

Steven Lapidus

**THE JEWISH COMMUNITY COUNCIL OF MONTREAL:
A NATIONAL *KEHILLAH* OR A LOCAL SECTARIAN
ORGANIZATION?¹**

Introduction

The Jewish Community Council of Montreal (Vaad Ha'ir) is generally associated today with the Orthodox leadership of Montreal and with kashrut certification. However, while kashrut has always been a significant element of the Vaad's purview, at its inception in 1922, its goals were wider and its constituents more representative of the broader spectrum of Montreal Jewry. Paradoxically, in its early years the Vaad aspired unsuccessfully to national prominence, while later decades have been witness to the Vaad's growing Orthodox sectarianism, and its concomitant increasing marginalization from the broader Jewish community. Following a brief introduction, the history and establishment of the Vaad will be examined before exploring the seemingly contradictory trends in its evolution.

Cultural organizations are fruitful repositories of social history. Ethnic communal institutions, such as Montreal's Vaad Ha'ir, reflect the needs and concerns of the community they represent. The central feature of these types of institutions, however, are not the cultural habits that they support and reinforce, but the social boundaries that they delineate. Frederik Barth, arguing that the strategies used to maintain ethnic boundaries are as important in understanding an ethnic group as are its specific cultural patterns, observes that, "[t]he critical focus of

investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses.”²

Based on Barth’s emphasis on margins as key elements of group coherence, of central interest to this paper are two inter-related features of ethnic boundaries: (1) the ability to maintain a distinct identity concomitant with, (2) the ability to permit cross-cultural exchange without losing group distinctiveness.

First, intentional differentiation –or, cultural identification –is a defining characteristic of voluntary ethnic groups in multicultural North America. As Frank Vallee observes, an ethnic group is regarded not only by others, but by the members themselves, as forming a distinct category.³ In the case of early-twentieth century Montreal, Jewish identity was chosen. While we cannot completely ignore the effects of antisemitism, the pursuit of Jewish distinctiveness was essentially voluntary. Therefore, understanding ethnic group allegiance requires an examination of how each group defines itself. As Barth states:

It makes no difference how dissimilar members may be in their overt behaviour – if they say they are A, in contrast to another cognate category B, they are willing to be treated and let their own behaviour be interpreted and judged as A’s and not B’s; in other words, they declare their allegiance to the shared culture of A’s. The effects of this, as compared to other factors influencing actual behaviour, can then be made the object of investigation.⁴

Second, groups in multicultural societies frequently experience social, economic, cultural, and political exchange across cultural boundaries without sacrificing distinct group identities. As Barth notes:

Though the naïve assumption that each tribe and people has maintained its culture through a belligerent ignorance of its neighbours is no longer entertained, the simplistic view that geographical and social isolation have been the critical factors in sustaining cultural diversity persists.⁵

Barth rejects the idea that group differences are maintained because of cultural ignorance. Rather, despite the constant exchange across cultural boundaries typical of multicultural societies, ethnic differentiation is not obliterated. Some system or vehicle must exist that is capable of maintaining this balance. As Werner Sollers observes, this mechanism comes from within: “The fact of ethnicity, then, does not lie in its content, but in the importance that individuals ascribe to it.”⁶ Therefore, a minority-group organization whose mandate is to facilitate Jewish religious, cultural, and social continuity is a rich source of insight into the struggle for Jewish ethnic identification in twentieth-century Canada.

One important feature that distinguishes the Canadian Jewish experience from that of Eastern Europe is its voluntary nature. Unlike the situation in the countries of Eastern Europe – from where the vast majority of Montreal’s Jewish immigrants of the period in question originated – Canada did not dictate that social identity be shackled to religion. By law, one was a Canadian – not a Canadian Jew. The Jewish part of one’s identity was now optional – a new reality for many European Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Charles Liebman observes:

The American Jewish community is a voluntaristic one. The basic fact of American Jewish life is that the survival of American Judaism depends on the commitment and will of American *Jews* to survive. Consequently, any understanding of American Jewish life must begin with questions of Jewish commitment....⁷

This observation applies to the Canadian Jewish community as well as to the American. “Within the [Canadian] Jewish community, population growth and the proliferation of institutions contributed to the strengthening of Jewish identification.”⁸

Canadian Jews faced two fundamental possibilities in their new environment – reconstitute themselves as a community, or fragment entirely.⁹ North America was seen by many contem-

porary Jewish leaders as the only viable site for new Jewish communal growth. In the interbellum years, North America was perceived by many as the best haven for Jews.¹⁰ In the new sanctuary of North America, an important place to look for Jewish identity is in the voluntary organizations and institutions established by the Jewish community.¹¹ In commenting on the New York *Kehillah*, Jonathan Sarna cites voluntarism as the fundamental driving force behind this “boldest effort of all to bring the many segments of the Jewish community together.”¹²

The Jews of Montreal

Montreal is the oldest, and for the majority of the twentieth century, the most populous Jewish community in Canada. For much of its history, its Jewish community constituted the largest ethnic minority in Montreal. As well, it functioned as the head of the Canadian Jewish community, and served as home to many national leaders and organizations. Pierre Anctil writes of the centrality of Montreal to the entire Canadian Jewish community:

Aussi depuis le début du siècle, les Juifs de Montréal donnaient-ils le ton à l’effort organisationnel consenti par leur communauté à travers le pays ; souvent leur embarras, leurs difficultés, face surtout à l’antisémitisme montréalais, étaient répercutés et discutés dans les autres centres juifs du Canada. En ce sens, à l’époque que nous étudions, le Juif montréalais demeurait le paradigme de la judéité canadienne en devenir, et sur lui se fondaient les espoirs de progression socio-économique et d’intégration à la société entière : nul n’était mieux placé que lui au pays pour briser le cercle d’isolement et d’infériorité dans lequel se débattaient la masse de ses coreligionnaires.¹³

Although by the beginning of the twentieth century, organizations such as the Young Men’s Hebrew Benevolent Society (founded in 1863 and later renamed the Baron de Hirsch Institute) and several congregations had been established, no effective national representative bodies existed.¹⁴ The Canadian

Jewish Congress (CJC) was founded in 1919, but following its inaugural convention it remained virtually inactive until Hitler's rise to power, when it reconvened, in 1933. In the intervening period, a seemingly local organization, the Montreal Jewish Community Council attempted to fill the gap and aspired to national status. It is to this institution that I now turn my attention.

