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## Early Zionist Activities Among Sephardim in Argentina

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The beginnings of organized Zionism in Argentina followed closely upon the arrival of news about the First Zionist Congress in Basel. On August 12, 1897, a few Jews in Buenos Aires gathered to found a *Hovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion) group. During the following two decades several small Zionist societies functioned in Buenos Aires, in the cities of the interior, and in the agricultural colonies of the Jewish Colonization Association. Though the Zionist movement in the country remained limited during those first twenty years, it served as the basis for more extensive activities in the decades to come. A Labor Zionist (*Poale Zion*) Society was established in the capital as early as 1906. Finally, in 1913, after a hard-fought battle between two rival Zionist groups in Buenos Aires for recognition by the Zionist headquarters in Europe, the *Federación Sionista Argentina* (FSA) was founded.<sup>1</sup>

A period of fundamental Zionist growth in Argentina was inaugurated in 1917. In March of that year Dr. Baer Epstein, a Zionist envoy, arrived from the United States, and he spent two years organizing Zionist work in the country. The Balfour Declaration of November 1917, moreover, bolstered the hopes of Zionist leaders, brought many more Jews into the various Zionist societies, and gave new impetus to the practical work. In addition, the formation of a Jewish Legion to fight on the side of the British in Palestine during World War I generated further enthusiasm, which was fed by the numerous public ceremonies in Buenos Aires to bid farewell to the fifty volunteers who left for the battlefield.

During the next thirteen years, up to 1930, the various Zionist circles operating in Argentina began to have a degree of influence on some of the country's Jews. By 1930, although many sectors of Argentinian Jewry remained apathetic to the Zionist idea, the movement had successfully recruited important members of the Sephardic communities and of the West European *Congregación Israelita* as well as a

number of Jews who were prominent in Argentinian political and cultural life.

The main role was played by the *Federación Sionista Argentina*, which represented the World Zionist Organization. The *Federación* was responsible for campaigns on behalf of the Jewish National Fund and *Keren Hayesod*, as well as for promoting an educational program to instill Zionist values among Jews. The Labor Zionist parties became increasingly prominent during this period. *Zeire Zion* and *Hitachdut* started the *Hechalutz* movement, which promoted the migration of some groups of young idealists to Palestine. *Poale Zion* was weakened after its division in 1922, but by 1930 the right wing of the party was gathering strength. Upon the unification of *Poale Zion* and *Zeire Zion* in 1932, they initiated a period of intense activity in Argentina.

### *The Sephardic Response to Zionism*

Even after the Balfour Declaration and through the 1920's, Zionist activities in Argentina were concentrated among the country's Ashkenazim. Some of the immigrants from Eastern Europe had come in touch with *Hovevei Zion* groups in their towns and cities of origin, and others had developed a warmth toward Jewish national aspirations through the various organs of propaganda, especially the Yiddish press, and through the many Zionist political and cultural associations. The Sephardic groups in Argentina, on the other hand, remained at best lukewarm to Zionist aspirations for many years after the Balfour Declaration. The present paper, which supplements my work on Zionist activities in Argentina from the Balfour Declaration to 1930, deals with the reactions the Jewish national revival aroused among the country's different Sephardic groups.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Moisés Cadoche, a lawyer and president of the Zionist society *Bene Kedem* of Argentina, declared in an interview in London, in March 1928, that "Zionist activity among the Sephardim of my country" dated back only to the end of 1926, "the first time that a delegate came to bring the Zionist message to the Sephardim of South America in a language they could understand." According to Cadoche, the main reason that the newly founded *Bene Kedem* did not join the *Federación Sionista Argentina* was because "we do not understand each other. We do not understand Yiddish, and their [Ashkenazic] Hebrew

pronunciation is strange to us. We respect the work they are doing, but in order to arouse our own people, we must speak to them in a way they understand.”<sup>3</sup> Though differences with Ashkenazim were a natural barrier for Sephardim, there were internal factors within the Sephardic communities that prompted their reticence vis-à-vis Zionist work. We shall touch upon these factors later on in this paper.

Cadoche was referring to Dr. Ariel Bension’s tour of Latin America during the latter part of 1926 and the beginning of 1927. Bension’s visit was the answer of the World Zionist Organization to the need to involve the growing Sephardic communities around the world in Zionist endeavors. Bension was mainly concerned with Argentina, where a considerable Sephardic population had settled. Before his visit several Sephardic groups in Buenos Aires had initiated Zionist activities, but little had been accomplished.

