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## AJC on Israel-Diaspora Relations

A Policy Statement adopted by the Board of Governors  
February 11, 1995

### **Continuity and Change**

Since 1948 the agenda of American Jewish-Israeli relations has focused on politics, philanthropy, and immigration. Israeli leaders have asked American Jews in particular to be political advocates on behalf of Israeli security, generous in their philanthropic contributions, and encouraging of personal settlement in Israel, even if they themselves are not prepared to undertake such a step.

Recently, this agenda has come under criticism. Some emphasize that the peace process suggests a future vision of an Israel relatively unthreatened by her neighbors. Others argue that, economically, Israel is becoming more prosperous and may not require the same level of Jewish philanthropy as today. And clearly, despite numerous calls for aliyah, the overwhelming majority of American Jews have indicated that they prefer to remain in the U.S. Recent American Jewish Committee research indicates growing weakness of attachments to Israel among American Jews reflected in the small numbers who have actually visited Israel and the fewer still who have done so more than once. Differences of language, culture, ethnic origin and religious orientation suggest a growing gulf between the two largest Jewish communities today.

As a result, there are numerous calls to redefine the agenda between American Jewry and Israel. Some call for establishing a new agenda around Jewish continuity. Others advocate changes in the Law of Return.

Still others are skeptical of the peace process and seek to involve American Jewry in redirecting it. The present statement seeks to define the principles and parameters of the American Jewish-Israeli relationship in the 1990s, and outlines programmatic initiatives to advance their realization.

The AJC has long been involved in identifying ways of strengthening the American Jewish-Israeli relationship. In 1956, the AJC secured the Blaustein-Ben-Gurion agreement affirming linkages between American Jewry and Israel and a respect for

the integrity of both communities -- an agreement reaffirmed in correspondence between Jacob Blaustein, former AJC president, and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in 1961, and subsequently by both Prime Ministers Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir.

Signaling the growing importance of Israel to American Jewry, the AJC in 1961 established its own office in Jerusalem. In 1979, the Jewish Communal Affairs Commission of AJC conducted a special study mission to Israel recommending Jewish identity programs to be conducted jointly by Israelis and American Jews. In 1982, the AJC pioneered an institute dedicated entirely to strengthening ties between American Jewry and Israel -- the Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations, charged with conducting exchange programs, public education within Israel and the American Jewish community, and research on changing patterns and issues concerning relations between these two communities.

At present, we stand at a moment of potentially significant change in relationships. The unity of world Jewry has all too often been built upon perceptions of vulnerability and weakness. An Israel that will be, it is hoped, economically and politically secure promises new opportunities for rebuilding relations in ways that could enrich both communities. The present statement rejects extreme positions, that is, those that argue nothing has changed as well as those that argue for radical transformations. Rather, it asserts an agenda of continuity and change, retaining salient elements of the current agenda while charting new directions for the future.

## **Jewish Peoplehood**

The rebirth of Israel as a sovereign state constitutes the success story of modern Jewish history. Israel has succeeded in capturing a consensus of support among the Jewish people everywhere. No issues have so engaged the attention of Jews today as have issues affecting Israel's well-being. As historian Michael Meyer writes, "Never in modern times have Jews in the West been more committed to Jewish peoplehood, and most of them see Israel as its chief embodiment."

For most American Jews, Jewish identity is personal and voluntary. Israel suggests a collective Jewish ethos and serves as a powerful expression of the unity of the Jewish people. Unfortunately, that unity has been built largely around a Jewish state under perpetual threat. The prospect of an Israel economically strong and at peace with her neighbors compels a redirecting of energies and passions around a new agenda of American Jewish-Israeli relations, enabling Israel to energize American Jewish life and strengthen Jewish peoplehood. At the same time, the peace process is far from fulfillment, and significant dangers to Israel continue to loom. This reality mandates caution in developing a new agenda.

As far as can reasonably be foreseen, there will continue to be a Diaspora. The Jewish communities in the Diaspora and Israel should not merely coexist, but rather should pursue as fruitful and productive a relationship as possible.

### **Mutual Responsibility**

Israel, its land, culture, language, institutions, and people, is a major resource for world Jewry, providing Jews everywhere with a vital sense of peoplehood and self-confidence. The Diaspora, in all its diversity and with all its material, cultural, and political capacities, is a major resource for Israel by reason of which Israel is both sustained and exerts an influence over, a realm vastly greater than its narrow borders.

The Talmud teaches that all Jews are responsible for one another. Threats to Jews in one corner of the world endanger Jews everywhere. All Jews are responsible for sustaining Jewish life wherever Jews live. The most obvious solution for some Jewish communities may indeed lie in immigration to Israel. Yet rescue or relief in whatever form that is most appropriate to particular endangered Jewish communities remains the responsibility of the entire Jewish people.