The Jewish Community Council of Montreal was a community-wide governing body modeled after the *kehillah* of Eastern Europe. For centuries, Jewish communities in Eastern Europe were organized in communal infrastructures called *kehillot* (singular: *kehillah*) which governed individual Jewish communities in corporate Europe. They reached their apex of power in Poland during the period spanning the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, but continued to function in many places into the twentieth century. Until just prior to the partitions of Poland, the local *kehillot* were organized in hierarchical bodies which formed larger provincial and national governing councils.¹⁵ Individual Jews were represented through the local *kehillah* and the larger councils to the government or crown. While the roles and powers of the *kehillot* varied over time and circumstance, the one stable factor of Jewish history in Eastern Europe was that civic recognition was maintained by a Jewish board of representatives. Because these councils frequently wielded tremendous influence and control over their constituents, potential for mismanagement and corruption were frequent. When the *kehillot* were not functioning fairly – a not infrequent occurrence – oligarchic oppression triggered communal antipathy. The fulfilling of harsh governmental decrees and unfair taxation burdens, both instances in which the wealthy and powerful often protected their own interests through bribery or influential connections – avenues inaccessible to the indigent – engendered strong resentment. While the following observation depicts the *kehillah* in eighteenth-century Poland, it applies equally well one or two centuries later:

Internal tension within the *kehillot* also surfaced; complaints were widespread that the Jewish

institutions were controlled by an oligarchy of wealthy families who exploited their connections with the Polish ruling class to monopolize positions of authority and to place most of the tax burden on the poor.¹⁶

Further, Polish disinterest in the internal functioning of the *kehillah* permitted rabbinic power and law to dominate Jewish cultural expression during the early days of the *kehillah*.¹⁷ By the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rabbinic power had diminished in the urban *kehillot* although it was still significant in the *shtetl* communities.¹⁸ Where earlier, religious pressure, buttressed by the *kehillah* plutocracy, may not have seemed overly onerous, by the late nineteenth century, rabbinic influence had become another source of tension for many in the *shtetl*. Traditionally-run *kehillot* were facing rebellion from their constituencies, and these constituents, antagonistic to their leadership, often organized their own governing bodies, ignoring the official *kehillah* wherever possible.¹⁹ As Salo Baron notes:

Buttressed by the legal recognition of State and Church; imbued with the spirit of a nomistic and ethical, i.e. activist religion; bound together by strong economic ties, outside animosity and a communal responsibility both theoretical and practical; permeated with a profound reverence for tradition; it was a sort of little state, interterritorial and non-political, but none the less quasi-totalitarian. What it lacked in police or military facilities for law enforcement, it more than compensated for by super-natural sanctions of religion, which made of every deviation from the norm, however slight and however secular in character, a serious offence against religion.²⁰

Generalized resentment towards an oligarchic power-structure, reinforced in some cases by rabbinic coercion would be a significant prejudice that Eastern European Jews would bring with them to North America during the era of mass immigration.

Kehillot in North America

In early-twentieth century North America many significant Jewish population centres shared common communal concerns. First, there were few umbrella organizations established to streamline and coordinate a united community's needs, and certainly no effective national organizations. Second, there was much concern about cultural and/or religious continuity in the face of the pressure to acculturate or assimilate. Third, chaotic internecine struggles led to increased demands for a unifying body. In many locales, including Montreal, Winnipeg²¹ and New York,²² a grave internal battle was fought over control of the lucrative kosher meat industry. Both the reliability of proper kosher meat production as well as the profits from this financially remunerative profession were sources of community-wide strife. Third, tensions arose between the established Jews and the far more numerous yet poor recent immigrants who felt their needs and concerns were ignored by the elite. Further splintering the community was the tendency of Jewish immigrants in Canada, as well as in New York, to maintain social distinction based on geographical origins.²³ There was, therefore, a perceived need for a communal structure that would permit Jewish continuity within the new, voluntary, and multicultural context that would be broad enough to incorporate all the disparate elements into a single functioning body. However, efforts to coalesce Jewish communities across North America were frequently stymied by internal diversity and divisiveness. As Arthur Goren, preeminent historian of the Jewish community council of New York City, writes:

an operationally useful definition [of Jewish identity] had to embrace a group splintered by dogma, culture, localism, and class. To reach and, hopefully, to control the radical, the Orthodox, the Zionist, and the *landsmanshaft*²⁴ Jew demanded a conception of community that coincided with the bounds of a multifarious ethnicity.²⁵

Some community leaders, first in New York City and later in Montreal, saw in the European *kehillah* a prototype for

a community organization in North American cities. They argued that some *kehillah*-style organization could help maintain ethnic identity in vast America while coalescing the distinct groups within the Jewish community into a unified organ.²⁶

The Montreal Jewish community grew significantly in a short period of time. The entire community counted only 181 souls in 1851, and by 1881, there were still fewer than one thousand Jews in all of Quebec. In 1882, at the beginning of the wave of mass emigration out of Russia that succeeded the assassination of Czar Alexander II, 2,400 Jews lived in Montreal. The community grew considerably in the wake of the failed 1905 revolution. At the turn of the century there were about 7,000 Jews in Montreal, 45,802 by 1921, and 57,997 in 1931 - an increase of more than 700 per cent from 1900 to 1931. By 1941, the community counted over 63,000 souls.²⁷