The first Sephardim to settle in Argentina came from North Africa, especially Morocco. By 1880 several Moroccan Jews were living in Buenos Aires, and more arrived later. By the turn of the century a few of them had achieved financial stability and even wealth.<sup>4</sup> Thus, not surprisingly, the emerging Zionist leadership tried to involve them in national work. At the initiative of “Liga Dr. Herzl,” an early Zionist society, founded in Buenos Aires in 1899, an Argentine Zionist Congress was convened. Meeting in Buenos Aires, on April 16–18, 1904, and attended by delegates from Jewish societies in the capital, as well as from the cities in the interior and the Jewish agricultural settlements, the Congress sought means of bolstering the propagation of Zionist ideals among the Jewish population of the country. Two of the sponsoring societies belonged to the Moroccan community: Congregación Israelita Latina, the oldest Sephardic synagogue in Argentina, founded in 1891, and Hebra Gemilut Hassadim, a burial and charitable society.<sup>5</sup> In practical terms the role of the Moroccan Jews at the Congress was minor when compared to that of the Ashkenazic Jews. Nonetheless, some of the Moroccans were appointed to positions of leadership, doubtless with the intent of ensuring their support for Zionist ideals. Thus Isaac Benzaquén was appointed vice-president of the Congress, and Abraham Benchetrit was a member of the committee.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the Congress, a *Federación Sionista Argentina* (not to be confused with the Federation of the same name founded in 1913)

came into being. Two prominent leaders of Congregación Israelita Latina, Mair Cohen, its president, and Yona Miguères, a past secretary, were elected vice-president and secretary, respectively, of the Federación Sionista Argentina.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in line with a recommendation by the Argentine Zionist Congress, a biweekly Zionist magazine in Spanish was created in order to reach those Jews who did not understand Yiddish, especially the Sephardim. Isaac Bentata, an active leader of the Moroccan Jews, helped in the editing of *El Sionista* during its early stages.<sup>8</sup>

Two years later, in 1906, Adolfo Crenovich of the Federación Sionista Argentina reiterated in a letter to the Zionist Action Committee in Cologne, Germany, that the two Moroccan synagogues in Buenos Aires, Congregación Israelita Latina and Ez Hayim, continued to sympathize with Zionism.<sup>9</sup> In March 1907, in a long report to Cologne describing the overall Jewish situation in Argentina, the country's Zionist leaders mentioned the formation of two small Zionist groups by Moroccan Jews in the interior, one in Villa Mercedes, Province of San Luis, and the other in Margarita, Province of Santa Fe. However, toward the end of the report, the correspondents asserted that among the Spanish (i.e., Moroccan) Jews, "some are religious fanatics, who see in Zionism a blasphemy of the Messianic idea."<sup>10</sup> This last statement clearly reflects the existence among Moroccan Jews of a strong religious undercurrent militating against the adoption of a positive political posture with regard to Jewish national goals. This attitude would appear even more strongly among the Ladino-speaking Jews from the Balkans and the Arabic-speaking Jews from Syria (both Aleppo and Damascus) who settled in Argentina in much larger numbers than their Moroccan brethren around the turn of the century and thereafter.

The impact of the Balfour Declaration, however, was reflected positively at the Congregación Israelita Latina. A few days before the celebration of the first anniversary of the Declaration, the congregational board resolved "to adhere to the celebrations programmed for next November 2 [1918], by buying a box for the performance that FSA is sponsoring at the Opera Theater; participating in the public manifestation on Nov. 3; celebrating a special ceremony during the morning services of Saturday, Nov. 2; sending circular letters to all members to adhere to the celebrations by closing their businesses and displaying

flags in front of their houses.”<sup>11</sup>

The Moroccan community, however, remained cool to the Jewish national aspirations. Some sparks of activity were evinced during Herzl's lifetime but subsided shortly after his death. Again, at the moment of Jewish pride and renewed hopes in Zion as a consequence of the Balfour Declaration, support was given to the efforts of the Federación Sionista Argentina, but when the enthusiasm gave way to more realistic analyses in the political sphere, support of the national cause also decreased. During the Keren Hayesod campaign of 1924, the FSA sent a long letter to Congregación Israelita Latina asking for a contribution, but the congregation's board answered “that this society is strictly religious, and they are not authorized [to approve expenditures] to this end.”<sup>12</sup>

