

The Jewish Community Council:
The Evolution of Sectarianism in a Montreal Organization

by Steven Lapidus
Concordia University

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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 was always 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 than they are today. 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.

THE JEWS OF MONTREAL

Montreal is the oldest, and for the majority of the twentieth century, the most established Jewish community in Canada. For much of its history, its Jewish community was the largest ethnic minority in Montreal and the largest Jewish community in Canada. As such, it functioned as the head of the Canadian Jewish community, and served as home to many of the national leaders and organizations.¹ 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.² The Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) was founded in 1919, but following its inaugural

¹ 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.

² 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), pp. 263-264.

convention it remained virtually inactive until Hitler's rise to power, when it reconvened, in 1933. In the intervening period, the dearth of umbrella organizations provided fertile ground for different groups to compete for communal authority, including the Montreal Jewish Community Council.

In early twentieth century North America many significant Jewish population centers 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 and New York, a grave internal battle was fought over control of the lucrative kosher meat industry.³ Both the reliability of proper kosher meat production as well as the profits from this financially remunerative profession were sources of community-wide strife. Finally, 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. The uptowners, as the established Jews were called, perceived themselves, as their counterparts did in other cities, as the Jewish ruling class.⁴ There was therefore, a perceived need for a communal structure that would permit Jewish continuity within the new, voluntary, and multicultural context of North America that would be broad enough to incorporate all the disparate elements into a single functioning body. Further splintering the community was the tendency of Jewish immigrants in Canada — like elsewhere — to maintain social distinctions based on geographical origins.⁵

³ Cf. Harold Gastwirt, *Fraud, Corruption, and Holiness: The Controversy over the Supervision of Jewish Dietary Practice in New York City 1881 – 1940* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1974).

⁴ Marshall Sklare, *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group* (NY: Free Press, 1958), p. 5.

⁵ 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; Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880 – 1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 122. 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

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. 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% from 1900 to 1931. By 1941, the community counted over 63,000 souls.⁶

This dramatic increase in poor, working-class, and politically variegated Eastern European Jewish immigrants in such a short period of time upset the balance of power in the community,⁷ and would alter the Montreal Jewish reality both demographically as well as culturally.⁸ The downtowners, as the new immigrants were called, were too green and often too radical for uptown, resulting in increased communal tension.⁹ Besides identifying “class, social position, economic status, etc.”¹⁰ as sources of communal divisiveness, historian of Canadian Jewish history, B. G. Sack, also hints at uptown’s patronizing attitude when he writes that, “[...] the ‘poor co-religionists’ stubbornly refused to conform to the rigid formula of Canadianization as laid down for them.”¹¹

Community leaders saw in the European *kehillah* a potential model for North American Jewish communities. However, the perception of the European *kehillot* — especially among many recent immigrants — was mixed. Historically, because the *kehillot* 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

⁶ Louis Rosenberg, *Canada’s Jews: A Social and Economic Study of Jews in Canada in the 1930s*, edited by Morton Wienfeld, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993), pp. 20 & 31; Tulchinsky, p. 22.

⁷ Arthur A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908 – 1922*. (NY: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 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 in New York City.

⁸ Abraham Rhinewine, *Der yid in kanada: fun der frantzoizisher periyode biz der moderner tzayt* (Toronto: Canada Press, 1925), pp. 203-204.

⁹ Israel Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday: Jewish Life in Montreal 1900 – 1920* (Montreal: Vehicule 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 (Benjamin G. Sack, *History of the Jews in Canada: From the Earliest Beginnings to the Present Day*. [Montreal: Canadian Jewish Congress, 1945], p. 172).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 242-243.

resentment.¹² 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*.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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. As Salo Baron observes:

What it [the *kehillah*] 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.¹⁵

Traditionally-run *kehillot* faced rebellion from their constituencies, and these constituents, antagonistic to their leadership, often organized their own governing bodies, ignoring the official *kehillah* wherever possible.¹⁶ Generalized resentment towards an oligarchic power-structure, often reinforced by rabbinic coercion and the community plutocracy, would be a significant prejudice that Eastern European Jews would bring with them to North America during the era of mass immigration.