This dramatic increase in poor and working-class Eastern-European Jewish immigrants in such a short period of time upset the balance of power in the community. The established Jewish community in Montreal prior to the Eastern European immigration, like those in several other East Coast cities, was generally of Western- or Central-European descent and better educated than the post-1880 immigrants. Many, if not most, of this elite had established themselves economically, socially and linguistically by 1880. In fact, several historians refer to a veritable golden century of tolerance and opportunity for the Canadian Jewish elite in the hundred or so years prior to the Eastern European immigration.²⁸ The “uptowners,” as the established Jews were called, perceived themselves, as their counterparts did in other cities, as the Jewish ruling class.

As Marshall Sklare states:

In America, as in other immigrant countries, social stratification and class structure are connected with arrival date; the earlier arrivals form a sort of aristocracy. Original cultural differences between the groups are intensified by this ‘class division.’ The dominant group – the

early arrivals – form the upper crust. They consider themselves superior to and distinct from the ‘minority’ groups of late-comers, and attempt to maintain social distance from them or to mold them into a certain pattern.²⁹

The new immigrants, known as the “downtowners” since they lived in the downtown core, were overwhelmingly Eastern European and arrived poor or penniless. Ideologically, all positions were represented: traditional Orthodox, Yiddishist, socialist, Zionist, secularist, assimilationist, and others, including combinations and permutations of the above. Despite a sense of communal solidarity, Montreal’s uptown was sensitive to the arrival of the new immigrants as was the case in most major cities.³⁰ The arrival of large numbers of new and often radical immigrants enlarged the chasm between uptown and downtown,³¹ and the large influx of working-class Jews altered the Montreal Jewish reality demographically as well as culturally.³² Besides attributing the sources of the tension between uptown and downtown to “class, social position, economic status, etc,”³³ Benjamin Sack further states that, “Important among these was the fact that the ‘poor co-religionists’ stubbornly refused to conform to the rigid formula of Canadianization as laid down for them.”³⁴ These tensions between uptown and downtown would serve as contributing factors in the perceived need to create a Jewish communal superstructure.³⁵

The downtowners, poor, and often victims of discrimination whether overt or more genteel, wanted to build a strong community structure for more effective representation. However, they maintained allegiance to their own community organizations, many of which mimicked structures that arose in opposition to the official *kehillah* in Europe. Besides several socialist groups, they also relied heavily upon and supported the *landsmanshaftn*, and were generally wary of community-wide, uptown-dominated organizations. They acknowledged – perhaps begrudgingly – that uptown was more established with greater political power. As Joseph Kage observes of the downtowners:

The new immigrants introduced a different outlook on various problems. They were a more vigorous and more dynamic group. Their dynamism was accentuated by their lower economic status and desire for improvement as well as by their insecure past, which was conducive to the quest for ethnic organization and a meaningful milieu of social acceptance. Moreover, their consciousness of Jewish life as an ethnic form or organization was also more dynamic, being based not only on religion but on national feeling as well.³⁶

Uptown, on the other hand, saw the idea of a community council as a way of controlling downtown and mitigating their “foreignness.”³⁷ In his critique of the New York *Kehillah*, for example, Mordecai Kaplan saw it “as nothing but a Jewish social pacifier.”³⁸ In the words of one prominent Montreal uptowner, the lawyer Maxwell Goldstein:

The cause of many of our troubles is the vast influx of foreign Jews into the Dominion. They form ghettos among themselves and create a great deal of prejudice.... The difficulty with us is how to co-operate with these people. They must not be ignored. The only thing to do is to take them by the hand, and lead them by persuasive methods to recognize their duties to the community. Recently owing to the stringency of our immigration laws, and owing also to the fact that our means of assistance have become exhausted, the tide of immigration has greatly lessened in volume. If it could be restrained for a few years longer, I have no doubt but what we should be able to assimilate and consolidate all sections of the community.³⁹

Uptown typically supported organizations that appointed representatives, preferring to avoid community elections.⁴⁰ As they were vastly outnumbered by downtown, the only possibility of retaining any control was to nominate representatives

rather than permit community-wide elections. This struggle over representation, which of course reflected the old-style European *kehillah* oligarchy and was hence highly suspect in the eyes of downtown, would arise frequently throughout the founding and history of the Vaad Ha'ir. A further divisive factor that would beset the Vaad was the competition for control of the supervision of kosher meat production.

In the early part of the twentieth century, most synagogues were unable to pay regular or significant salaries to their rabbis. Thus, there remained for rabbis few avenues of remuneration. One of these was the supervision of kosher meat production which was in serious disarray.⁴¹ Competition for these scarce positions as kosher supervisors was a prominent impetus in the founding of the Council and in its continued infighting.⁴² Besides using the income from kashrut supervision to defray the overhead costs of the Council, the founders of the Vaad would offer regular remuneration to the rabbis along with financial support for Jewish education in the city.⁴³ Despite the competing visions and methodologies, one Montreal community leader would succeed in uniting the disparate groups into a functional organization.