Some initiatives also took place among Ladino- and Arabic-speaking Jews before 1926. Jews from Turkey and the island of Rhodes founded Bene Zion in 1914 for Zionist work. After the Balfour Declaration its membership increased somewhat, but shortly afterwards it was discontinued.<sup>13</sup> Another group of Arabic-speaking Sephardic Jews, originally from Eretz Israel and Syria, founded Geulat Zion in 1916, and participated in the popular demonstration of 1917 together with the rest of the Zionists. It was probably members of this group who published *Al Gala*, a short-lived fortnightly periodical printed in Arabic. The issue of *Al Gala* for December 28, 1917, was entirely devoted to developments in Palestine and in the Zionist world, including several articles on Palestine and the Jews, and others on General Allenby, Theodor Herzl, agriculture among the Jews, and even the pogroms of 1881 in Russia.<sup>14</sup> Geulat Zion sent three of its most prominent members to the Fifth Land Conference of Argentine Zionists in 1919. Hacham Shaul Setton Dabbah, serving the Jewish community of Aleppine origin, was invited to the conference as a special guest, but due to the fact that the majority of the speakers insisted on expressing their views in Yiddish, the Sephardic participants left the gathering.<sup>15</sup> In 1921, due principally to the language problem, both Spanish- and Arabic-speaking Sephardim decided to establish a Zionist Federation independent of the FSA.<sup>16</sup> The formation of the Centro Sionista Sefaradí did not take place until 1925, however. It initiated some small-scale activities in the capital and some of the cities of the interior, and during Bension's visit served as an instrumentality for his educational pro-

gram and for his efforts to organize a network of Sephardic Zionist clusters.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, throughout the 1920's the great majority of the country's Sephardim remained far removed from the Zionist ideal.

### *Efforts to Win Sephardic Support*

Argentina's Zionist leaders, aware of the need to enlist more of the Sephardim in Zionist activities, repeatedly tried to broaden the FSA's sphere of influence. The Sephardic question came up again and again at Land Conferences and during special campaigns, and in most instances the delegates adopted resolutions encouraging a more positive approach to the Sephardim.<sup>18</sup> As early as 1921 the FSA asked the World Zionist Organization in London to send a Sephardic delegate to work with the Argentine Sephardic communities.<sup>19</sup> The Sephardim, it was felt, would more readily listen to the Zionist message from one of their own, basically because of their localism and parochialism, but also because in the eyes of many Sephardim Zionism was a secular ideology, opposed to the traditional Messianic conception. Moreover, since the Sephardim mistrusted the world Zionist leadership, which in effect was East European, they needed assurance that the movement would benefit Sephardim in the Land of Israel and also in their communities of origin. These assurances, quite naturally, would be better conveyed by delegates who shared their roots, concerns, culture, and traditions.

While Argentina's very vibrant and popular Yiddish press, with its numerous daily, weekly, and monthly publications, was out of bounds to those who did not understand the language of Eastern European Jewry, the country's Spanish-Jewish press, and its Hebrew press as well, attempted to attract the Sephardim to Zionist causes. The diversity of the Jewish population of Buenos Aires was an issue strongly touched upon by the editors of the three Hebrew periodicals published in the 1920's, who considered that the promotion of Hebrew language and culture would unify the different Jewish groups. The Sephardic element was a recurring theme in editorials, and various articles kept readers informed about developments in the capital's Sephardic communities. The abyss separating the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim was to be overcome by means of a culture common to all Jews, i.e., a Hebrew culture.

The Sephardic community here in the capital, which is very important both in quantity and quality, is far away, as is known, from our community, the Ashkenazic community. The Sephardic Jews have no contacts, dealings, or relations with us Ashkenazim, in the way, for example, that the Italians here—Neapolitans and Sicilians and the like—have. All this has been caused by the language, their language of exile being different from our language of exile. . . . The language of exile has made of us two different races; but the language of revival will unite us. . . . *Habima Haiivrit*, born in the language of revival, is devoted both to them and to us. . . . We shall both be girded with all of our united strengths in order to labor for the revival of the people, the labor of rebuilding our destroyed homeland, of rebuilding the House of Israel, both there, in the land of our future, and here, in the lands of our wanderings.<sup>20</sup>

The Hebrew language would also encourage Zionist work among the Sephardim, who were often estranged from such activities by the insistence of most Ashkenazim that meetings and campaigns be conducted in Yiddish.

Despite the high hopes voiced by the editors, the Hebrew cultural movement did not attain much importance among Jews in Argentina during the 1920's. The forces sponsoring Hebrew linguistic and cultural activities, even if enthusiastic, were very small. Moreover, since the vast majority of Sephardim, and most Ashkenazim as well, did not know Hebrew and were not involved in circles that promoted it, the desire to use Hebrew as a means of uniting the two communities never had much of a likelihood of success. Whether Ashkenazic or Sephardic, the various immigrant groups and their children preferred their accustomed languages of discourse—Yiddish among the East Europeans, Arabic among the Syrians, and Spanish among the Turks and Moroccans.