The mixed perception of the *kehillah* notwithstanding, the idea of a *kehillah*-style organization would eventually appeal to both uptown and downtown. Uptowners believed that a *kehillah*-style organization could help maintain ethnic identity in vast America while coalescing the distinct groups within the Jewish community into a unified organ.¹⁷ Further, the *kehillah* was seen by uptown as a strategy for maintaining power

¹² Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (NY: Macmillan, 1980), p. 483.

¹³ Salo W. Baron, W. *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution, In Three Volumes*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1942), pp. 213-215; Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, "The Middle Ages," in *A History of the Jewish People*, ed. Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 385-723), p. 678.

¹⁴ See for example, Abraham Ain, "Swislocz: Portrait of a Jewish Community in Eastern Europe," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, Vol. 4, 1949, 86-114, p. 90.

¹⁵ Baron, p. 208.

¹⁶ Goren, pp. 11 – 12; Soyer, pp. 16-17; Baron, p. 208.

¹⁷ Goren, pp. 3 - 4; Ira Robinson, "The Foundation Documents of the Jewish Community Council of Montreal," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 8: 3-4, 69-86, 1996, p. 69. Michael Weisser argues that in the twentieth century, the old *kehillah* system was best suited to situations of dislocation when, "many [Jewish]

while controlling downtown and mitigating their “foreignness.”¹⁸ 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. It if 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.¹⁹

Downtown, although fearful of plutocracy and uptown-dominated representation, was nonetheless aware of the advantages of communal solidarity, especially if they could incorporate their own organizations — the *landsmanshaftn*²⁰ and the socialist (labour) organizations — into the new structure. Identity for most downtowners was tied in with their labour, social, and political organizations as well as communal adhesion. As Joseph Kage observes, “Moreover, their [downtowners’] 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.”²¹

THE MONTREAL VAAD HA’IR

The main protagonist in the establishment of the Jewish Community Council of Montreal was Hirsch Wolofsky. A Yiddish-speaking journalist and traditional Jew who

communities reverted to their most primitive, instinctual relations and attitudes.” Michael R. Weisser, *A Brotherhood of Memory: Jewish Landsmanshaftn in the New World* (NY: Basic Books, 1985), p. 143.

¹⁸ In his critique of the New York *Kehillah*, for example, Mordecai Kaplan saw it “as nothing but a Jewish social pacifier.” Goren, pp. 247-248. In Montreal, Sack (p. 217) refers to uptown’s “increasingly patronizing attitude.”

¹⁹ *The Jewish Chronicle*, (London), July 16, 1909, p. 16.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Kage, pp. 41-42.

published both the business-friendly *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* and the downtown-oriented Yiddish daily the *Keneder Odler*,²² Wolofsky was of appeal to both uptown and downtown. A keen observer of the New York *Kehillah*, which disbanded in 1922 after a mere fourteen years of existence, he learned from New York's mistakes. Realizing that a significant factor in the New York *Kehillah*'s downfall was the absence of the socialist (radical) element, Wolofsky sought inclusiveness, and therefore planned for equal representation from uptown, the socialists, and the Orthodox.²³ Assuming that a larger mandate would prove the importance and necessity of the council, as well as ensure its longevity, Wolofsky aimed big.

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 (including financial support) 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 Folke *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, etc.²⁴

In October of 1922, one hundred and sixty-four delegates representing seventy-three local Jewish organizations participated in the founding conference of the Vaad

²² 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, p. 81.

²³ Ira Robinson, "Two North American *Kehillot* and Their Structure: Philadelphia and Montreal," *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1994, (Division B: The History of the Jewish People, Vol. III: Modern Times), pp. 139-146, p. 142.

