members of the community. Most of the historical information about the community reported here is the result of Nassi's research.

## **Part One: A Brief History of the Jewish Community in Venezuela**

The Jewish presence in Venezuela is very old. During the years 1819-1821, Simon Bolivar freed Colombia and Venezuela from Spain. On May 6, 1819, the government of Colombia (then encompassing the territories of Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador) accorded Jews the right to settle and religious liberty and political privileges identical to those of other citizens. In 1821, the Inquisition was officially abolished in Venezuela. Only after this did Curacao Jews begin to settle permanently in the various part of the new nation (Emmanuel, 1973).

Sephardi Jews from the Caribbean Islands started to settle in Venezuela, mainly in Barcelona and Coro. In 1828, a small group of the Jews of Curacao settled in the city of Coro. They had no synagogues and all services were held in the private home of David Valencia. They were all shopkeepers and businessmen in search of better economic opportunities than those their native island could offer.

One of the oldest Jewish residents of Coro was Joseph Curiel, the son of the rabbinical advisor Jacob Curiel. We also find David de Samuel Hoheb, born in Curacao in 1792. In 1830 Hoheb was elected mayor of Coro. The number of Jews in Coro remained rather small for a considerable period of time.

Some of the Jews from this period worked together with Bolivar and helped in the independence cause of Venezuela. There was Benjamin Henriques, born in Curacao in 1784 and a cavalry captain in Bolivar's army. Another was Isidoro Borowski (1807-1837), a Jew from Eastern Europe who came to Venezuela especially to meet Bolivar and to fight for independence. The third was Isaac de Sola from St. Thomas who fought in the Batalla de Carabobo and also had many public positions. He also published a weekly newspaper, *El Patriota* (1843-1844), in Valencia (Nassi, 1981).

This population did not establish any community institutions. The community, as a whole, kept close ties with its Jewish counterparts in Curacao and St. Thomas. Individually they lived a very restricted Jewish life, with worship services held in private homes. There was no official *hazzan* (cantor), no Hebrew teacher and no rabbi to officiate at marriages. Therefore lay men took over those functions.

The Jewish children born and raised during this stage assimilated quickly into the local society due to the fact that the language and customs they practiced were similar to the Venezuelan ones. Many of them married non-Jews.

It seems clear that the confluence of religious isolation, the lack of rabbinical authorities and the high rate of intermarriage hastened the assimilation and ultimately the disappearance of this small Jewish community. Today, the only signs which remain of the existence of the communities are the names of some commercial establishments, still managed by the descendants of the Curacao Jews, and the cemeteries in Barcelona and Coro, a silent testimony of their presence in Venezuela. Many of the names of the Jews from this stage, such as Curiel, Capriles, Henriquez, Senior and Fonseca, can be found among the Venezuelan aristocracy.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century Moroccan Jews began to arrive and then Jews from Poland and Romania began coming until the end of World War I. These groups began the contemporary stage of the history of the Jewish community in Venezuela. Each one brought its own characteristics, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, to Venezuela. They began the work of creating institutional Jewish life in synagogues, welfare, education, first separately and then jointly. Through the years, most of the Jews

moved to Caracas and today this is the center of Venezuelan Jewry.

The first Sephardi settlers came from Melilla, Tetuan, Tangier, Ceuta and other cities in Morocco. It is difficult to discover the precise date of arrival of these Jews, but it is known that in 1875 the government in Madrid gave authorization to bestow Spanish citizenship on all the Moroccans who resided in Venezuela (Carciente, 1980).

At the beginning of the 1900s, the news of the construction of the Panama Canal attracted many Moroccans. But the weather and the failure of the project made many of them move on to Venezuela and Colombia.

Many of the first Ashkenazi Jews came from Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Trinidad and San Salvador. As with the Sephardi Jews, Ashkenazi Jews lived in many cities in Venezuela, such as Coro, Maracaibo, Ciudad, Bolivar, Porlamar, etc. Most of them worked as "clappers" — walking from house to house, with a suitcase in their hands, hardly speaking the language, "cloipping" the doors to sell "shmates." Jews from this stage first became established as peddlers providing sales credit guarantees. Later on, some of them established factories in their homes from which emerged the textile industry in Venezuela (Nassi, 1981).

### **Building a Community: The Sephardim**

The Jews from Morocco started to meet in private homes to have Sabbath services. Homes were provided by Mr. Pariente and Mr. Menajem Coriat, who served as *hazzan*. In 1894, Mr. Jacobo Pariente acquired the first Sefer Torah for the community on the occasion of the Rosh Hashanah festivities.

In February 22, 1907, the Sociedad Sefardi de Beneficiencia was founded, marking the beginning of the Sephardi kehillah. It had 178 members out of the 230 Jews in the country. The goal of the society was to help the new Jewish immigrants in Venezuela, Jews all over the world and, when necessary, non-Jews as well. Later the name was changed to Sociedad Benefica Israelita and for some years it was the only organization that represented the Jews in Venezuela.

On March 13, 1907, the society's first Board of Directors decided to rent a house in order to have a place to meet and to build a synagogue. Messrs. Elias J. Ettegui, J.A. Levy, and Alejandro Mondolfi were assigned to locate a suitable house within their budget of Bs. 250. This project was a failure and it was only in 1919, more than 10 years later, that another group of people tried and succeeded in organizing the community. In that year the Sociedad Israelita de Venezuela was established which eventually became the Asociacion Israelita de Venezuela (AIV).

Until 1930, the services were still held in private homes, both in Caracas and in the cities close by. In Caracas, services were held in the house of Menajem Coriat and in the house of Isaac R. Benarroch. In the port of La Guaira, services were held in the house of D. David Nahon. In Los Teques, services were held in Abraham Benchimol's home. The merging of all these places on June 29, 1930 took place "with the purpose of founding a synagogue in this city." In 1934, the members of the Sociedad Benefica Israelita met and created the Asociacion Israelita de Venezuela (Carciente, 1980).

In 1939, the synagogue of El Conde was finished. Many people helped in the building of the synagogue, such as D. Elias Benaïm, Leon Taurel, Jose d. Bendayan and Jose M. Benarroch.

Twenty years later, in 1954, with the urbanization of the city, the synagogue had to be demolished due to construction of an important highway. The same year, there were many meetings devoted to finding a new and appropriate place to build the new synagogue. The synagogue was built during the 1960s and given the name of Gran Sinagoga Tiferet Israel.

During the 1950s, many Jews from Morocco, Syria and Egypt came to Venezuela. Many of them built their own synagogues, but all of these members are affiliated with the Gran Sinagoga Tiferet Israel, which was and still is the core of the Sephardi kehillah.

## **Building a Community: The Ashkenazim**

In the 1920s, Jews from Central and Eastern Europe came to Venezuela. Due to economic and religious necessities, the Ashkenazi Jews established their first community institution on

November 27, 1931, the Sociedad Israelita Aschkenazit, with the stated purposes: 1. To establish a center of mutual assistance among the co-religionists. 2. To collect money in order to assist the members of the community and to found a synagogue to hold religious services (Nassi, 1981).