Similarly, as American Jews grapple with their critical task of ensuring their future Jewish continuity, Israel shares the responsibility to assist American Jewry in meeting that challenge. Moreover, American Jewry has a stake in and responsibility for helping ensure the continued salience and presence of Judaic values within Israeli society.

### **Interdependence**

Aside from being mutually responsible for one another's well-being, American Jewry and Israel form interdependent entities as part of a united Jewish people. Israel draws upon the energies of Jews everywhere. Israelis often comment that they do not realize the full meaning of being a Jew until they have visited the Diaspora. Conversely, Diaspora Jews draw spiritual sustenance from Israel.

In other words, to be a Jew today in the Diaspora generally means confronting the reality of Israel, while Israel, absent close ties to Jewish tradition and history, would risk becoming an ever narrower nationalism disconnected from the richness and diversity of Jewish heritage and experience. To be sure, this interdependence does have clear limitations.

American Jews cannot presume to be equal partners on questions of Israeli security, which affect those residents in Israel far more than in America. Yet as members of a single Jewish people, we have the obligation to participate in major issues of intrinsic Jewish importance, such as "Who is a Jew," and the Jewish nature of the Jewish state. The cultural and spiritual ties of peoplehood between American Jews and Israelis will affect our respective destinies as well as our collective future.

### **Jewish Education in Israel and North America**

Jewish education combining religious teaching with modern secular culture enriches us all as heirs to a common heritage. The most effective forms of Jewish education today demonstrate the viability of Jewish tradition in the modern context, and seek to integrate the values of Jewish heritage with those of Western culture.

Absent such Jewish education, we risk broadening the gulf between American Jewry and Israel. We must reconnect with our common Judaic heritage, including the study of the Hebrew language, underscoring its content as the common possession of Jews everywhere and transmitting that commonality to future generations.

Israel and American Jewry must maintain effective channels of communication, cooperation, and succor. In order to care for each other, they must know each other. This is a two-way street. Not only must Jews in the Diaspora be more fully acquainted with all aspects of life in Israel, but, conversely, it is incumbent upon Israelis to understand the diverse character of Jewish life in the Diaspora.

### **Political Support**

Despite arguments to the contrary, the political roles of American Jewry are by no means obsolete. The peace process will be years in unfolding. The clear majority of American Jews actively support the peace process while recognizing that there will be many obstacles ahead. Jews everywhere have a stake in preserving Jerusalem as the eternal and undivided capital of Israel. Moreover, the active involvement of the United States in the region has been a critical factor in preserving Israel's security and advancing the peace process. The continuing efforts by American Jews on behalf of ongoing U.S. support for Israel -- diplomatic, strategic, economic and moral -- remain a necessity.

The American Jewish community enjoys a unique position in America relative to other Diaspora Jewish communities and, like other Diaspora Jewries, benefits from a special relationship with the State of Israel. American Jews support the interests of their fellow Jews abroad. As a result, strong ties between Israel and the U.S. government have been nurtured and maintained over many years. Those political accomplishments symbolize the position of Jews in American society and their effective functioning within the democratic American political system.

American Jews are plainly entitled to express their opinions and offer their advice on anything about which they are informed. Unanimity can no more be expected of them than it can of Israelis. American Jews must, however, recognize that statements critical of Israel or Israeli government policy are likely to be given disproportionate weight when uttered by Jews. They should speak, therefore, with prudent circumspection. In particular, they should give reasonable deference to positions taken by Israel through its regular democratic processes, especially on matters of security and defense. Moreover, American Jews should refrain from interfering in the domestic partisan politics of Israel. Conversely, we look with displeasure on efforts by Israelis to accentuate ideological and political differences within the American Jewish community.

## **Law of Return**

Efforts in 1988 to amend the Law of Return, which guarantees every Jew the right of immediate Israeli citizenship upon settling in Israel, failed, at least in part, because of protests by leading American Jews. The Law defines a Jew as either the child of a Jewish mother or one who had converted to Judaism. In turn, the benefits of the Law of Return apply to several other categories of people, including those who have one Jewish grandparent.

In 1988, some Orthodox groups wished to amend the Law of Return by inserting the phrase "converted to Judaism in accordance with Jewish law." They, in turn, were warned that such changes would sow divisions between American Jewry and Israel by delegitimizing Conservative and Reform rabbis and rejecting conversions performed under non-Orthodox auspices. Ironically, in the 1990s the primary pressures for change in the Law emanate not from the Orthodox in Israel but from secular Israelis. Some commentators have suggested that the Law of Return is racist in character, others have argued that the Law permits entry into Israel of numerous individuals who may have the right to aliyah but who are not Jews, thereby threatening to exhaust Israel's absorptive capacity. Still others suggest that the Law of Return is an anachronism in an Israel trying to become part of the Middle East. More outspoken opponents of the Law argue that it is an obstacle to liberal democracy. Although a general consensus remains in Israeli society supportive of the Law of Return, these indications suggest the possibility of a new coalition proposing putative changes and amendments.