²⁴ Robinson, "The Foundation Documents," pp. 80-86. The same proposal appeared the next day in the *Keneder Odler* as part of Wolofsky's editorial campaign to support a *kehillah*. In fact, Wolofsky's plans for community organization were long-held. As early as August 30, 1907, in the inaugural issue of the *Keneder Odler*, Wolofsky put forth what he referred to as the "fundamental principles" for the newspaper, a list that included many of these very communal objectives, 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: Vehicule Press, 2001), pp. 33-34.

Ha'ir of Montreal. Wolofsky eliminated the term *kehillah* from the final name of the new organization, probably to distance himself from the failed New York attempt,²⁵ and to avoid comparison to the much maligned European *kehillot*.

INCREASING SECTARIANISM

Initially sensitive to the make-up of the entire community and to the failure of the New York *Kehillah*, Wolofsky specifically proposed 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 composed equally 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).²⁶

Some 35 years later, in 1958, in the next set of available by-laws, the constituency had changed somewhat although not significantly. The three groups were to be composed of members of the following: (1) synagogues; (2) educational institutions;²⁷ and (3) fraternal (and other) organizations.²⁸ However, the mandate of the Vaad Ha'ir had changed by this time. In Wolofsky's original proposal, the "religious aspect"²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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

²⁵ Robinson, "The Foundation Documents," pp. 75-76.

²⁶ *Keneder Odler*, September 21, 1962, p. 6.

²⁷ Although fully one half of the subsidized educational institutions in 1964 were Haredi, less than one-fifth of the affiliated synagogues could be considered Haredi. In fact, there were more Haredi synagogues in Montreal in 1964 than were affiliated with the Vaad Ha'ir.

²⁸ CJCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/6/1.

²⁹ Wolofsky's term by which he was referring to the rabbinical council (*Vaad Harabbonim*) which was formed under the aegis of the larger Vaad Ha'ir to supervise religious functions. Robinson, "The Foundation Documents," p. 82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Laurentian region.”³¹ It seems that the mandate of the Rabbinical Council of the Vaad Ha’ir (*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. This era coincides with the arrival of Holocaust survivors, including members of the right-wing or Haredi element of Orthodox Judaism, especially present among several of the Hasidic sects who established communities in Montreal. I will discuss the implications of this immigration wave in the conclusion.

Before the next set of by-laws would appear, the Vaad Harabbonim would establish the Beth Din of Montreal — its halakhic arm. Negotiations began in late 1962 and by June, 1963, the Beth Din had been officially organized. Two resolutions of the Preliminary Arrangements Committee merit mention. First, the Beth Din gave itself the mandate to “establish its own procedures and standards” which seems to impart more autonomy to itself than was initially intended. Second, to ensure its own authority, it was resolved that, “The Vaad Harabbonim shall permanently have a majority of one representative over the RCA [Rabbinical Council of America] on the Beth Din.”³²

The most dramatic shift in the composition of the Vaad Ha’ir occurred by 1994. In that year, while the general membership of the council was 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; or (4) synagogues,³³ not affiliated with the above-mentioned groups. This change in by-laws virtually eliminated active participation from secular and other non-Orthodox segments of the community giving greatly increased influence to the Haredi element. Where membership was previously more variegated and representative of the broader Jewish community, by 1994, this diversity was severely curtailed in violation of the original

³¹ Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives (CJCNA)/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/6/1.

³² CJCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/19/Rabbinical Court/8/. Of course, no Haredi rabbis, and virtually all Modern Orthodox rabbis, are members of the Rabbinical Council of America thus, ensuring a permanent majority on the Montreal Beth Din of non-Modern Orthodox rabbis.