During that time there was a dictatorial regime in Venezuela, under General Gomez. The Jews who arrived at that time had some difficulties in obtaining Venezuelan citizenship. Thus the community statutes of 1931 established that "...it was forbidden to discuss any political issue of Venezuela" (Nassi, 1981).

As with the Sephardim in the early years, all the activities of the Ashkenazim were held in private homes until they started to rent houses in the city.

During that time the Centro Israelita de Caracas tried very hard to attract all the Ashkenazim that were living in Caracas, especially the Hungarians. There were also intensive relationships with Jews who lived in other cities. In December, 1941 the Sociedad Israelita de Maracaibo was founded and in July, 1944 the Centro Israelita de Maracay was established (Nassi, 1980).

Individually, during the 1930s, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews worked together on a monthly magazine, *Israel*, and in the Maccabi sports organization. During the 1960s, the individual initiative to work together in a sports organization culminated with the creation of the Hebraica club.

At the end of World War II, on August 12, 1946, the Comité Israelita Pro Refugiados was created. The members of the Committee were known Venezuelan personalities in the political and cultural arenas. They included Jose Nuceti Sardi (President), Andres Eloy Blanco and Rafael Pizani (Vice Presidents), B. Briceno Belisario (Treasurer), Eugenio Medina (Secretary of Correspondence), Cesar Gustavo Cordova (Secretary of Register), Antonio Arraiiz, Pedro Beroes, Julio Morales Lara, Luz Machado de Arnao, Juan Liscano, Luis Esteban Rey, Miguel Otero Silva, Carlos Augusto Leon, Maria Luissa Escobar, Antonio Lares, Mario Briceno Iragorry (Vocals), Debora Gabaldon, Natty Bargraser (Coordinators), and Moises Sananes (Director of Information).

Their public relations work, together with the sympathy of Venezuela for the creation of the State of Israel, led President Romulo Gallegos, and the ambassadors in the United Nations



Pedro Zuluaga and Carlos Eduardo Stolk, to work together with Guatemalan President Jorge Garcia Granados and Uruguayan President of Uruguay Enrique Fabregat to vote in favor of the Partition Plan of 1947.

Another similar important political achievement in the history of the community was the successful negotiation in 1939 with Venezuelan President General Lopez Contreras to allow the landing of two ships, the Koenigstein and the Caribia, with almost 200 Jewish refugees from Nazism.

During the war, the Centro Israelita de Caracas sought a larger home due to the increasing membership. On February 15, 1942, a new site was approved that included a synagogue, a large social hall suitable for meetings and parties and perhaps a swimming pool. The amount of money necessary for this project would be raised through the issuance of shares for a value of Bs. 250 a piece.

In 1942, there was an attempt to create the Asociacion Union Hebreo-Polaca de Venezuela (an association of only Polish Jews). In 1943, due to discussion among the members about the way the community should be run, there was a split within the Sociedad Israelita Aschkenazit. Some of the members separated and created the Centro Social y Cultural Israel. Both institutions were the center of the Ashkenazi community during the 1940s.

On May 14, 1945, the Jewish community in Caracas and the rest of the country publicly commemorated the Holocaust. All the Jewish businesses were closed that day and the German Jews who lived in the country went to the Centro Israelita asking that this institution transmit to the Venezuelan authorities that they did not want to be considered Germans anymore.

There are some examples of united actions. On April 30, 1945, the Centro Israelita de Caracas, the Centro Social y Cultural Israel, the Sociedad Israelita de Maracaibo, the Sociedad Israelita de San Cristobal, and the Asociacion Sionista de Venezuela decided to participate in the festivities which were being planned to celebrate Berlin's anticipated surrender. All the Jewish organizations would offer an "*ofrenda floral*" to the Statue of the Liberator Simon Bolivar (Nassi, 1980).

In 1950, both Ashkenazi centers reunited to found the Union Israelita de Caracas (UIC). The priorities that were established were welfare, religious services, culture and education. The



building of the synagogue of the Ashkenazi community was completed in 1961.

Up to now, we have seen the establishment of the two synagogues, as the main institutions of both *kehillot*. Despite occasional cooperation, during this period it was very seldom that they worked together. Parallel to this development, the necessity of each *kehillah* to promote education for its children was always present. It is in this area that the effort of both *kehillot* ultimately culminated in the formation of a unified educational system for the Jewish community. Given the general disunity, the emergence of cooperation in education will be a major focus of Part Four.

### **Structure of the Jewish Community in Venezuela**

This section will focus on Caracas rather than on the Jewish communities in other Venezuelan's cities, because the latter are very small (no more than 5,000 people dispersed in three cities).

The Jewish community of Caracas has been substantially shaped by the Venezuelan environment, but there is also a real continuity in Jewish history and culture which plays a role in shaping organized Jewish life. Jewish communities have traditionally organized their populations into coherent bodies on a constitutional basis (Elazar, 1974). The Venezuelan Jewish community is a very good example of this.

There are four major institutions in the Jewish community in Caracas: 1) Federacion Sionista de Venezuela (FSV), a branch of the World Zionist Federation; 2) B'nai Brith; 3) Asociacion Israelita de Venezuela (AIV), the center of the Sephardi *kehillah*; and 4) Union Israelita de Caracas (UIC), the center of the Ashkenazi *kehillah*. Each of these has many structures to serve their different purposes.

To better understand the decision-making of the Jewish community in Caracas and more specifically in the Jewish school system, it is important to analyze the general values and behavior of the institutions of the Caracas Jewish community. Some of them reflect the Venezuelan political and cultural surroundings and some of them reflect the uniquely Jewish political characteristics held in common with Jews in other places and times.

Venezuela is a democracy. Its government is in the hands of a president and a cabinet of approximately 20 ministers. There are 23 states in the country but they do not have decision-making autonomy. In this respect, they depend on the president and the ministers.

As noted above, in the Venezuelan Jewish community there are four important institutions: the UIC, the AIV, the FSV, and the B'nai Brith. These four institutions are loosely confederated in the Confederacion de Asociaciones Israelitas de Venezuela (CAIV). The president of the CAIV is alternately a member from the AIV for one term and a member from the UIC for the next.

The UIC and the AIV own the only Jewish community school, Colegio Moral y Luces "Herzl Bialik," which has three branches: one in San Bernardino, and the other two in the Hebraica center (elementary and high school). (This will be discussed in more detail in Part Four.) The UIC and the AIV are also the owners of the recreational center, Hebraica. Although the school and Hebraica have their own boards of directors, the major decisions are taken by the UIC and the AIV. Representatives of both *kehillot* belong to Hebraica's and the school's boards. Membership in either one of the *kehillot* is a requirement to become a member of Hebraica or to register a child in the school.

Both the government and the Jewish community institutions have a very centralized system. Typically, their boards avoid conflict and seek consensus which is derived from the Jewish political tradition, but is also very "Venezuelan" (Woocher, 1982).

In Venezuela there are two major political parties: the Social Democratic party, Accion Democratica (AD), which has just won the elections, and the Social Christian party, COPEI. In the thirty years since the installation of the democratic system in Venezuela, these two political parties have ruled the country. Debates between them are only for election purposes. There is the fear that any controversial issue could jeopardize the system.