The Montreal Vaad Ha'ir

The primary activist in the establishment of the Jewish Community Council of Montreal was Hirsch Wolofsky. As publisher and editor of Montreal's Yiddish-language daily, *Der Keneder Odler*, Wolofsky began an editorial campaign in 1912 to foster support for the establishment of a *kehillah* in Montreal.⁴⁴ As a keen observer of the experience of the New York *Kehillah*, which disbanded in 1922 after a mere fourteen years of existence, Wolofsky planned carefully for success. First, realizing that a significant factor in the New York *Kehillah's* downfall was the flagrant absence of the socialist (radical) element, Wolofsky sought inclusiveness, initially planning for equal representation from uptown, the socialists, and the Orthodox.⁴⁵ Second, he aimed big. He planned to establish a

council that would be responsible for the control of *kashrut*, funding of Jewish schools, including the radical Yiddishist ones, labour arbitration, trade unions and a Jewish hospital.⁴⁶

On September 30, 1922 Wolofsky published a pamphlet entitled, *A Kehillah for Montreal: Outline of a Plan for the Formation of such a Body*, in which he laid out his goals for the proposed Jewish Community Council. A summary of the major objectives of this proposal were: (1) to create a *bet din* (rabbinical court) responsible for the supervision of *kashrut*, halakhic rulings, marriages, divorces, the proper functioning of the *Talmud Torahs* (Jewish day schools), a yeshiva, and religious education; (2) to prevent profiteering among Jewish businessmen; (3) to fundraise for the Peretz and Folks *shule* (the secular Yiddishist schools) and to standardize teaching methods in these schools; (4) to establish a Jewish school system; (5) to organize and control the *landsmanshaftn* and loan syndicates; (6) to avoid unnecessary strikes and provide labour arbitration; and (7) to establish new Jewish institutions such as a hospital.⁴⁷

In October 1922, one hundred and sixty-four delegates representing seventy-three local Jewish organizations participated in the founding conference of the Vaad Ha'ir of Montreal. Although Wolofsky eliminated the term *kehillah* from the final title given to the new organization, probably to distance himself from the failed New York attempt,⁴⁸ the Vaad saw itself functioning as a *kehillah*. In a 1964 article in the Vaad's archives, Jacob Heller, in an interview with the then executive director, Rabbi Isaac Hechtman, concludes, "Essentially, the Vaad Ha'ir – Montreal's Jewish Community Council – is a *kehillah* like those that existed in Eastern Europe in all its forms."⁴⁹

There are several significant observations to be made about Wolofsky's September proposal. First, along with delineating a broad and extensive mandate, Wolofsky's original proposal concluded with the word, "*etcetera*," thereby allowing unlimited expansion into new areas of control for the Montreal *kehillah*. Despite the breadth of the proposed mandate, Wolofsky was not going to limit the Vaad's potential scope in

any formal way. Second, the proposal for the *kehillah* is directed toward Montreal Jews to organize on the local level only. There is no indication of any higher-order aspirations on the provincial or federal level. Third, while the Vaad proposes to support Orthodoxy, there is no indication of *promoting* Orthodoxy over other forms of Jewish expression. In fact, explicit mention is made of the Yiddishist (radical) schools as well as the *landsmanshaftn*, many of which were dominated by secularists.

However, I will bring evidence that, despite the absence of national or Orthodox aspirations in Wolofsky's 1922 proposal, both of these boundaries would be challenged in the course of the history of the Vaad.

National Aspirations

In January 1934 the CJC struck a committee with a mandate to examine the feasibility of creating a national *kehillah* to: a) organize every Jewish community in Canada with more than 10 families into a local *kehillah*; b) unite all the Jews of a particular community into one organizational unit; and c) attend to the Jewish economic, charitable, and educational problems of the community. These local councils would be responsible for the following: (1) the hiring of all *klei koydesh* – rabbis, slaughterers, and other clergymen; (2) control of *shekhita* (kosher slaughter of animals) and kashrut; (3) building and administration of synagogues; (4) building and administration of *mikves* (ritual baths); (5) administration of cemeteries and supervision of funeral practices; (6) creation and administration of Jewish schools; (7) creation of scholarships for students with distinction in Jewish studies; (8) registration of vital statistics; (9) administration of charitable institutions; (10) administration of loan cooperatives; (11) maintenance of the archives and history of the community; and (12) to be the sole and unique representative of the community to the provincial and municipal governments.⁵⁰

Besides the extensive self-appointed mandate, the proposed structure hints at national organization. Although

representation to the federal government is not mentioned – presumably as this was the responsibility of CJC Executive committee – all other tasks and infrastructure allude to a national *kehillah*. In fact, the document calls for a hierarchy where smaller *kehillot* were to be represented by the largest provincial *kehillah* and a standardized name, “The Jewish Community Council of _____,” was to be imposed on each *kehillah*. More significantly, the national *kehillah* plan can be easily linked to the Montreal Jewish Community Council, suggesting that the Vaad Ha’ir of Montreal may well have entertained visions of national leadership.

First, the membership of the *Kehillah* Committee of the CJC overlapped considerably with that of the Montreal Vaad Ha’ir, including, most significantly, that the secretary of the former, Mordecai Peters, simultaneously served as executive secretary of the latter. Second, the committee met often in the Montreal Vaad’s own boardrooms. Third, minutes and resolutions of the national *Kehillah* Committee were officially forwarded in memos signed by H.M. Caiserman, General Secretary of CJC, to the Montreal Vaad.⁵¹ Fourth, we are aware of Wolofsky’s national dreams from his introduction to the *kehillah* plan. While not part of the formal proposal, it is illuminative of Wolofsky’s intent:

When I speak of a *Kehillah* for Montreal, it must be understood that it will not refer only to Montreal, but will represent all Canada. For, while it is true that the *Kehillah* will function only in this city, it will really be taken as the authority for all Canadian Jewry to follow. As we are the oldest and largest Jewish community in this country, it is really our duty to be the pathfinders for all other Canadian Jewry. Thus, a *Kehillah* in our city will really serve the best interests of all Canadian Jewry.⁵²

Finally in a prepared statement, presented to the *Kehillah* Committee on April 19, 1934, by Mordecai Peters, the

following ambiguous statement appears: “The only form of *Kehillah* which can and should be organized is a *Kehillah* without any power of taxation⁵³ but a central communal organization to supervise the *national*, religious and other communal activities.”⁵⁴ The aforementioned evidence offers strong support to the contention that the Montreal Vaad Ha’ir had its eyes on the prize of national Jewish authority.