³³ Orthodox only.

mandate of the Vaad Ha'ir.³⁴ This narrowing demographic bias notwithstanding, the Vaad continues to portray itself as universal. “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.”³⁵ “[...] the members of the Vaad Harabbonim of the Vaad Ha'ir represent virtually every segment of the Montreal community.”³⁶ In fact, the current members of the Rabbinical Court — the active arm of the Rabbinical Council — are hardly representative, even of Orthodox Jewry in Montreal. Only one member was ever affiliated with a non-Haredi, Modern Orthodox synagogue and currently identifies with the Haredi community. Four are Hasidic, including one who serves on the Montreal Beth Din as well as sits as head of the Beth Din of New Square, the segregated township of Skverer Hasidim outside of Monsey, New York. The others serve as leaders of the Montreal Lubavitcher, Zibower, and Belzer communities. Another is Sephardi Haredi, and the Chief Rabbi of Montreal, who serves as head of the Beth Din, is a product of the yeshivas of Baranowicz and Mir in Lithuania.

A majority of Orthodox or Haredi executive members on the larger Community Council representing a community whose majority is not Orthodox, speaks directly to the dwindling relationship of today's Vaad Ha'ir to the original design that recognized the necessity of 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. In fact, with the growing influence of Haredim, the Vaad is also becoming increasingly irrelevant to many Modern Orthodox Jews in Montreal as well. Several Modern Orthodox, synagogue-affiliated rabbis have recently formed their own *bet din* to process conversions, in order to provide a Modern Orthodox alternative to the Haredi-dominated Vaad conversion court.³⁷

³⁴ In its first year of operation, the Vaad Ha'ir counted 22 synagogues, 3 schools, 12 loan syndicates, 6 union locals, 2 Zionist organizations, and 19 *landsmanshaftn* or benefit societies. (CJCNA/JPL/VAAD/Series ZC/JCC/Vaad Hoir 1923/4/). This hardly reflects a 75% Orthodox majority as the 1994 by-laws demand.

³⁵ *Voice of the Vaad: 1922 – 1972, Golden Jubilee*. Located in CJCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/13/1.

³⁶ Y. Tzvi, *Voice of the Vaad*, Montreal, April, 2006, p. 105.

³⁷ *Canadian Jewish News*, August 4, 2005.

An example of the Vaad's catering to the needs of the Ultra-Orthodox minority can be seen in the March 2004 announcement by the Vaad that they would no longer permit non-"18-minute" machine-made matzot to be used by establishments under its supervision.³⁸ While the Vaad struggled to explain that they were not prohibiting OU-supervised matzot from individual use, nor that they were impugning the kashrut of OU-supervised matzot, they were promoting increased public halakhic stringency to accommodate those individuals who observe a higher standard.³⁹ The Montreal chapter of the Rabbinical Council of Canada (synagogue-based Modern Orthodox rabbinical board) opposed the implementation of such a high standard on the entire community.⁴⁰ It would seem that the Vaad was paralleling a change that Charles Liebman observes generally of late twentieth-century Orthodoxy as distinct from the prewar atmosphere:

One [constraint] was the sense of responsibility that leading Orthodox rabbis who interpret Jewish law felt to the total Jewish community; a sense of responsibility evidenced in a reluctance to interpret the Law in such a manner that the vast majority of Jews would find its observance excessively burdensome.⁴¹

Another example of increased stringency can be found in recent rulings by the Vaad Ha'ir on the status of certain vegetables. While removal of insects is a legitimate halakhic issue, many unnecessary stringencies are applied to the supervision of establishments by the Vaad of Montreal in this regard. Beyond the standard requirement that vegetables and fruits be checked for infestations, the Vaad has completely prohibited use of the following in any of its supervised establishments under any and all conditions, including the procurement of these items with *hashgacha*:⁴² artichoke hearts, blackberries, brussel sprouts, chicory, fresh dill, fresh cauliflower, fresh oregano, fresh parsley, raspberries, and fresh spinach.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid., March 11, 2004. "18-minute" matza means, in this case, that the machinery has been cleaned every 18 minutes. All matzot are baked within 18 minutes.

³⁹ Ibid, March 25, 2004.

⁴⁰ Mike Cohen, *Controversy Surfaces over Passover Products*, March 3, 2004. <http://www.bnaibrith.ca/article.php?id=300>.

⁴¹ Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodox Judaism Today," in *Dimensions of Orthodox Judaism*, ed. Reuven P. Bulka, (NY: Ktav, 1983, 106-120), p. 110.