Attempts to approach the Sephardim through the Spanish-language press were equally unsuccessful. Prior to 1930, only one of the country's Spanish-Jewish periodicals was under Sephardic control. Founded in March 1917 by Samuel de A. Levy and Jacob Levy, *Israel* began as a monthly, subsequently became a weekly, and for six months in 1920 appeared five times a week. *Israel* did not have a definite organic structure. It printed articles and notes about Sephardic Jews, concentrating on the Moroccan Jewish community of Buenos Aires. Corre-

spondents in the interior of Argentina and in neighboring countries contributed additional information about local Sephardim. However, the publishers of *Israel* were Zionist enthusiasts, and they endorsed the activities and goals of the Zionist groups functioning in Argentina. The pro-Zionist leanings of *Israel* were quite atypical of Sephardim in Buenos Aires until 1930, when a new Sephardic journal, *La Luz*, was initiated, raising the level of Sephardic journalism in Buenos Aires.<sup>21</sup>

Although many of the Sephardic immigrants to Argentina knew Spanish, the country's Spanish-Jewish press, by and large, did not try to attract Sephardic readers.<sup>22</sup> In the years before 1930, nine "Ashkenazic" periodicals were issued in Argentina (one is still in existence, another barely made it in 1930, and seven closed before then). Of these, only three—those with a Zionist orientation—attempted to broaden their scope by including items of Sephardic interest. *El Sionista*, with which the Jewish press in Spanish made its debut in Argentina on June 15, 1904, was devoted to Zionist issues. It was also concerned with the Moroccan Jewish community of Buenos Aires, many of whose members were active Zionists during the early years of the century.<sup>23</sup> *El Macabeo*, which appeared for a short time in 1920, and *El Semanario Hebreo*, a weekly, which appeared irregularly for nearly a decade starting in 1923, were also Zionist oriented. The latter, especially, reported on developments in the Sephardic communities and on Zionist activities among Sephardim.<sup>24</sup> At times, *El Semanario Hebreo* wrote strong editorials criticizing the Sephardim for not contributing to the rebuilding of the Jewish homeland and for remaining separate from the mainstream of the Jewish community.<sup>25</sup>

### *Ariel Bension and the Order Bene Kedem*

In 1924, claiming they had the support of such Zionist leaders as Chaim Weizmann, Nahum Sokolow, Menahem Ussishkin, and Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, Sephardic leaders in Europe and the Middle East founded the World Union of Sephardic Jews (WUSJ). At the time, nearly a third of the Jews in Palestine were Sephardim, and the founders of the WUSJ claimed that they were not receiving the guidance and help that was given to Ashkenazic Jews from Russia and Poland on their arrival in Palestine. In light of this, the WUSJ intended to advise potential Sephardic emigrants from the Middle East, North Africa,

and the Balkans, before their departure from their communities of origin, in order to facilitate their settlement in Israel, and it also launched a campaign against the Keren Hayesod for failing to keep its promises to Sephardic *olim* and for pursuing policies that favored the Ashkenazim.<sup>26</sup>

As was mentioned earlier, the World Zionist Organization, toward the end of 1926, sent Dr. Ariel Bension to visit the Sephardic communities of Latin America. When he arrived in Mendoza after having visited the Jewish community in Chile, he learned that the WUSJ had begun propagandizing against the Keren Hayesod in Buenos Aires. The Sephardim whom Bension met in Buenos Aires told him that they would only contribute to Zionist causes if the money went to WUSJ for the Sephardim in Jerusalem. Jacobo Karmona, president of the Centro Sionista Sefaradí, further argued that unless all the money collected in Bension's campaign was sent to the WUSJ, they would not officially recognize his delegation. Moreover, despite Bension's objections, the Sephardim insisted on complete autonomy, including the authority to deal directly with London, since they felt it was impossible for them to work with the FSA.<sup>27</sup>