On October 21, 1934, J. Graner, chairman of the *Kehillah* Committee reported to a meeting of standing committees of the CJC, Central Division (Ontario), on a resolution to create a centralized, national rabbinical authority to be solely responsible for *kashrut* and “control over the rabbinical profession.”⁵⁵ This resolution grew out of a discussion based on the review of a memorandum entitled *The Jewish Kehillah Movement: Thesis to the Formation and Organization of Kehillahs in the Canadian Jewish Settlements*, prepared by Mordecai Peters, Secretary of the *Kehillah* Committee of CJC and Executive Secretary of the Montreal Vaad Ha’ir.⁵⁶

Three years later, in 1937, at an executive meeting of CJC, Central Division, a resolution was passed to pursue the program for nationwide *kehillot*, and a sub-committee was struck.⁵⁷ However, this would be the last mention of the *Kehillah* Committee. By 1939, the dream seems to have died. Toronto’s local *kehillah*, which began to disintegrate in 1934, was formally disbanded in 1939,⁵⁸ and no further mention of the *Kehillah* Committee of CJC would appear again. In fact, in the minutes of an executive meeting of the Central Division in 1939, which listed all standing committees, there is no mention of the *Kehillah* Committee at all and its former chair was now associated with another committee.⁵⁹ The national *kehillah* was not to be. Eventually, another generation of leaders would transform the Vaad from an organization aspiring for national control to one representing an increasingly smaller segment of the local community.

Increasing Local Sectarianism

A second significant factor to be examined is the evolution of Orthodox control of the Vaad Ha'ir of Montreal. Wolofsky's initial 1922 proposal recognized the need to support the religious community through its schools, consistency in kosher supervision, financial support of local rabbis and other clergy, and control of civil status – all typical religious functions. Wolofsky's proposal also included the formation of a rabbinical council called the Vaad Harabbonim. Under its aegis were such portfolios as the funding of Jewish schools and financial support of scholars in the city, both of which functions carry obvious social as well as religious weight. The Vaad Harabbonim of Montreal was given authority in halakhic areas with social impact such as education, commerce and arbitration. This power structure – strikingly similar to the European *kehillah* model – begs the question of rabbinic designs on the community council. It has been suggested that rather than parallel the vision of the larger Vaad Ha'ir to unify Jewish organizations and maximize communal effectiveness, the Vaad Harabbonim was more narrowly focused on strengthening Orthodoxy in the city.⁶⁰

Initially sensitive to the make-up of the entire community and to the failure of the New York *Kehillah*, Wolofsky's proposal specifically stated that representation would be sought from all constituent groups of the community and no numerical bias would benefit any one group. The executive committee was to be generated with equal representation of members from each of the following groups: (1) the Orthodox Jews – through synagogue affiliation; (2) members of trade unions and benefit societies to represent downtown; and (3) private members to represent uptown. By the opening convention in October 1922, the composition had changed slightly, without directly affecting the religious balance of the Council. The three groups were made up of the Orthodox, householders (representing the societies and loan syndicates as well as private members) and the workers (including members of labour organizations).⁶¹

Some thirty-five years later, in 1958, in the next set of by-laws, the constituency has changed somewhat although not significantly. The three groups were to be composed of members of the following: (1) synagogues; (2) educational institutions; and (3) fraternal (and other) organizations.⁶² However, the mandate of the Vaad Ha'ir had changed by this time. In Wolofsky's original proposal, the "religious aspect"⁶³ of the Vaad Ha'ir was limited to financing a bet din, addressing civil status issues (especially marriage and divorce), supervising kashrut and Jewish education.⁶⁴ But by the 1958 by-laws the first purpose assigned to the larger Vaad Ha'ir was, "To maintain and develop Orthodox Judaism and Jewish traditions in Greater Montreal and vicinity, including the Laurentian region."⁶⁵ It seems that the original mandate of the Vaad Harabbonim had now become the mandate of the entire Vaad Ha'ir, of which the former was only a sub-committee of the latter – clearly not compatible with Wolofsky's original, broader outline.

The most dramatic shift occurs over the next thirty years. In 1994, while the general membership of the council is still to derive from the three standard sources of synagogues, educational institutions, and fraternal organizations, a new item in the by-laws had been introduced limiting the membership of the executive committee. Those nominated to the executive, while maintaining membership in one of the standard three groups must further belong to one of the following sub-groups: (1) Sephardi community; (2) Hasidic community; (3) yeshiva community; and (4) synagogues, not affiliated with the above-mentioned groups. Where membership was previously more variegated, and representative of the broader Jewish community, by 1994, this diversity was severely curtailed reflecting a strong bias towards the Orthodox element, with representatives from the Haredi community comprising fully one-half of the executive committee members.⁶⁶

A majority of Orthodox or Haredi executive members representing a community whose majority is not Orthodox,⁶⁷ speaks directly to the dwindling relationship of today's Vaad

Ha'ir to Wolofsky's original intentions, which reflected a representative balance. Further, since the majority of the executive members are to be drawn from rabbinic circles, it would seem fair to say that the Rabbinical Council is exerting strong influence on the Vaad Ha'ir. It is hard to know whether this bias is due to, or causal of, the decreasing relevance of the Vaad Ha'ir outside of the Orthodox community.⁶⁸