In 1958, the years of dictatorship ended with a coup d'etat. The three democratic parties — the AD, the COPEI, and the URD — realized that it was necessary to create an agreement in order to protect the democratic system against another dictatorial regime (either from the right or the left). Thus they subscribed

to the Pacto de Punto Fijo, in which the parties recognized some common interests. The main issues were: the commitment for any party that would be in government to allow the others to be represented in the Parliament and in the Executive (to include some ministers from the other parties). In order to avoid any opposition that could jeopardize the system, there was also recognition of the important role of the Church, the military, and private enterprise in the stability of the democracy (Njaim, 1975).

Within this political context, in the Jewish community no issue is allowed to emerge as a matter of public controversy. Perhaps the fear is that this might threaten the unity of the community. Open community conflict, therefore, tends to be limited to unimportant issues, while the major decisions have already been taken by the ruling elite. The community newspaper *Nuevo Mundo Israelita* has a board of editors, whose members belong to the UIC and to the AIV, which is really a board of censorship. Many times they reject articles submitted by individuals because they are "disrespectful" toward a member or an institution of the community.

Most aspects of the typology of the constitutional principles of the Jewish political tradition (Woocher, 1982) are reflected in the organizational life of the Jewish community. They are discussed below.

## **Federalism**

Federalism, defined as "emphasizing the development of contractually defined partnerships based on mutual obligations" (Elazar, 1980, p. 86), is found in almost every institution of the community. The CAIV is the major one. It confederates all the main institutions of the community — the UIC, the AIV, the FSV and B'nai Brith of Venezuela.

The FSV also federates many institutions having the same goal — to represent Israel in Venezuela. Thus some of its institutions are: WIZO, Keren Hayesod, Israel Cancer Association, B'nai Akiva, Hashomer Hatzair, etc. The Board of Jewish Education is formed by the federation of the board of all the branches of the community — the high school, the elementary

school of San Bernardino, and the elementary school of Los Chorros.

The UIC and the AIV have federated themselves with the purpose of working together in areas of mutual interest. Examples include obtaining permission from the government to import kosher products for Passover and the creation of the Vaad Hakehillot for educational purposes. Sitting on the Vaad are the executive members of the UIC, the AIV, and all the former presidents of both institutions.

### **Aristocratic Republicanism**

The Jewish community in Venezuela is governed by what Daniel Elazar has termed a "trusteeship of givers and doers" (Woocher, 1982). Decision-making within most organizations, and especially in the highest levels of policy-making, is the province of a relatively small elite. This elite is generally self-selected on the basis of its members' willingness to participate in communal life. Usually they are wealthy people who have spare time to work for the community. Most of them are business owners or successful professionals and, in most cases, they also are the major financial contributors to Jewish communal causes (the school, the Beit Avot, the Hebraica recreational center). The problem is that this elite has been in power for decades and it is very difficult for a young person with ideas different from those of the establishment to qualify or to become accepted as one of the decision-makers.

### **Mutual Responsibility (*Arevut*)**

This principle implies the acceptance of one's obligations to other Jews and the recognition that our fate as individuals and as a community is tied up with that of other Jews (*brit arevut*). In Venezuela this is clearly expressed through the Soviet Jewry movement. B'nai Brith's Human Rights office is very active in this respect. The members of the other institutions such as the UIC and the AIV, when performing a *bar/bat mitzvah*, often mentioned Soviet children who are not allowed to celebrate such

rites of passage. Although this is not a very active way to participate, at least the principle is recognized by everybody.

### **Jewish Survivalism**

This principle is tied in with the purpose of the Jewish community to ensure physical and spiritual continuity as a people. To ensure this the community has a positive attitude toward Jewish tradition. The community provides for synagogues, cemeteries, kosher food, and other ritual needs. The community also is the owner of the welfare institutions such as the Beit Avot, a community social service which provides health, clothes, housing and even kosher food to people without financial means. This is very important because the economic crisis that is affecting Venezuela is also affecting many Jews.

The most important matter today in the community is Jewish education. People have realized that without Jewish education there is no Jewish continuity. Recently, the community has created a fund for Jewish education (Keren Jinuj), which will be discussed later in detail. There is also an institution of Jewish education for adults, the Instituto Superior de Estudios Judaicos (ISEJ). The ISEJ has the economic support of the UIC, the AIV, B'nai Brith, the FSV, and the CAIV. In 1987, three of the institutions (UIC, AIV, FSV) increased their support of the ISEJ by 300 percent. The CAIV and B'nai Brith also increased their support, but not to such an extent.

To ensure Jewish survival, supporting the State of Israel is also very important. Jews in Venezuela support Israel materially and politically. The community enforces this economic support, requiring dues to Keren Hayesod of any Jews who want to register their child in the Jewish school. Politically, the community protests any attack on Israel in the media. The main institutions doing this are the CAIV and the Department of Human Rights of B'nai Brith. Internally, criticism of Israel is not permitted under any circumstances. One cannot be a member of any board within the institutions of the community while standing in opposition to Israel's policies.

## Separation of Power

The division of power according to Elazar and Cohen's conception of three *ketarim* (*The Jewish Polity*, 1985), which encapsulates the organizational system in which the Jewish polity traditionally distributed authority amongst and between specific governmental instrumentalities, is present in the Jewish community in this way: the *keter malkhut* by the CAIV and the FSV; the *keter kehunah* by the services offered by the synagogues of the UIC and the AIV; and the *keter torah* by the Jewish schools and the ISEJ.

## Part Two: Review of the Literature

There are few things written about the Jewish community in Venezuela. Professor Mario Nassi, who dedicated many years to research about the community, wrote a book about the history of the Ashkenazi *kehillah*, *La Comunidad Ashkenazi de Caracas, breve historia institucional*. There is also a book about the history of the Sephardi *kehillah* by Jacobo Carciente, *Apuntes para la Historia de la Gran Sinagoga Tiferet Israel de Caracas*.

Finally there is a more statistical analysis of the youth in Venezuela, *Investigacion sobre la Juventud Judia de Venezuela*, by Bernardo Kliksberg. The only other publications about the Jewish community in Venezuela are articles in the community newspaper or in magazines about particular issues.

There some articles and books dedicated to the Jews of Coro, who were the first settlers of the community, both by Isidoro Aizemberg, *The 1855 Expulsion of the Curacao Jews from Coro* and *Los intentos de Establecer un cementerio Judio en la Caracas del Siglo XIX*. There is also a book by Isaac Emmanuel about *The Jews of Coro*. All of these analyze the situation from a historical point of view.

There are two papers about the development of the Jewish day school, one about Latin America in general and the other specifically about the day school in Venezuela. Both of these papers served as useful beginning sources of information for the research reported in this study.

"La Educacion Judia en medianas y peguenas comunidades de America Latina," by Efraim Zadoff, is a very good introduction to the study of the Jewish day schools in Latin American countries. It provides the historical background, when the schools were created, the programs of the Jewish education, the source of fiscal support, the composition of the student body and a description of how the schools recruit and train the Jewish studies teachers.