Although the WUSJ tried to prevent him from founding a Sephardic branch of the World Zionist Organization, Bension was able to achieve some temporary successes. On October 23, 1926, after a month-long mobilization of Sephardic Zionists led by Bension, the Order Bene Kedem was founded at a large public gathering in Buenos Aires, in the presence of Dr. Isaac Nissensohn, president of the FSA. Bene Kedem was established as an independent organization and had no formal ties to the FSA. Its first president was Jacobo Benarroch, an honored member of Congregación Israelita Latina. Branches of Bene Kedem were immediately started, under the auspices and activation of Bension, in Rosário, Córdoba, Río Cuarto, Tucumán, Mendoza, and Santa Fe. Contacts were made with the Sephardic communities in Montevideo, Uruguay, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the external factors impeding his work in Buenos Aires, Bension also had to deal with a Sephardic community that was divided along origin lines. The city's Sephardic Jewry actually consisted of four distinct communities: Jews from Morocco, Ladino-speaking Jews from Turkey, Salonika, and Rhodes, and the two Arabic-speaking Jewish groups from Aleppo and Damascus. At the time there was little contact among these groups. The Moroccan Jews constituted the

smallest group, about 200 families, but also the richest. The Turkish community was larger, but much poorer. The Aleppine Jews, except for a few individuals, were also poor, while the Damascenes constituted the largest Sephardic community, with a few rich men. Bension's contacts with Sephardic organizations and individuals led him to conclude that most of the Sephardim in Buenos Aires were extremely indifferent to Zionism. The older elements of the Moroccan community were "extremist believers in the Messiah on a white horse . . . while the young are completely assimilated." Moisés Schoua, the president of the Damascene community, gave Bension a bad reception, insulting his whole committee with the allegation "that all the Zionist leaders and delegates were working on a commission basis," and refused to make a contribution. Hacham Shaul Setton Dabbah, the rabbi of the Aleppine community and chief representative of Agudat Israel among the Sephardim in Argentina, was anti-Zionist on religious grounds and in his sermons urged his congregants not to contribute to Keren Hayesod. Hacham Setton's negative attitude to Eretz Israel is reflected in some of his responsa. His views with respect to education at the Aleppine Talmud Torah confirm his anti-Zionist position, for he obstinately refused to permit the teaching of Hebrew as a language. Bension contacted Setton, and after a long debate the latter promised that he would no longer actively interfere in the former's efforts, but he would not help in any way.<sup>29</sup>

To compound Bension's problems, the poor results obtained by the Keren Hayesod campaign among Ashkenazic Jews did not help to inspire a sense of Zionist idealism among the Sephardim. In addition, as has already been mentioned, Yiddish, the language spoken by most of the Ashkenazic Zionist officials in Buenos Aires, was incomprehensible to the Sephardim. Finally, while the Sephardic Jews had come to Argentina from regions near Palestine, the leadership of the World Zionist Organization was almost entirely Ashkenazic, and most of the *olim* settling in Palestine were from Eastern Europe, and these facts contributed to a feeling that Zionism was mainly an Ashkenazic enterprise.

#### *The Decline of Bene Kedem*

Bension's labors opened the door to national work for the Sephardim in Argentina, but even if there were cordial relations between Bene Kedem and the FSA, the former being in direct connection with London,

a major collaboration between Sephardim and Ashkenazim was not effected via Zionism. Meanwhile, the WUSJ sent Shabbetai Djaen, rabbi in Monastir and one of the founders of WUSJ, as its delegate to South and North America. He arrived in Buenos Aires in April 1927, just before Passover, and during his stay in Argentina visited Rosario, Mendoza, and other centers with Sephardic populations.<sup>30</sup> Djaen soon aroused the suspicions of Argentina's Zionist leaders, including the leaders of Bene Kedem. Dr. Moisés Cadoche, at the time secretary of Bene Kedem, mentioned on several occasions that Djaen was playing a double role. On the one hand he spoke highly of Zionism as an ideal, and on the other, he spoke against the Zionist Organization and its personnel, demanding that the Sephardim send their contributions only to the WUSJ.<sup>31</sup>

In 1928, Cadoche became the president of Bene Kedem, and in the aforementioned interview in London with Zionist leaders he asserted that "the WUSJ... in spite of its pretended Zionist tendencies, only created obstacles for us, and made our Zionist work much more difficult... trying to convince us to change our allegiance."<sup>32</sup> In a campaign to discredit the Zionist Organization in the eyes of Sephardic communities all over the world, the WUSJ published some of its attacks in an independent Sephardic publication which had a large following among Sephardim all over South and Central America and in Morocco. These articles argued that the Zionist Organization did not help the Sephardim in Palestine and did not appoint Sephardim to posts in its bureaucratic hierarchy. The WUSJ would do a better job.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of 1928, after a visit to the United States, Djaen returned to Argentina. With the help of some leaders of the Moroccan Jews (Congregación Israelita Latina) and the Jews from Turkey (Comunidad Israelita Sefaradí), he formed a Consistorio Rabínico to deal with rabbinical questions among Sephardic Jews. He also became Gran Rabino of the Moroccan and Turkish Jews. Meanwhile, Akiva Ettinger, the Argentine delegate of the Keren Hayesod, proposed to the central office in Jerusalem that Djaen be asked to spend four months working among the Sephardim as part of the annual fund-raising campaign. The first 3,000 pounds he collected would go to the Keren Hayesod; 30 percent of anything over that amount would be given to the WUSJ. The central office approved, and for some time Djaen handled this work, though without great success. The Keren Hayesod approached