There is often an inverse relationship between the maintenance of cultural and ethnic organizations and upward social mobility. In other words, the more diversified, complex, and comprehensive an ethnic community's institutions, the fewer the opportunities or need to interact with the surrounding culture, frequently resulting in less upward social mobility. The evolution of the Vaad's constituency reflects the increasing level of closure – the degree to which a particular group is closed to integration or exchange with others – characteristic of post-war Haredi Orthodoxy in North America. Frank Vallee notes that the higher a group scores on measures of endogamy, occupational and residential segregation from other groups, and the institutional complexity of the group, the more closed a group is considered. While Jews have generally scored high on closure measurements in Canada,⁶⁹ the Orthodox generally score even higher than the larger Jewish population.⁷⁰ While a complete analysis of the relationship between Orthodoxy and sectarianism is well beyond the scope of this paper, a few observations are necessary.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the post-Holocaust Haredi immigrants to North America introduced greater trends of social and religious isolation than was typical of the prewar Orthodox community.⁷¹ With respect to the specific dynamic taking place in Montreal, many of the same (Hasidic) communities, responsible in the decades after the Second World War for introducing sectarianism into North America, also established communities here in Montreal, such as Satmar, Belz, Tosh, and Skver.⁷² Demographically and ideologically powerful, in recent decades these groups have joined

and influenced the larger Orthodox community of Montreal, including the Vaad Ha'ir.⁷³ Eschewing communal unity in favour of parochialism and rigid religious standards, they have been able to influence the Jewish Community Council away from its broader mission into a narrower one.⁷⁴ This move is evident in the new allegiances required of members of the executive committee introduced in 1994 and the converging mandate of the Vaad Ha'ir with that of the Vaad Harabbonim, begun in 1958.

Conclusion

While the Vaad Ha'ir of Montreal did not succeed in its aspirations to national grandeur, to some extent, it did recreate a European-style *kehillah* in its enforcement of Orthodox tradition and its reinstatement of authority into the hands of rabbis. However, the price it has paid is its very relevance to the general Jewish community. For outside of its prime areas of kosher supervision and divorce, the Vaad Ha'ir has become increasingly marginalized in contemporary Montreal. As Ira Robinson observes, "Founded in 1922 in an attempt to create an all-embracing *kehillah* for Montreal, it ultimately emerged as an organization espousing Orthodoxy and specializing in the ritual certification of meat and other kosher products in the Montreal area."⁷⁵

And how does the Vaad fare with respect to Barth's essential features of ethnic identity: group coherence and social exchange? The Vaad's area of influence has consistently narrowed. At its inception, the Vaad postulated a Jewish identity composed of cultural, social, economic, political, and religious (halakhic) factors. However, the halakhic emphasis is the one that has predominated at the end of the twentieth century. Concomitant to its decreasing responsibilities and parameters of identity, the Vaad has also grown increasingly sectarian, intentionally restricting cross-cultural exchange in a move toward social isolation. While the founders of the Vaad may have envisioned a flexible and adaptable organization, its current condition is far less permeable than foreseen. Its narrow

purview and mandate are, perhaps, a manifestation of the inappropriateness of the *kehillah* model – even a refashioned version – to twenty-first century Canadian Jewry.

Notes

¹ Parts of this paper were presented at the Graduate Student Colloquium on Quebec/Canadian Jewish Studies, Montreal, Quebec, November 2004. I would like to thank Ira Robinson and Pierre Anctil for their support, guidance, and suggestions. I would also like to express my gratitude to Janice Rosen and H el ene Vall e of Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives for their assistance.

² Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 15. Italics in original.

³ Frank Vallee, “Multi-Ethnic Societies: The Issues of Identity and Inequality,” in *Issues in Canadian Society: An Introduction to Sociology*, edited by Dennis Forcese and Stephen Richer, p. 162-202 (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 167.

⁴ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶ Werner Sollers, “Foreword,” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, edited by Werner Sollers, p. x-xliv (NY: Washington Square Press, 1996), p. xviii.

⁷ Charles S. Liebman, *Deceptive Images: Toward a Redefinition of American Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), p. 6. Italics in original.

⁸ Michael Brown, *Jew or Juif? Jews, French Canadians, and Anglo-Canadians, 1759-1914* (Philadelphia & NY: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p. 211.

⁹ Cf. Ira Robinson & Mervin Butovsky, eds., *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal: V ehicule Press, 1995), p. 9-10.

¹⁰ Marshall Sklare, *The Jewish Community in America* (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1974), p. 12. In fact, Sklare cites the Jewish historian, Simon Dubnow, who predicted that America was destined to be the new Jewish fatherland. Cf. Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New*

Judaism, edited with an introductory essay by Koppel S. Pinson (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958), p. 156, where he refers to the salvific nature of the “great migrations” to America and Palestine.

¹¹ In general, religious organizations are the largest voluntary networks in North American society. Peter L. Berger & Richard J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977), p. 26.

¹² Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 200.

¹³ Pierre Anctil, *Le rendez-vous manqué : Les Juifs de Montréal face au Québec de l'entre-deux-guerres* (Québec : Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1988), p. 35.

¹⁴ The only possible exception was the Federation of Zionist Societies of Canada (founded in 1899) whose executive director, Clarence de Sola would argue in the 1930s that a Canadian Jewish Congress was not necessary because the Zionist Federation fulfilled a national role. Gerald Tulchinsky, *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), p. 263-264.

¹⁵ For a detailed review, see Salo W. Baron, *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution, In Three Volumes* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1942), esp. Vol. I, p. 208-282.

¹⁶ Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (NY: Macmillan, 1980), p. 483.

¹⁷ Baron, *The Jewish Community*, p. 213-215; Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, “The Middle Ages,” in *A History of the Jewish People*, edited by Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, p. 385-723 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 678.