In an unpublished paper, "The Jewish Community Educational Network of Caracas Venezuela," Cheryl Kemper describes the community's educational system as well as the attitudes of some parents, teachers and students about the educational system.

### **Part Three: Theory and Methodology**

This research focused on how the Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews in Venezuela joined together to create the educational system for the Jewish community. This subject is important for a number of reasons. The first is that the status of Jewish education today and how to improve it is crucial to the survival of Judaism in the diaspora. Venezuela's Jewish community, being one of the larger communities in Latin America, bears many similarities to Jewish communities throughout the world. In addition, the issue of education is central to every institution in the Jewish community in Venezuela. Finally, the study of education provides a vehicle for understanding the political process within the Caracas Jewish community.

To ensure continuity, any community has to take into consideration two important functions: defense and education. Jews have been aware of this dual imperative for survival and indeed have traditionally excelled in self-perpetuation through education, at times even more than they have in matters of defense. For over 2,000 years Jews not only developed an elaborate educational system, they devoted their best talents to study, learning and teaching.

Professor Elazar has explained that studying, learning and teaching became primary missions for those Jewish cadres who functioned within the domain of *keter malkhut* (the crown of civil



rule), while they often contested with the bearers of the *keter torah* for power within the community. They saw it as their responsibility to cultivate learning in its own right and to support the people's educational efforts (Elazar, 1984, p.3). The apotheosis of this symbiotic relationship was to be found in the way in which the wealthy leaders of the community sought to marry their daughters to scholars who would ornament their families and who, in turn, could then rely upon a steady source of income to pursue their studying, learning and teaching (Elazar, 1984, p. 3).

The symbiotic nature of this relationship was disrupted when the Jews were forced to give up their corporate autonomy to the demands of the new nation-state, and sought instead the right to enter modern society as individuals. Resistance to their claim to equal rights led to an emphasis on defense against anti-Semitism, one of whose major components was a denial of Jewish difference in an effort to minimize Jewish separatism. This led to a great ambivalence toward Jewish education, to the extent that emphasizing studying, learning and teaching was a mark of Jewish separatism.

The concept of what constituted Jewish education changed. Instead of being part of a life-time preoccupation for every Jew at least in principle, education became strictly a matter of schooling for the young, a means of socialization into the community at a minimal level so that young people would grow up knowing enough about Judaism to participate in the synagogue service and to know enough to feel secure against anti-Semitic charges.

In general, what happened in most of the Jewish communities of the diaspora was a weakening of the importance of Jewish education in the minds of the leadership of the Jewish communities, and a structural change in the organization of Jewish education, which fostered a sharp separation between those who undertook the tasks of Jewish education and the general leadership of the Jewish people. The new demands for Jewish self-defense, first in the struggle for civil rights, then in the fight against anti-Semitism, and finally in the effort to save the Jews and the Jewish people through the Zionist enterprise, demanded a new kind of leadership, skilled in the ways of the world, at home in non-Jewish circles, willing to step outside of traditional

Judaism in their own lives. Such leaders, with few exceptions, were not drawn to Jewish study and regarded learning as a reactionary force which prevented the achievement of their defense goals. This situation was exacerbated by the very fact that the great migration of the Jewish people away from their Old World areas of settlement to new worlds, including the new society being built in Israel, generated new demands on individuals to assure their survival in new places and made it even more difficult for them to devote time to traditional study and learning, even if they wanted to. Thus economic necessities, combined with political aspirations, pushed Jewish education away from the mainstream of Jewish activity (Elazar, 1984).

What was left was a kind of Jewish education for children which, with a few notable exceptions, did not command the serious attention of the community's cosmopolitan leadership. Where it did command their attention, it often did so as an effort to modernize Jews or as a way to help Jews to adapt to their new country, more than to instill Jewishness.

This is the reality all over the world including Venezuela. It is important to note, however, that in the last few years there has been a recognition among the community leaders that education is the key to survival of the Jewish community. The efforts being made in this area will be discussed in Part Four.

Another aspect important to mention is that, according to Elazar, most of the voluntary leadership of the highest caliber is not involved in Jewish education (Elazar, 1984, p. 9). In Venezuela, the leaders of the two *kehillot* are involved in educational politics because both *kehillot* are the owners of the Jewish school. The problem is that the leaders who make the decisions are not always the experts in the issue, while the people who are directly related to Jewish education do not always have great power in the Board of Directors of the *kehillot*.

The study of the educational system is the key to understanding the community for two important reasons. First, the school is the socializer of the community. Around 90 percent of the Jewish children go to the Jewish school — Sephardim, Ashkenazim, poor and wealthy. The second is that almost all of the policies jointly adopted by both *kehillot* relate to education or occasionally to the highly sensitive issue of defense.

This analysis will include the status of Jewish education, especially in Caracas, as well as of education as a means of integration of the Ashkenazi and Sephardi groups. Thus, the goal here will be to analyze all the aspects of this integration, how it began, who promoted it, how decisions are made, and to see if integration, in this case, means efficiency.

The lack of written material made this research quite difficult. Therefore it is based on a compilation of all the available information about the history of the school, and on interviews with the key people who were and are involved in the process of the founding of the school and the development of its ideology, budget, etc. An attempt was made to check the archives of the community and find the documents describing some important decisions, to verify the information obtained through interviews.

## **Part Four: Findings and Conclusions**

### **Introduction: History of Jewish Education in Caracas**

The concern of every Jewish community to offer Jewish education to its youth is ever present throughout the history of our people, and this is also true in the Jewish community of Caracas.

Supplementary Jewish education was established in Caracas at the beginning of the 1940s. In 1941, the Asociacion Israelita de Venezuela hired the services of Rabbi Moises Binia, who within a short period of time took charge of the religious services and began to take care of the Jewish education of youngsters (Nassi, 1983).

According to Samuel Eskenazi: "With the natural enthusiasm of our 10-13 year olds, and while still discussing the incidents of the game finished just a while ago, we go to the upper level (of the Conde Synagogue), to a specially prepared room. Classes begin with the teaching of the Bar Mitzvah ritual. After the practice of the Hebrew reading, the learning of the Sabbath and other holiday prayers and, at the end, as a 'main dish,' the stories of the Bible" (Nassi, 1983).

Like the Sephardi community, the Ashkenazi community had, on some occasions, teachers of Hebrew and Judaism like Mr. Vainberg and Mr. Chanales. After 1942, Chanales undertook the first steps to create a Jewish school, which had, in principle the features of a supplementary school (Talmud Torah) and in time became an overall (all-day) school, the Moral y Luces Herzl-Bialik School.

In 1946, despite the opposition of some sectors of the community, this school was established with the sponsorship of some members of the Centro Social y Cultural Israel (Ashkenazi *kehillah*). That year, three members of the Ashkenazi *kehillah*, M. Steinmetz, General Secretary of the Centro Social y Cultural Israel, Jaime Zighelboim, and Eduardo Sonnenschein, went to New York to ask David Gross to be principal of the new school. "Upon his arrival in Caracas, Dr. Gross realized that there was indeed a fertile field before him. The country was prosperous, the Jews were good people and they had positive intentions toward both general and Jewish education. Nevertheless, there was no consensus as to the nature of the desired education. Every household and every communal official wanted to provide his children with the best, according to his own recollection and achievements under changing conditions" (Kodesh, 1983). After some time, it was decided that the school would be of a pluralistic character, emphasizing Jewish national elements.