⁴² Kosher supervision.

⁴³ *Montreal Kosher Guide*, (Montreal: Jewish Community Council, 2001). This list is also available on the Vaad website at http://www.mk.ca/vegetable.php?p_sess=d1246440aa08efa3750a96d9a12a02da. Irvin

In the year 2000, the Vaad changed its previous policy and would no longer permit the caterers under its supervision to serve food in non-Vaad-approved venues, such as non-Orthodox synagogues, private homes, or non-approved hotels. Previously, while acknowledging that the venue itself was not kosher — and thus the food served in such a place was no longer under the Vaad’s supervision once it left the caterer’s kitchen — there was no prohibition on a caterer delivering to or serving at any venue. The executive director of the Vaad Ha’ir, Rabbi Emanuel explained that, “Synagogues not on the list, such as Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom⁴⁴ and the Reconstructionist Synagogue, will not be able to hire an MK⁴⁵-certified caterer under any circumstances.”⁴⁶

Celebrations and commemorations are opportunities for groups to assert their positions and claim their public space. At the end of November, 2005, the Montreal Vaad Ha’ir inaugurated Rabbi Yonasan Binyamin Weiss (formerly of Bnei Brak) as *segan av bet din* (assistant chief rabbi). Some two thousand people were in attendance, with 90 – 95% of them Haredi and fully half Hasidic — a far cry from the initial cross section of Orthodox and secular of the Vaad’s early days. Most of the speeches were given in Yiddish, which not only reflected Haredi linguistic distinctiveness, but also served to alienate the non-Yiddish speakers in the community, such as the large Sephardi minority, as well as most of the Modern Orthodox community, including many of the latter’s rabbis. Of the ten speakers, only one was affiliated with a modern Orthodox institution — all the others Haredi, in affiliation and appearance. Although designed as the inauguration of Rabbi Weiss, the evening took on a self-congratulatory tone. The main theme was the strength of a *kehillah* as exemplified by the Montreal Vaad Ha’ir. Several out-of-town speakers noted that the reputation of Montreal abroad is that of a typical prewar European-style *kehillah*, where a Vaad Harabbonim, empowered by putative communal unity, dominates and controls the religious life of the community.⁴⁷ I

Brandwein uses the Vaad’s vegetable rulings as evidence of increasing halakhic stringencies in the twentieth century. Cf. Irvin Brandwein, “Changing the Halakha” *Judaism*, Vol. 50(4), Fall 2001, 426-437, especially, p. 429.

⁴⁴ Reform congregation.

⁴⁵ MK stands for Montreal Kosher – the symbol of Vaad Ha’ir of Montreal kosher certification.

⁴⁶ *Canadian Jewish News*, October 19, 2000.

⁴⁷ At the 1994 annual general meeting of the Vaad Hair, invited speaker and Haredi community leader, Rabbi Berel Wein, noted that the “Vaad community is in the envy of North America.” *Ibid.*, December 22, 1994.

say putative because in fact, the current active members of the Vaad Ha'ir can hardly be construed as representative of the larger Jewish community of Montreal and thereby, the “communal unity” — upon which the power and prestige of the Vaad is based — is in fact only that of a minority of the Montreal Jewish community.⁴⁸