¹⁸ See for example, Abraham Ain, “Swislocz: Portrait of a Jewish Community in Eastern Europe,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, 4 (1949), p. 90.

¹⁹ Arthur A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908 – 1922* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 11-12; Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 16-17.

²⁰ Baron, *The Jewish Community*, p. 208.

²¹ M.S. Stern, "Communal Problem Solving: The Winnipeg VA'AD HA'IR 1946" *Jewish Historical Society Journal*, 4, no. 1 (Spring 1940), p. 5-6.

²² C.f. Harold P. Gastwirt, *Fraud, Corruption, and Holiness: The Controversy Over the Supervision of Jewish Dietary Practice in New York City, 1881-1940* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974).

²³ Joseph Kage, *With Faith and Thanksgiving: The Story of Two Hundred Years of Jewish Immigration and Immigrant Aid Effort in Canada – 1760-1960* (Montreal: Eagle Publishing Company, 1962), p. 43; Soyer, p. 122. In fact, Moses Rischin, in describing how each geographical Jewish community on New York City's Lower East Side lived on different blocks, writes, "Clustered in their separate Jewries, they were set side by side in a pattern suggesting the cultural, if not physical, geography of the Old World." Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 76.

²⁴ Fraternal organizations whose membership is based on European cities/towns of origin that provided medical and burial benefits to its members as well as opportunities for social interaction.

²⁵ Goren, *New York Jews*, p. 247. Although comparisons will be made to the experience of American Jews, especially because the fact of different sovereignty was frequently of little significance to the Jews of this era, it is important to note that many scholars do argue for a distinction between "America" and Canada. Cf. Gerald Tulchinsky, "The Contours of Jewish History," in *The Jews in Canada*, edited by Robert J. Brym, William Shaffir, & Morton Weinfeld, p. 5-21 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Value of Canadian Jewish History to the American Jewish Historian and Vice Versa," *Canadian Jewish Historical Society Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 17-22; John Porter, *The Measure of Canadian Society: Education, Equality, and Opportunity* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1987), p. 140-162.

²⁶ Goren, *New York Jews*, p. 3-4; Ira Robinson, "The Foundation Documents of the Jewish Community Council of Montreal," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 8 (1996), p. 69. Michael Weisser argues that in the twentieth century, the old and true *kehillah* system was best suited to situations of dislocation when, "many [Jewish] communities reverted to their most primitive, instinctual relations and attitudes." Michael R. Weisser, *A Brotherhood*

The Jewish Community Council of Montreal 49

of Memory: *Jewish Landsmanshaftn in the New World* (NY: Basic Books, 1985), p. 143.

²⁷ Louis Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews: A Social and Economic Study of Jews in Canada in the 1930s*, edited by Morton Wienfeld (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 20 & 31; Tulchinsky, *Branching Out*, p. 22.

²⁸ Cf. Benjamin G. Sack, *History of the Jews in Canada: From the Earliest Beginnings to the Present Day* (Montreal: Canadian Jewish Congress, 1945), p. 57; Tulchinsky, *Branching Out*, p. 55; Irving Abella, *A Coat of Many Colours: Two Centuries of Jewish Life in Canada* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990), p. 37.

²⁹ Marshall Sklare, *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group* (NY: Free Press, 1958), p. 5.

³⁰ Goren, *New York Jews*, p. 12-17. See also Steven M. Lowenstein, *Frankfurt on the Hudson: The German-Jewish Community of Washington Heights, 1933-1983, its Structure and Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), for a similar analysis of post-1900 German-Jewish immigration and adaptation to New York City.

³¹ Israel Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday: Jewish Life in Montreal 1900-1920* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2000), p. 74. In fact, even prior to the large wave of emigration, there were instances when uptowners in Montreal tried to slow the arrival of Jewish immigrants to Canada to maintain their perceived precarious balance. Sack, *History of the Jews in Canada*, p. 172.

³² Abraham Rhinewine, *Der yid in kanada: fun der frantzoyzisher periyode biz der moderner tzayt* (Toronto: Canada Press, 1925), p. 203-204.

³³ Sack, *History of the Jews in Canada*, p. 242.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 242-243.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216-217; Abella, *A Coat of Many Colours*, p. 157.

³⁶ Kage, *With Faith and Thanksgiving*, p. 41-42.

³⁷ Sack refers to uptown's "increasingly patronizing attitude." Sack, *History of the Jews in Canada*, p. 217.

³⁸ Goren, *New York Jews*, p. 247-48.

³⁹ *The Jewish Chronicle*, (London), July 16, 1909, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Cf. Kage, *With Faith and Thanksgiving*, p. 54-55; Tulchinsky, *Branching Out*, p. 261-62; Goren, *New York Jews*, p. 218-27.

⁴¹ Ira Robinson, "The Kosher Meat War and the Jewish Community

Council of Montreal, 1922-1925,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* XXII, no. 2 (1990), p. 42; Israel Medres, *Between the Wars: Canadian Jews in Transition* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2003), p. 42.

⁴² Cf. Robinson, “The Kosher Meat War.”

⁴³ Robinson, “The Foundation Documents,” p. 75.

⁴⁴ In fact, Israel Medres, who wrote for the *Keneder Odler*, saw the newspaper’s very establishment in 1907 as “instrumental in the development of organized Jewish community life by providing a network among the various Jewish groups in Montreal.” Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday*, p. 81.

⁴⁵ Ira Robinson, “Two North American *Kehillot* and Their Structure: Philadelphia and Montreal,” in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1994, p. 139-46 (Division B: The History of the Jewish People, Vol. III: Modern Times), p. 142.