The school began with a kindergarten and six primary grades. Some grades were combined because of the small number of children. There was also a lack of teaching personnel, especially in the Hebrew department. The economic difficulties were enormous, but despite all this, "we succeeded to enlarge the number of pupils in the first year of the school's existence to eighty children" (Gross, 1967).

David Gross recalled that the mere task of convincing the parents of the community to enroll their children in the Moral y Luces Herzl Bialik School was in itself a titanic effort. Many parents, distrustful of the success of this new school, did not want to enroll their children and preferred institutions of solid prestige. Few were the parents who endorsed this initiative (Nassi, 1977), though included among the school's earliest backers were: Mr. Freilich, W. Chentchowsky, N. Glijansky, Mr. Caplivsky, Mr. Meiler, Mr. Lubowsky, and Salomon Zimet.

The unification of both Ashkenazi centers, the Sociedad Israelita Ashkenazit and the Centro Social y Cultural Israel, took place in 1950 in the Union Israelita de Caracas. In 1951, among its earliest decisions, the UIC accepted the responsibility of managing the school.

In 1949, the secondary school began to function with a few grades, and the process was completed in 1956 with the first group of graduates. Since its creation the school was geared towards the goal of gathering the highest possible number of Jewish children residing in Caracas, including those of parents who could not afford to pay tuition. From the beginning, the UIC (Ashkenazi *kehillah*) sponsored scholarships to any students whose parents could not afford to pay the tuition. Thus it became a driving force of community cohesion, in as much as its pluralistic educational philosophy allowed for the fulfillment of the wishes and expectations of the majority of families belonging to both *kehillot* (Nuevo Mundo Israelita, 1984).

In 1952, there were 630 students in the school with 22 classrooms and 7 school buses. In 1959, there were 930 students. Today there are more than 2,000 students altogether (kindergarten, primary and high school). The school building was becoming too small for the number of children. The community built two other branches, one in 1959 and the other in 1963.

It was only in the 1960s that the Sephardi community began to participate substantially in the community-wide educational effort. In 1966, the AIV and the UIC decided to collect funds jointly for the construction of new facilities and the purchase of a site for the construction of the community center. In 1967 they purchased the land for the future new elementary school, the high school and the Hebraica social and sports center.

In 1973, two new committees were established to collect money to finish the building of the school and to give scholarships to members who could not afford to pay the school fee. These were the CEPEC (Comite Economico para la Educacion Comunitaria) and the CEPECREDITO.

The joint participation was finally consolidated on September 10, 1984, with the signing of an institutional agreement between the UIC and the AIV. This agreement established, among other things, equal participation regarding educational policy and expenses, with shared duties and rights, in the

directing of community education. The joint governing body representing the *kehillot* is called the *Comite Pedagógico*.

At the same time, both *kehillot* also created the *Consejo Comunal Unificado* (*Vaad Hakehillot*) with the purpose of working together in other areas of mutual interest. This *Vaad Hakehillot* is represented by the Executive Committee of the *UIC* and the Executive Committee of the *AIV*. Thus we see that the ideal of Jewish education led to both *kehillot* working together for the improvement of their institutions and the future of their children.

Besides the Jewish community schools in Caracas, there are other private Jewish day schools: the Rambam School, founded in the 1970s, which had at that time, a body of 500 pupils, but will be closing soon because of economic problems; and the Sinai School, founded in the 1980s, which provides religious (Orthodox) education at pre-school and primary levels. There is also a *yeshiva kindergarten*.

## Structure and Legal Status

The educational network of the community is made up of three day schools (two pre-school and primary level schools and one high school) providing overall education in both general and Jewish education, which guides the child academically from early childhood until his/her high school graduation.

From a legal point of view these schools are defined as private schools, recognized (and supervised) by governmental authorities (the Venezuelan Ministry of Education). They provide programs similar to the national education network, together with Jewish education programs. Besides the department of general studies, the school has total autonomy, especially in relation to the Jewish studies curriculum (Kemper, 1987).

Jewish schools in Latin America are legally defined as private schools. Their legal situation is the same as that of the religious private schools such as Catholic schools, those of cultural-national character, i.e., English, German, or other ethnical-linguistic-based schools, and other types of private schools (Zadoff, 1985).

In general, the goals pursued by the Caracas Jewish schools are:

1. To transmit to the young the culture, the traditions, values and customs of Judaism with the final intention of securing their continuity and shaping them into Jewish citizens capable of taking part themselves in Venezuelan society (School Regulations, ch. 1).
2. To absorb the highest possible number of children into the educational system (*Nuevo Mundo Israelita*, 1984).
3. To provide a high quality education (Cohen, 1984).
4. To provide overall Jewish education of a pluralistic nature, optimizing all the aspects making up Jewish identity, language (Hebrew), religion, tradition, Zionism, etc. (Benarroch, 1986). (In the community context, an "education of pluralistic nature" is understood as that which allows for admittance of children with different economic and social backgrounds into the system and at the curricular level, includes all the existing trends in Judaism [Kemper, 1987].)

The schools are also the means to reinforce the development of good Jewish-Venezuelan citizens. In this area some of the Herzl Bialik School's goals are as follows: to ensure the integration of the Venezuelan and Jewish cultures in its students; to instill an appropriate perspective on the traditions of Jewish and Venezuelan customs; to strengthen their love for Venezuela and promote and respect the cultural and religious identity of its students with the ancestral-modern inheritance of Judaism" (School Regulations, 1986).

Thus the community leadership regards the school system as a place for the greatest number of Jewish children to receive a general and Jewish education of the highest quality. It is also clear from the curriculum that the leaders hope that Jewish education will be the means to attain the goal of continuity of Venezuelan Jewry.

## Administration of the Schools

From the administrative point of view, all schools belong equally to the Ashkenazi and Sephardi *kehillot* in equal proportions. Their management and budget are decided by the del-



legates and representatives of both *kehillot* in the Pedagogical Committee.

The financial resources for schools are obtained from two main sources: local and foreign (the former being the larger of the two). Local sources include tuition paid by parents or representatives of the pupils (Zadoff, 1985), subsidies given from the UIC and the AIV (Nassi, 1985), and donations made through the CEPEC (Economic Committee for Community Education) and/or through the SOPRE (Parents Associations) of the various schools (Nassi, 1985).

The main foreign source is the World Zionist Organization (Education and Culture Department, Religious Education Department). This help is both direct and indirect, including funds for new buildings as, for instance, in the case of the Herzl Bialik High School of Caracas during the late 1970s. It also includes the sending of educational emissaries from Israel, the organization of teachers' training courses, provision of complementary study programs and materials, and preparation of special programs for youth (in Israel) (Zadoff, 1985).