Djaen again on the eve of the enlargement of the Jewish Agency, this time asking him to permit the inclusion of his name, along with the names of Chief Rabbis and teachers in all the countries where the organization was active, on a circular sponsoring Keren Hayesod's work as provider for the Jewish Agency. Despite the recognition of his standing that these invitations reflected, Djaen was already complaining about his personal situation in Buenos Aires. In June 1930, the Consistorio Rabínico was permanently closed, having accomplished little, and soon after Djaen left the country for Europe.<sup>34</sup>

Bene Kedem initiated its Zionist activities with energy and enthusiasm, but as often happens, once its founder—in this case Ariel Bension—left, and contacts with him became more diluted, the organization languished. Bene Kedem published a booklet containing a "Call to Sephardim" by Bension and salutations by Weizmann, Sokolow, Sir Alfred Mond, president of Keren Hayesod in England, and Isaac Nissensohn, from the FSA. The goals of Zionism and the functions of each of its institutions and funds were explained in this publication, emphasizing the particular interests of the Sephardim.<sup>35</sup> The organization was chiefly involved in financial affairs, promoting a *shekel* campaign. During its first two and a half years of activities, until May 1929, Bene Kedem did poorly even in the distribution of *shekalim*. Ettinger in 1928, and Pazi, as Keren Hayesod delegate in 1929, believed there was no hope of effective action among Sephardim. Pazi wrote, just before the Jerusalem riots of 1929, that Djaen could help with the *shekel* campaign, although he was convinced that "for Keren Hayesod it is impossible to do anything among Sephardim."<sup>36</sup>

### *The 1929 Emergency Campaign*

Bension's efforts, and the continuation of his work by the leaders of Bene Kedem, finally had positive results in the aftermath of the anti-Jewish riots that swept Palestine in 1929. Argentine Jewry, seriously concerned about the safety of the Palestinian Jewish community, immediately proclaimed an Emergency Campaign at a meeting attended by Jews from all sectors, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Zionists and non-Zionists. The grandiose goal of raising 1,000,000 pesos by September 30, 1929, was not achieved. However, although the harvest in the Jewish agricultural colonies had been poor and the country was

experiencing a monetary crisis, Argentina's Jews contributed 313,000 pesos to the Emergency Fund. More than 50,000 pesos were collected by and among Sephardim. In Buenos Aires alone, where a total of 194,399.69 pesos was raised, fully 35,661 pesos were contributed by Sephardim. These figures make it evident that Bension and Bene Kedem had succeeded in influencing wider circles of the various Sephardic communities.<sup>37</sup>

The localism of the Sephardim, however, remained strong. The Emergency Campaign was intended to aid Palestinian Jewry, but the Aleppine community in Buenos Aires, for example, decided to allocate only half of the money it raised to Zionists in Palestine and to divide the other half among institutions in Aleppo, Sephardim in Palestine, and the Ahavat Zedek society, which helped Aleppine widows, orphans, and poor people in Buenos Aires. Thus only half of the proceeds were turned over to the Federación Sionista Argentina.<sup>38</sup>

The leadership of the FSA enthusiastically welcomed the participation of the Sephardim in this campaign. Dr. Isaac Nissensohn, its president, wrote to Chaim Weizmann in London that "the Sephardim, who had hardly contributed to the upbuilding of Palestine, are now contributing to the Emergency Fund with a liberal hand."<sup>39</sup> Bension had brought the Zionist message to the Sephardim in Argentina in a language they understood. As a result, they were now somewhat more conscious of the Zionist program and recognized the importance of working for and contributing to its fulfillment. They had also begun to realize that the Sephardim already in Palestine and potential Sephardic immigrants were benefiting from the building of the Jewish national homeland.<sup>40</sup>