⁴⁶ As early as August 30, 1907, in the inaugural issue of *Der Keneder Odler*, Wolofsky put forth what he referred to as the “fundamental principles” for the newspaper, a list that included many of these very concerns, such as education, Jewish national self-awareness, charity, justice, and union representation. David Rome & Pierre Anctil, *Through the Eyes of the Eagle: The Early Montreal Yiddish Press 1907-1916* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2001), p. 33-34.

⁴⁷ Robinson, “The Foundation Documents,” p. 80-86.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75-76.

⁴⁹ Jacob Heller, “The Vaad Ha’ir – Montreal’s Jewish Community Council – The Model of a *Kehillah*,” CJCCCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/13/1, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives (CJCCCNA)/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/6/11.

⁵¹ These documents can be found in CJCCCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/6/11.

⁵² Robinson, “The Foundation Documents,” p. 80.

⁵³ A reference to a much despised power that most European *kehillot* wielded.

⁵⁴ Minutes of the *Kehillah* Committee meeting held on April 19, 1934, CJCCCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/6/11, p. 3. Italics added.

⁵⁵ CJCCCNA/BC/1934.

⁵⁶ This memorandum is located in CJCCCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/06/11. It is a slightly modified version of the one cited above.

⁵⁷ CJCCCNA/BC/1937.

⁵⁸ Steven A. Spiesman, *The Jews of Toronto: A History to 1937* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), p. 298.

⁵⁹ CJCCCNA/BC/1939.

⁶⁰ Beverly Harris & Eiran Harris, *Jewish Community Council of Montreal (Vaad Ha'ir): A Finding Aid* (Montreal: Jewish Public Library Archives, 1996), p. 3.

⁶¹ *Keneder Odler*, September 21, 1962, p. 6.

⁶² CJCCCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/6/1.

⁶³ These were Wolofsky's own words, which refer to the future rabbinical council. Robinson, "The Foundation Documents," p. 82.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ CJCCCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/6/1.

⁶⁶ Although, as late as 1972, the Vaad Ha'ir still claimed global relevance: "The Vaad Ha'ir of Montreal thus represents local Jewish society and in a wider sense, reaches out to the peripheries of the Jewish community of Canada." *Voice of the Vaad: 1922-1972, Golden Jubilee*. Located in CJCC-CNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/13/1.

⁶⁷ In a recent survey, some 12 per cent of the Montreal Jewish community (or 5.3 per cent of the total number of Jewish households) was identified as Haredi. Charles Shahar, *A Comprehensive Study of the Frum Community of Greater Montreal* (Montreal: Federation CJA & Ahavas Chesed, 2003).

⁶⁸ By the time of the writing of this article, with the growing influence of Haredim, the Vaad is also becoming increasingly irrelevant to many Modern Orthodox Jews in Montreal as well.

⁶⁹ Frank G. Vallee, "Multi-Ethnic Societies: The Issues of Identity and Inequality," in *Issues in Canadian Society: An Introduction to Sociology*, edited by Dennis Forcese & Stephen Richerm, p. 162-202 (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 174-75.

⁷⁰ Cf. Samuel C. Heilman, "Orthodox Jews: An Open or Closed Group," in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, edited by Robert N. Bellah and Frederick E. Greenspan, p. 115-31 (NY: Crossroad, 1987).

⁷¹ Solomon Poll, *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg: A Study in the Sociology of Religion* (NY: Schocken, 1962), p. 49; Stephen Sharot, "Hasidism in Modern Society," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to*

Present, edited by Gershon D. Hundert, p. 511-31 (NY: NYU Press, 1991), p. 513; Solomon Poll, "The Persistence of Tradition: Orthodoxy in America," in *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays in Jewish Life in America*, edited by Peter I. Rose, p. 118-49 (NY: Random House, 1969), p. 129; Egon Mayer, "The Perpetuation and Growth of Sectarian Pluralism: The Case of the Jewish Communities of Boro Park, Brooklyn," in *Jewish Settlement and Community in the Modern Western World*, edited by Ronald Dotterer, Deborah Dash Moore and Steven M. Cohen, p. 154-64 (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1991), p. 159; Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Yearbook*, 66 (1965), p. 67; Jeffrey S. Gurock, *American Jewish Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective* (NY: Ktav, 1996), p. 53; Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 148.

⁷² Cf. Jacques Gutwirth, « Hassidim et Judaïcité à Montréal », *Recherches Sociographiques* 14, no. 3 (1973): 291-325; Jacques Gutwirth, "The Structure of a Hassidic Community in Montreal," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 14, no. 1 (June 1972): 43-62; William Shaffir, "Separation from the Mainstream in Canada: The Hassidic Community of Tash," in *The Jews in Canada*, edited by Robert J. Brym, William Shaffir, & Morton Weinfeld, p. 126-41 (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993); William Shaffir, "Still Separated from the Mainstream: A Hassidic Community Revisited," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 39, no. 1&2 (1997): 46-62.

⁷³ Steven Lapidus, "The Forgotten Hasidim: Rabbis and Rebbes in Prewar Canada," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, Vol. XII, 2004, p. 1-30.

⁷⁴ Chaim Waxman notes that the latter decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a role reversal among Orthodox Jews. Where Modern Orthodox Jews have turned inward, the Ultra-Orthodox have become increasingly assertive and more active in Jewish communal life. Chaim I. Waxman, "Winners and Losers in Denominational Memberships in the United States," *Changing Jewish Communities*, no. 1 (October 16, 2005), p. 5.

⁷⁵ Ira Robinson, "They Work in Faithfulness: Studies in the Constitutional Documents of Canadian Jewish Organizations Other Than Synagogues," in *Not Written in Stone: Jews, Constitutions, and Constitutionalism in Canada*, edited by Daniel J. Elazar, Michael Brown, & Ira Robinson, p. 110-51 (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2003), p. 137.