## **Facilities**

The educational community network has three facilities. One is located in the San Bernardino neighborhood (the northern central zone of the city). It was built in the 1950s and at present includes the Cologio Moral y Luces Herzl Bialik, with primary and pre-school levels, the latter being located in a separate wing that was built in the 1960s (Kemper, 1987). It has approximately 400 students. The second building is located in the northeast section of the city, the Los Chorros neighborhood. Built at the beginning of the 1970s, it is utilized at present for the Moral y Luces, Hebraica, pre-school, kindergarten and elementary school. It has approximately 600 students. The third one, inaugurated in September 1984, is the Moral y Luces Herzl Bialik High School, which until 1984 was part of the building located in San Bernardino (Kemper, 1987). It has around 850 students. The latter two buildings are located next to the Hebraica club.

All these facilities were especially built for their specific educational goals. Each of them has a cafeteria and dining rooms (where inexpensive kosher food is served), a library, an auditorium, laboratories, infirmary, arts and crafts workroom, computer rooms, and synagogue. There are also areas for sports and recreation activities annexed to these buildings.

The educational network also controls a small fleet of buses owned by the drivers (around 30) that daily transport the students to and from the schools to every part of the city (Kemper, 1987).

### **Study Programs**

The general studies curriculum is determined and recognized by the Venezuelan Ministry of Education. It includes, in general terms, the following subject areas: a) pre-school and elementary level: language, math, natural sciences, social sciences, physical education, and arts and crafts (including music). b) high school level: language and literature, math, biology, geography (world and local), civics, physics, chemistry, English, art history (in the humanities area, French and Latin are also taught) (Kemper, 1987).

The Jewish studies program is based on the educational policies of the community and does not have the recognition of the Venezuelan Education Minister (Zadoff, 1985). This program includes the following areas for the pre- and elementary school as well as for the high school: Bible, Hebrew (language and literature), history of the Jewish people (in Spanish), prayer, traditions and holidays, and Israel. These subjects are taught in Hebrew 8-12 hours weekly (students spend a weekly average of 36 hours at school) (Kemper, 1987).

This program is supplemented by extracurricular activities such as the celebration of religious and national holidays, raising the Israeli flag and singing the anthem in every school ceremony, and the organization of folk dance circles and Hebrew and Israeli music classes within the school schedule (Kemper, 1987).

## **The Educational System**

Technically speaking, the educational system belongs to the community; that is, the community determines the educational objectives and the means to reach them.

*The Schools.* Every school in the system is autonomous vis-à-vis the Education Ministry and conducts its administration internally. However, efforts are being made at centralizing some administrative aspects such as purchase of supplies, billing, etc. (Hariton, 1989). In principle, the curriculum of the three units is the same. However, in practice, there are some variations (both in general and Jewish studies) as to the manner in which the programs are implemented, according to the approach of the principal and teachers in charge of each unit.

*The Educational Committees* (Comision de Educacion). To supervise its activities, each school has a committee where the UIC and the AIV are represented. According to Anita Lapco (Principal of Hebraica-Liceo), the role of this committee is on the "micro" level: "to back up the school in its daily activities and to take the initiative for the improvement of the school" (Lapco, 1989). According to the statutes of both the UIC and the AIV, this committee is entrusted with the direction and supervision of educational activities and with preparing, together with the Committee of Finance, the budget of income and expenses for every school (Art. 33, Statutes, UIC, Art. 35, AIV).

To belong to any of these committees, a person has to be a member of either the UIC or the AIV. If the spouse of a member wants to belong to any of the committees in the *kehillah*, he/she has to register separately and also pay full membership dues, even though through a proposed amendment to the statutes this should no longer be necessary. It is also necessary to collect thirty signatures of the members of the same *kehillah* (Ashkenazi or Sephardi) to back one's candidacy. Also the person cannot work in any of the schools because "one cannot participate in the decision-making process and be affected by those decisions at the same time" (Landau, 1989).

The members of the Education Committee for each school include representatives of the UIC, the AIV, the principal of the school, and the president of the SOPRE (the institution representing the parents of that school). The UIC and the AIV are

elected by vote to the Board of Directors every three years. The decisions in this committee are made by consensus.

*The Finance Committee* (Comision de Finanzas). This committee's activities are parallel to those of the Education Committee. Four members represent each *kehillah* in this committee. The chairmanship alternates between them every four years. The same holds true for the Education Committee. Its functions include preparing and submitting to the Board of Directors the budget of income and expenses for every fiscal year in agreement with the Education Committee (Art. 31, Statutes, UIC, Art. 36, AIV).

The task of the Finance Committee at the "macro" level, is to prepare the budget of the overall system. At the "micro" level, the UIC and the AIV designate representatives to every educational unit to address the daily financial needs of each school. Major decisions for the system in general are discussed and made up at the committee level (Hariton, 1989).

According to Hariton, the emissaries from Israel take a large part of the schools' budgets. Presently there are eight people who earn fourteen percent of the budget for teachers' salaries. The idea is to instruct local people in the Hebrew language and in Torah in order to avoid the need to bring so many emissaries. The problem is that very few people in Venezuela want to be involved in Jewish education, due to its low status and salary (Hariton, 1989).

*The SOPRE*. The other body which is very close to the everyday activities of the school is the SOPRE (Sociedad de Padres y Representantes) — the society of parents (similar to the American PTA, but without the teachers). According to the Ministry of Education in Venezuela, this society is the only representative of the educational system permitted to submit demands or to criticize any aspect of the school functioning. However, given the specific features of this school system, (owned by the Ashkenazi and Sephardi *kehillah*), this does not occur in reality.

The members of the board of the society are elected annually by the parents during an assembly held in every school. Usually there are not too many candidates. However, a small group of women decided to dedicate their time to work for the school.

Only a few years ago, parent associations did not participate in the activities of the Education and Finance Committees. One of the SOPRE's important achievements is that currently it can be represented at the meetings of both committees (Waich, 1989). However, this participation is limited and conditioned to the attendance of the president (no deputies are allowed) "because of distrust as to who will be sent" (Israel, 1988).

In a recent forum, "Education: Mothers Speak Up", organized by the community newspaper *Nuevo Mundo Israelita*, the representatives of the three SOPREs complained that this system obstructed the work that could be done by the parents. Some of the criticisms were that the educational system is becoming extremely bureaucratic — "too many people working in the system and too many committees where problems are discussed. The least taken into account by the system is the SOPRE, which is really closest to the children and daily situations" (Israel, 1988). They also questioned the kind of Jewish education the children receive: what does it mean for Jewish education to be pluralistic? They commented on the lack of communication between the parents and the bodies involved in the educational system: "When you address the principals of the schools, they usually convey the idea that decisions are really made at the level of the Pedagogic Committee; here, in turn, answers are not always clear and straightforward. The fact that the owners of the schools are the UIC and the AIV, is often given as an excuse to sidetrack concrete answers and delay actions" (Vaisberg, 1988).

*The Pedagogic Committee* (Comision Pedagogica). In September 1984, the UIC and the AIV signed an institutional agreement formally committing them both to share responsibility in the educational area. The agreement included the creation of a regulating body for Jewish education in the community, the *Comite Pedagogico*. Both the UIC and the AIV were to have equal representation on this committee. The first coordinator would be a representative of the UIC (Institutional Agreement, 1984). According to Joyce Landau, present coordinator and also the first one, "they were working informally before the creation of the committee" (Landau, 1989).