### *The 1930's and Afterward*

Despite these accomplishments, however, Zionism made little progress among the Sephardim of Argentina in the years that followed. Although some of the Sephardic leaders had begun warming up to the Zionist program and had worked together with Ashkenazim in an effort to propagate the Zionist idea among the country's Jews, the Sephardic rank and file continued to distrust the Ashkenazic leadership. Strongly linked to their communities of origin and imbued with intense localist feelings, Argentina's Sephardim required much more in the way of explanation and reassurance if they were to over-

come their suspicions and doubts. In the 1930's, however, both the Zionists and world Jewry as a whole were preoccupied with other issues that took precedence over the work of reassuring the Sephardim. Thus the necessary effort was not forthcoming, and the attempt to win over the Sephardim was dropped before it ever attained substantial results. In part because of this unfortunate inconsistency in the approach to Argentina's Sephardim, a segment of the community was permanently alienated from Zionism.

As the account in this paper indicates, the Zionist movement failed to win the cooperation of the Sephardim during its early decades, both locally in Argentina and at the international level. In later years, especially after the creation of the State of Israel, and once its most urgent challenges—including the absorption of large numbers of refugees in a very short period of time—were met, the rift between these two major segments of Jewry would again be evident. Even today it continues to be a concern shared by Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Israel and the diaspora.

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### Notes

1. Silvia Schenkolewski, "Di Zionistische Bavegung in Argentine fun 1897-1917" [The Zionist movement in Argentina during 1897-1917], *Pinkas fun der Kehila* (Buenos Aires), 1969, pp. 101-130.

2. Victor A. Mirelman, "Zionist Activities in Argentina from the Balfour Declaration to 1930," in *Studies in the History of Zionism*, ed. Yehuda Bauer, Moshe Davis, and Israel Kolatt (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 188-223 (Hebrew).

3. Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter cited as CZA), Z4 3579III (1928); also in *New Judea*, 4, no. 11 (April 27, 1928).

4. On the migration of Sephardic Jews from North Africa and the Ottoman Empire to Argentina, see Victor A. Mirelman, "The Jews in Argentina (1890-1930): Assimilation and Particularism" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1973), pp. 33-43.

5. CZA Z1 (405), # 14 (1904).

6. CZA Z1 (405), Enrique Rubinsky and Esteban Crenovich to Vienna, May 5, 1904. Benzaquen was vice-president of Congregación Israelita Latina (CIL) in 1903, cf. *Minutes* of *ibid.*, September 20, 1903; Benchetrit was vice-president in 1899, secretary in 1905, and later on president of CIL, cf. *Minutes*, *passim*.

7. *El Sionista* (Buenos Aires), 1, no. 12 (December 1, 1904): 6.

8. CZA Z.B. Köln B.Ig 123, fasc. 3, "Report on the History of Zionism in Argentina," by J. L. Liachovitzky, A. Crenovich, G. Dabin, and G. Zeitlin, March 14, 1907, 22 pp.