In its recent Passover publication, *Voice of the Vaad*, there are two articles recapping the inauguration, one in English and one in Yiddish. While the two contain much in common, there are several significant deviations. For example, the Yiddish version offers the following inaccurate summary of the Vaad's history, which is entirely absent from the English version: “The Vaad Ha'ir was founded over eighty years ago, when several Orthodox rabbis recognized the need for an organization that would provide all Jewish needs related to kashrut and halakha.”⁴⁹ This interpretation of the history of the Vaad Ha'ir is really a history of the Rabbinical Council and not of the Vaad Ha'ir itself. The larger Vaad Ha'ir was not founded just to address halakhic issues nor was it founded uniquely by Orthodox rabbis, although some of the latter were involved in its establishment. This vision completely ignores the involvement of lay people, and especially the non-Orthodox, who were not an insignificant element among the original constituents of the Vaad⁵⁰ — a point acknowledged by the Vaad itself, forty years earlier, when an article on the history of the organization observed that, “In spite of the centrality of the Kosher meat problem in the framework, the leadership of the Vaad from the beginning included Poale Zionists and labor organizers as well as representatives of synagogues and of other Orthodox institutions.”⁵¹ The Vaad itself is rewriting its own history to serve its contemporary vision. There is a strong tendency to idealize the *kehillah* system in the Vaad's self-perception,⁵² specifically, in justifying the tight control that the Vaad maintains over Orthodoxy in Montreal. In fact, Rabbi Yaacov Yitzchok

⁴⁸ In a recent survey, some 12% of the Montreal Jewish community (or 5.3% of the total number of Jewish households) was identified as Haredi. Charles Shahr, *A Comprehensive Study of the Frum Community of Greater Montreal* (Montreal: Federation CJA & Ahavas Chesed, 2003).

⁴⁹ *Voice of the Vaad*, 2006, p. 112.

⁵⁰ While the majority of the people who originally supported the Vaad were very concerned about reliable kosher meat, they can hardly be considered Orthodox.

⁵¹ *Voice of the Vaad*, Montreal, 1962, p. 16.

⁵² As early as 1964, Rabbi Isaac Hechtman, the Orthodox executive director of the Vaad, in an interview 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.” (Jacob Heller, “The Vaad Ha'ir — Montreal's Jewish Community Council – The Model of a *Kehillah*.” CJCNA/JPL/VAAD/MB/09/13/1, p. 4).

Neuman, the head of the Belzer community of Montreal, noted that the Vaad must continue to function according to the guidelines for a *kehillah* established by Rabbi Moshe Sofer — the father of traditionalist Orthodox sectarianism.⁵³

The overt comparison of the Vaad with a European-style *kehillah* by both Haredi observers and insiders is quite deliberate. They are trying to support collective domination by the Haredi minority and support communal sectarianism in the name of halakha and tradition. However, as the European *kehillah*, towards the end of its lifespan, suffered the rejection of many of its constituents, especially those who objected to rabbinic domination, the Montreal Vaad seems to be neglected by many, with the exception of the Haredi communities, in favour of Federation CJA, the more secular umbrella organization.

CONCLUSION

There is often an inverse relationship between the maintenance of cultural organizations and upward social mobility. 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.⁵⁴ Of course, among many cultural communities, a complex infrastructure is intentionally designed in order to minimize interaction with outsiders. 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,⁵⁵ the Orthodox generally score even higher than the larger Jewish population.⁵⁶

⁵³ Y. Tzvi, *Voice of the Vaad*, Montreal, April, 2006, p. 106. In the Yiddish version, Neiman is cited to have wished the new Rabbi success in expanding the powers of the *kehillah* by “extending the borders of holiness,” (Ibid., p. 111).

⁵⁴ Frederik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 33.

⁵⁵ Frank G. Vallee, “Multi-Ethnic Societies: The Issues of Identity and Inequality,” in *Issues in Canadian Society: An Introduction to Sociology*, ed. Dennis Forcese & Stephen Richer (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall, 1975, 162-202), pp. 174 – 175.

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.⁵⁷ In Montreal, specifically, many of the same (Hasidic) communities, responsible in the decades after World War II for introducing sectarianism into North America, also established communities here in Montreal, such as Satmar, Belz, Tosh, and Skver.⁵⁸ Demographically and ideologically powerful, in recent decades these groups have joined and influenced the larger Orthodox community of Montreal, including the Vaad Ha'ir.⁵⁹ Eschewing communal unity in favour of parochialism and rigid religious standards,⁶⁰ they have been able to influence the Jewish Community Council away from its broader mission into a narrower one.⁶¹ Norman

⁵⁶ Cf. Samuel C. Heilman, "Orthodox Jews: An Open or Closed Group," in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, ed. Robert N. Bellah & Frederick E. Greenspan, (NY: Crossroad, 1987, pp. 115-131).