In practice, the Pedagogic Committee took over the role of the Education Commission. This committee prepares the budget for the schools and submits it to the Finance Committee and

“represents the macro-level work; to define the general philosophy of Jewish and general education in the community” (Landau, 1989). Probably this overlapping of roles occurred because in practice the only two people who have been representatives at the Pedagogic Committee since its creation were also appointed to the Education Commission: Jaime Cohen (AIV) and Joyce Landau (UIC). The members of the Education Commission and the Pedagogic Committee in the UIC are the same people. This is not the case of the members from the AIV. There is no special reason for that difference, except that every *kehillah* did what seemed logical to it (Lapco, 1989).

According to the Annual Report of the Education Commission of the UIC, March 27, 1989, “the goals of the Pedagogic Committee are to evaluate, analyse, propose and implement the educational policy of the community” (Annual Report, 1989, p. 3).

There is a difference of approach about the role of the Education Committee. According to the statutes of the UIC and AIV, the Education Committees should be entrusted with the educational policy of the community, but according to the internal regulations of the Pedagogic Committee, the Education Committees “will supervise the implementation of the objectives and agreements of the Pedagogic Committee in each of the educational institutions. To this end, they will become acquainted with matters pertaining to routine functioning of said institutions, and decide over them jointly with school officials” (Regulations of the Pedagogic Committee, Art. 17).

These regulations also refer to the role of the Finance Committee. Its members are appointed by the Board of Directors of the UIC and the AIV and “it will be in charge of all matters related to financial aspects of education management” (Regulations of the Pedagogic Committee, Art. 20).

In practice, the Pedagogic Committee sets forth the general guidelines in educational policies and the Education Committee supervises the daily activities in the three educational units. The Finance Committee may or may not approve the budget submitted by the Pedagogic Committee.

There are other autonomous institutions functioning beside this structure who indirectly cover some of the costs of education in order to alleviate part of the burden of the parents. These

institutions are: the CEPEC, the CEPECREDITO, the Scholarship Foundation and Keren Jinuj.

CEPEC (Comision Economica para la Educacion Comunitaria) and CEPECREDITO. These institutions were created in 1973, at the time the elementary school was moved from a small building to the new buildings of Hebraica and the building of Hebraica High School was started. The CEPEC was created to collect money to complete the school buildings. The CEPECREDITOS was created to give educational loans to those who could not afford to pay for their education, either entirely or in part. To register a child in one of the educational units, a contribution to the CEPEC is mandatory. CEPEC covers part of the items of the budget of the Finance Committee and all the building debts owed by Hebraica Sociedad Civil (the recreational center).

*Fundacion de Becas "Herzl Bialik"* (Scholarship Foundation). This institution was created in 1987 by a group of former students on the twentieth anniversary of their high school graduation. Scholarships are given only to those high school students having a high average in both general and Jewish studies. It works in consultation with the Finance Committee and also covers part of the budget of Jewish education for those who cannot afford to pay for their education.

*Keren Jinuj*. This institution was created in 1987 to improve and seek excellence in general and Jewish education in the Jewish community (*Nuevo Mundo Israelita*, 1988). The idea was to collect \$18,000 from each one of the members and to use only the interest from the money. There are 38 members and the goal is to have 200 people. Their contribution consists in paying for extra items to improve education which are not included in the ordinary budget. They are in close contact with the Pedagogic Committee and, at present, are paying for language, math and science consultants for the elementary schools, courses on values for the members of the Department of Student Welfare in the three units, the production of math and language textbooks for the Hebraica Elementary School, courses to improve communication, educational materials for social studies, part of the expenses of two emissaries from Israel for the high school, special benefits for specialized staff, and the creation of a yearly award to recognize good teachers (Pedagogic Committee, Annual Report, 1989).



*The UIC and the AIV.* These are the owners of the educational system and they supervise education through their representatives in the Finance and the Education Committees. The most important issue that is affecting the community is a sizeable deficit in the education budget. This deficit consists of debts to Hebraica due to the construction of the school buildings, the need to create a fund to cover benefits to teachers and people working for the educational system, and the need to supply the schools with all the necessary educational tools (laboratories, etc.) (Sultan, 1989).

To face this crisis both *kehillot* asked their members to pay an extraordinary contribution of Bs. 30,000 per family. The idea was rejected by the members of the AIV, because its statutes are very democratic and they have to submit any major decision to an open assembly with all their members. In this assembly the decision was rejected. The UIC did not submit this idea to its members, but it was approved by the members of the Board of Directors.

After the decision of the AIV, there was a meeting with the Vaad Hakehillot (the executive board of both *kehillot*) which invited the members of the Board of Directors of Hebraica, the recreational center, because the issue was also their concern. That meeting decided on a campaign to collect voluntary contributions, with each *kehillah* covering half of the money needed. If the campaign does not succeed, the extraordinary fee will have to be paid by their members. In an interview in the community newspaper *Nuevo Mundo Israelita*, the presidents of both the UIC and the AIV agreed that "there is only one Jewish community in Venezuela, organized through two institutions, the UIC and the AIV" (*Nuevo Mundo Israelita*, May, 1989).

After recent elections in the UIC, the new president did not agree with the idea about "the need to make an extraordinary fee compulsory if the campaign is not successful to cover the deficit. No member should be forced to pay. In our community, we should see to it, as consistent with Jewish ethics, that those who have greater means cover the needs, while those who do not have enough should not be obliged to contribute beyond their means" (Ostfeld, May, 1989).

For Mr. Ostfeld, the next president of the UIC, Jewish education is very important. "We should look for every child and see to it that he studies in our school" (Ostfeld, 1989). This means that the community will absorb part of the costs of education in the schools. For the president of the AIV, M. Benarroch, the entire cost of education must be covered by the parents through the payment of monthly tuition. If a family cannot afford the payment, it can ask for a loan or scholarship for its children. The problem is that this is a small community where everybody knows everybody else and people are reluctant to ask for help because they are embarrassed (Hariton, 1989). Yet Venezuela is undergoing a period of economic recession and many people in the community have been adversely affected, especially young professional couples. If the AIV's president prevails, the cost of education will be directly transferred to parents and many people will be forced to ask for economic help in the different institutions such as the CEPECREDITO or the Fundacion de Becas "Herzl-Bialik," or they may take their children out of the educational system. Also there is a clear need to review the system and to cut back some of the items in order to keep the overall budget from increasing significantly.

The Jewish community in Venezuela is very young, and many things are taking place right now that need to be considered; there are many changes within the community and also in the surrounding environment (the country). Time and experience will bring some answers to this community, fighting for an ideal of integration and survival at a time when it is difficult for Judaism in general.