9. CZA Z.B. Köln B.lg 123, fasc. 1.
10. See note 8.
11. CIL, *Minutes*, October 30, 1918.
12. *Ibid.*, August 3, 1924.
13. *La Luz* 12, no. 8 (April 17, 1942): 184–186, in a report on the antecedents of the Centro Sionista Sefaradí presented by Maurice Alacid to the First Sephardic Convention.
14. *Al Gala* (Arabic; *Hagolah* in Hebrew), 1, nos. 13–14 (December 28, 1917).
15. *Habima Haivrit* 1, no. 6 (Elul–Tishre 1921): 11 f. The three delegates from Geulat Sion to the Zionist Congress in Argentina were José Cassuto, Yedidiah Abulafia, and Jacobo Setton. Cf. *Habima Haivrit* 5 (1925): 37.
16. *Habima Haivrit* 1, no. 6 (1921): 11 f.
17. Cf. note 13.
18. The Third Zionist Conference in Argentina tried to encourage Sephardim (cf. Schenkowski, “Di Zionistische Bevegung in Argentine,” p. 118), as did the Twelfth Conference (cf. *Semanario Hebreo*, May 23, 1930, p. 3).
19. Cf. the suggestion of Moises Senderey in *Habima Haivrit* 1, no. 7 (December 1921): 11.
20. *Habima Haivrit* 1, no. 1 (Nisan 1921): 2; reproduced in I. L. Gorelik, *Be’eretz Nod* [In the land of Nod] (Buenos Aires, 1943), p. 135. Cf. also *Atideinu*, no. 1 (January 1926): 1 f.
21. *Israel* (Mundo Hebraico Argentino) had correspondents in eleven provinces.
22. Arabic-speaking Jews put out, in 1917, the fortnightly *Al Gala*, of which only one number was available. Cf. above, note 14.
23. *El Sionista* was directed by J. S. Liachovitzky. Only forty-seven numbers of this fortnightly were published.
24. Especially at the end of 1926, and during 1929–1930, *Semanario Hebreo* published news and articles about Sephardim in Buenos Aires, coinciding with visits of Sephardic personalities or emissaries from Zionist centers in Jerusalem.
25. Cf. “El Silencio de los Sefaradim,” *Semanario Hebreo*, August 23, 1924, p. 1.
26. Cf. the summary of *Report of the World Union of Sephardic Jews* for the period Iyar 5684–Elul 5686 (approx. April 1924–September 1926) at CZA Z4 35791.
27. Cf. CZA Z4 2412, letters from Bension to the Zionist Organization (London), dated Mendoza, September 22, 1926, and Buenos Aires, September 29, 1926; also s25 519, Bension to Dr. Leo Hermann (Keren Hayesod, Jerusalem), November 9, 1926.
28. CZA Z4 35791, FSA to Keren Hayesod (Jerusalem), December 12, 1926.
29. The quotations are from the letters mentioned in notes 27 and 28. Hacham Shaul Setton’s participation in Agudat Israel is asserted in the letter cited in note 28, and in CZA KH4 4531, notes on Akiva Ettinger’s conversation with Shmuel Pazi and Schwartz, Jerusalem, January 21, 1929. The Argentine branch of Agudat Israel was founded in 1920, and Hacham Setton joined in some capacity. Cf. *Habima Haivrit* 1, no. 6 (1921): 14. In his collection of Responsa, *Dibber Shaul* (Jerusalem, 1928), Hacham Setton deals with the question whether in Argentina, which has opposite seasons to Eretz Israel, Jews should include the petition for rain and wind in their prayers—which is done during the winter season in the Northern Hemisphere—according to the climate of Israel, or during the actual winter in Argentina. His answer was that Jews should follow the seasons of their place of dwelling, which is the custom of the Aleppine community in Buenos Aires, contrary to the practice accepted in all other synagogues in the country. For Hacham Setton’s position on the program of studies at the Talmud Torah, see Yesod Hadath, *Minutes*, February 22, 1928; also Yesod Hadath, *Minutes of General Assemblies*, March 25, 1928, and March 10, 1929.
30. CZA Z4 35791, Zionist Organization (Jerusalem) to all Zionist Federations and Organizations in the Diaspora, December 7, 1926.

31. CZA Z4 3579I, Bension to Zionist Organization, September 21, 1927, quotes Cadoche's words.

32. Cf. above, note 3.

33. Among the goals of WUSJ, according to *Israel* magazine, February 3, 1928, were the following: "To coordinate, to strengthen, and to unite our forces in the Diaspora, in order to present a single front in Palestine, capable of representing before the proper authorities, our claims and the vindication of our brothers. Besides, we feel the urgent necessity to propagate amongst the Sephardim of the whole world the Zionist ideal, and influence them to take part in the common task."

34. Cf. CZA KH4 453I, Ettinger (Buenos Aires) to Keren Hayesod (Jerusalem), September 27, 1928, and Jerusalem's answer. In his conversation with Pazi (CZA, same file), January 21, 1929, Ettinger confirmed that Djaen worked for Keren Hayesod and WUSJ, though he had put some pressure on Cadoche and other activists of Bene Kedem against contributing to Keren Hayesod.

35. Cf. *Los Sefaradim y el Sionismo* (Buenos Aires, 1926).

36. See Ettinger's conversation with Pazi, CZA KH4 453I, January 21, 1929; Pazi's letter to Zionist Organization (London), May 15, 1929, CZA Z4 3659; and interview with Cadoche, note 3 above.

37. Cf. *Report of Activities* presented to the 12th Land Conference (FSA), May 1930 (Yiddish), p. 9. Also CZA KH4 454I, Nissensohn (FSA) to Weizmann (London), September 23, 1929; and Pazi to Keren Hayesod (Jerusalem), September 17, 1929.

38. Cf. Hesed Shel Emeth Sefaradit, *Minutes*, September 4, 1929; Yesod Hadath, *Minutes*, September 4, 1929, and November 5, 1929.

39. Cf. Nissensohn to Weizmann, quoted above, note 37. See also *Allgemeine Tetigkeit Baricht*, October 1928–May 1930, 8 pp. (Yiddish), at CZA KH4 456I.

40. Cf. *Los Sefaradim y el Sionismo*, pp. 66–71.