⁵⁷ Solomon Poll, *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg: A Study in the Sociology of Religion* (NY: Schocken, 1962), p. 49; idem, "The Persistence of Tradition: Orthodoxy in America," in *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays in Jewish Life in America*, ed. Peter I. Rose (NY: Random House, 1969, 118-149), p. 129; Stephen Sharot, "Hasidism in Modern Society," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present*, ed. Gershon D. Hundert (NY: NYU Press, 1991, 511-531), p. 513; 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*, ed. Ronald Dotterer, Deborah Dash Moore and Steven M. Cohen (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1991, 154-164), p. 159; Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Yearbook*, Vol. 66, 1965, 21-97, 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.

⁵⁸ Cf. Jacques Gutwirth, « Hassidim et Judaïcité à Montréal, » *Recherches Sociographiques*, Vol. 14(3), 1973, 291-325 ; idem, "The Structure of a Hassidic Community in Montreal," *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 14(1), June, 1972, 43-62; William Shaffir, "Separation from the Mainstream in Canada: The Hassidic Community of Tash," in *The Jews in Canada*, ED. Robert J. Brym, William Shaffir, & Morton Weinfeld (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993, 126-141); idem, "Still Separated from the Mainstream: A Hassidic Community Revisited," *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 39(1&2), 1997, 46-62.

⁵⁹ Steven Lapidus, "Forgotten Hasidim: Hasidic Rabbis and Rebbes in Prewar Canada," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, Vol. XI (Forthcoming).

⁶⁰ Interestingly, the Vaad which has used the "MK" symbol to represent its kashrut supervision, has introduced several variants, including "MK – Mehadrin" to cater to the Ultra-Orthodox community. The MK – Mehadrin guarantees that the product was produced under the direct and specific guidelines of the local members of the rabbinical court and is prepared following the strictest standards, such as cooked by Jews, using only Jewish bread, and "kosher" milk (*pat yehudi, bishul yehudi, chalav yisrael*). The Vaad has thereby established a dual system of kashrut supervision.

⁶¹ 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, albeit usually in order to dominate.

Lamm expresses it succinctly in what he refers to as the “Only One Way” ideology: “Unity, a great desideratum, is defined as uniformity.”⁶² Diversity gives way to conformity, putatively in the name of tradition and halakhic integrity. This move is evident in the new requirements 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. Menachem Friedman argues that Haredism itself can be defined as the rejection of traditional patterns of Jewish society, namely geographically defined and homogenous in praxis, in favour of voluntary and elitist communities, where accepted practice may be rejected for text-based behavioural exclusivity. This, Friedman concludes, is only possible in the modern city, which does not impose responsibility to the larger religious community.⁶³ Thus, where the Jewish Community Council of Montreal may have been founded on notions of communal unity and collective responsibility, it has easily developed, in the latter half of the century, into a separatist and narrowly-focused rabbinical council.

While the Vaad Ha’ir of Montreal did not succeed in its aspirations to national authority, to some extent, it did recreate a European-style *kehillah* in its enforcement of Orthodox tradition and its reinstatement of power 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.”⁶⁴

Chaim I. Waxman, “Winners and Losers in Denominational Memberships in the United States,” *Changing Jewish Communities*, No. 1, October 16, 2005, 1-9, p. 5.

⁶² Norman Lamm, “Pluralism and Unity in the Orthodox Jewish Community.” In *Dimensions of Orthodox Judaism*, ed. Reuven P. Bulka, (NY: Ktav, 1983, 272-278), p. 272.

⁶³ Menachem Friedman, “Haredim Confront the Modern City,” in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry Vol. 2*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 76-77.

⁶⁴ 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*, (ed.) Daniel J. Elazar, Michael Brown, & Ira Robinson (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2003, 110-151), p. 137.