## **Discussions and Directions for Future Research**

The efforts towards integration between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim which started through the educational system in the Jewish community in Venezuela have been quite fruitful. Every *kehillah* was already well organized when this integration started. There was a need for cemeteries to bury the Jewish dead. Social welfare agencies were needed to provide services that the Catholic poor obtained from their parish churches. Schools were needed to transmit Jewish tradition and to provide basic educa-

tion free of Catholic dogma. From the beginning, both *kehillot* worked to obtain all these services for their membership separately. Education, always a Jewish value, was the unifying factor of the Jewish community in Venezuela. Both *kehillot* got together to work for the improvement of the Jewish education of their children. In general, the Jewish community in Venezuela is very centralist; there is no way to have any service without being a member of the Jewish community. The community is held together by its educational system and by its relations with Israel.

Integration was possible because those who took the first steps to make it possible were mainly secularists and therefore the secular side of Jewish life was emphasized. Education was an important issue. The Ashkenazim were the first to realize the importance of Jewish education for a community in the diaspora. Every effort was made to create a Jewish school which encouraged a philosophy of Jewish pluralism advocating the concept of *klal Israel* (the community of Israel) and promoting dialogue and an exchange of ideas. It was almost twenty years after the creation of the school that the Sephardi community realized the importance of being involved in Jewish education. Since the Sephardim committed themselves to share the responsibility for Jewish education in the community, the "partnership" has proven to be a clever decision. There are, of course, differences in approach to some issues, such as how to make up the deficit of education, but in general, the goal is to work together and to find the best solutions for the educational system and for the overall community.

Today the Jewish community in Caracas is proud to have one recreational center, Hebraica, for all the members of the community and an educational system with around 2,000 students belonging to all socio-economic levels. The goal is to give a Jewish education to all Jewish children.

In theory, the decision-making process of the educational system involves both *kehillot*; however, in practice, it is not very efficient. There are communication and information difficulties among the institutions and the three school units. The people who work in the different committees do so on a voluntary basis. They do not have direct contact with the reality of the school, but only receive the information from the principals of each school. This could be improved by letting people who work in the

schools attend the meetings of the Education Committees and the Finance Committee, but according to the community leaders one cannot participate in the decision-making process and be affected by those decisions at the same time. Thus many times the major decisions are not taken by the experts on the issue, but by leaders who work very hard but do not have all the necessary information on a particular issue.

Another aspect is that, within both the political and educational context, no issue is allowed to emerge as a matter of public controversy. There is the fear that this might threaten the unity of the community. Because education is a very sensitive issue, it seems that those people who have been involved in education and have contributed their time and efforts do not want to be criticized and do not differentiate between constructive and negative criticism. This could be one of the reasons why the president of the SOPRE is the only person from that body who is allowed to come to the meetings of the different committees involved in education.

In 1989 a young teacher of "Yo y mi Judaismo" (a program that encourages discussion of current problems of Judaism — politics, identity, community problems — taught in the last year of high school) tried to organize a forum about Jewish education and invited people who are very critical of the way the school system is conducted, but who have also contributed a great deal to Jewish education. The principal of the school and the chairperson of the Pedagogic Committee did not allow it, arguing that "the school is not the appropriate place to criticize the system." A few months later, a letter written by the young teacher explaining what had happened was published in the community newspaper, *Nuevo Mundo Israelita*. The next day he was fired.

Parents feel that they are not being taken into consideration in the decision-making process. This caused many to turn away from the system or simply send their children to the school without getting involved, because they feel the system will ignore their ideas or feelings anyway, if they differ from what is being implemented.

Another problem is that the community is not always capable of recruiting voluntary and professional leadership with the highest qualifications to become involved in Jewish educa-

tion. There are very few people who choose Jewish education as a career. There is little prestige in doing so, and the salary and status of a Hebrew or Tanach teacher is low. At the voluntary level, in the Education or Pedagogic Committees, there are also very few people involved in education who participate in those meetings. Some of the reasons were mentioned before — the people affected by the decisions cannot be the same as those who make the decisions. Other reasons that are commonly heard are that there are people who are afraid to get into the committees, because “the system is so closed that it does not accept any criticism or ideas for change from new people.”

Jewish education must be the concern of voluntary leaders who believe that Jewish study, learning and teaching are important for all Jews, not only for the children. Jewish education is not a matter of minimal socialization or acquisition of synagogue skills, however important both are, but is a major function of being Jewish. In the last few years there has been a notable rediscovery of Jewish leadership concerning Jewish education and its importance for Jewish survival. Now it seems necessary to attract young people to community activities in general, to make the system attractive, and to clearly develop the *Dor Hahemshej* the next generation in the Jewish community in Venezuela. It would be healthy for Jewish educators to become involved in the community at large in order to understand its problems. This requires Jewish educators not to be confined to any specific *keter* in their orientation, such as the *keter torah*, but to be able to have a role in the Jewish communal leadership, the *keter malkhut*.

Finally, it is important to mention that, although the Jewish community in Venezuela is of medium size, its history is very rich and it seems a good place for research in many areas. These could include historical and political points of interest and testimonies of Holocaust survivors.

The issues that were studied in this thesis could be a first approach to a more comprehensive research about many things such as Jewish education in medium-sized communities, structure of power, the future of the Jewish community in Venezuela and the way to improve its community education, new Sephardi immigration that is changing the 50-50 percent relationship between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, interest in increasing the

religious aspect of education, the economic crisis in the country which is affecting the Jewish community as well, differences in the socio-economic status of the community members and is the present educational system the best suited to cope with the differences and changes?

## **Appendix**

The following is a list of the questions asked for the purpose of this research.

### *Founding of the School*

1. What were the motivations for the creation of the school?
2. Which sectors, institutions, people backed the creation of the school? Which sectors were indifferent or did not approve of it?
3. Who helped to finance the school?
4. Who were the first students — Ashkenazim, Sephardim, wealthy or poor families?
5. What was the philosophy of the school — religious, Zionist or pluralist?
6. What were the problems the school faced at that time and how were they solved — creation of a special commission, vote, individual decisions?

### *Structure of the Institutions as They Related to the Educational System*

This question was addressed differently to every person interviewed according to his/her institutional background or membership.

1. Why was this institution created?
2. How is it organized?
3. Who are the members of the institution — Ashkenazim or Sephardim or both? How are they chosen — by election? Who votes? How long do office holders remain in office?
4. Which leaders are volunteers and which are professionals?
5. Which are the goals of your institution?
6. Which are the problems that most affect your institution and how are they solved — vote, commission, individual decisions?
7. How is your institution related to the others which are also involved in the educational system?

8. How is your institution financed — voluntary contributions, taxes, paying for activities?

*Conflict and Consensus*

1. What are the main problems affecting the community's educational system?
2. What is the main problem affecting your institution?
3. How could these problems be solved?
4. Who are the leaders that have power in this field? Why are they the leaders?

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#### *Interviews*

Professor Anita Lapco, principal of Hebraica High School.

Mrs. Joyce Landau, chairperson of the Pedagogic Committee.

Mrs. Lisbeth Waich, former president of SOPRE, Hebraica Elementary School.

Mr. Sadi Sultan, former chairperson of the Finance Committee of the AIV.

**Mr. Martin Hariton**, chairperson of the Finance Committee.

**Mrs. Monica Vaisberg**, chairperson of SOPRE Moral y Lucas, San Bernardino.