These protestations notwithstanding, the Law of Return stands as a capstone of the Zionist program in asserting the right of every Jew to settle in the Jewish homeland. Enacted in 1950, the Law of Return is probably the most Zionist of any Israeli law. Symbolically, it has come to represent the inextricable tie between Israel and world Jewry. Israel belongs to the entire Jewish people, and the Law of Return is, both ideologically and practically, a significant manifestation of Israel's relationship to Diaspora Jewry. We urge that appropriate consultations be held with Diaspora Jewish leaders and organizations prior to enacting any amendments to the existing Law of Return.

## **Philanthropic Support**

When Israel engages in the rescue and resettlement of Jews in peril, it does so on behalf of all Jews and it is entitled to the material support of the world Jewish community. Similarly, maintaining cultural, educational and recreational facilities in Israel merits the support of Jews worldwide. Proposals to end or reduce American Jewish fund-raising for Israel ignore the importance of American foreign aid to Israel. The significant moneys raised annually by the United Jewish Appeal communicate a powerful message to the American government of American Jewish attachment to, and involvement with, Israel.

Proposals to redirect the focus of fund-raising toward Jewish education for American Jews in Israel, and perhaps transform Israel into a spiritual learning center for American

Jews, merit serious consideration. Unquestionably, American Jewry must increase support for Jewish education in the U.S. in order to ensure American Jewish continuity.

Similarly, direct giving -- constituency to constituency and institution to institution -- may, in fact, increase over time. However, diminished fund-raising for Israel generally could potentially weaken ties between our two Jewish communities. To be sure, philanthropic relationships between Israel and American Jewry are undergoing change. In America, a general shift toward the domestic concerns of American Jewry is taking place, given increased anxieties over Jewish continuity.

New ways of building financial support for Israel are being developed, e.g. venture-capital initiatives. American Jews engaged in fund-raising for Israel perceive themselves as participating in the social and economic development of the Jewish state. Although changes in the patterns of philanthropy are both inevitable and desirable, it is harmful to dismiss the philanthropic energies of American Jewry as irrelevant to the collective Jewish future, as some Israelis have suggested. American Jewish fund-raising for Israel continues to express mutual interdependence between our communities.

### **Aliyah**

American immigrants to Israel, products of Western education and heirs to traditions of liberal democratic values, have contributed significantly to Israel's technological, cultural, and political development. Clearly, the number of American olim is not large, and therefore aliyah does not threaten American Jewish demographics. We recognize that aliyah is not a likely option for most American Jews. However, those willing to undertake aliyah deserve communal encouragement. On questions of religious pluralism, human rights, and democratic values, American Jews have much to contribute to enhancing Israeli society. Moreover, olim, through their friendship and familial networks, strengthen ties between American Jews and Israel.

To be sure, programs to encourage aliyah should by no means be considered substitutes for efforts to strengthen Jewish identity and continuity in the U.S.

Decisions to go on aliyah are frequently the result of positive earlier experiences in Israel, such as visits, extended study periods, work or service programs. Therefore, we ought to encourage broadening such experiences, especially making them available to a wider cross section of American Jewry.

### **Religious Pluralism**

An indispensable link between the Jews of Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora is Judaism. It is the shared responsibility of both communities to nurture all forms and expressions of Judaism in the life of the Jewish people.

Most American Jews treasure the availability of plural identifications of the meaning of being Jewish today. The availability of choices for Judaic expression constitutes a core issue for them. Few issues evoke greater disappointment in Israel by American Jews than the lack of dignity accorded non-Orthodox rabbis, particularly the right to officiate at religious ceremonies and life-cycle events.

American Jews rejoice that Israel is a Jewish state and Israeli society is inherently Jewish. Greater numbers of Reform and Conservative Jews in Israel would undoubtedly bring about greater Jewish religious pluralism. Israel's own future Jewish continuity requires reconnection with Judaic heritage. For that reason, movements in Israel that provide additional vehicles for Judaic expression should not only be tolerated but encouraged.

Moreover, the conduct of American Jewish-Israeli relations ought to reflect the great concern American Jews place in the legitimacy of their particular religious expressions. Knesset legislation and statements of Israeli leaders need to refrain from delegitimizing Jewish religious leaders abroad. Both Israeli and American Jews ought to recognize the public observance of Jewish religious practices -- e.g. Shabbat, kashruth -- as expressions of historical Jewish culture. More generally, American Jews and Israelis are heirs to a common Judaic civilization and, accordingly, should strive to share the treasures of that heritage with a broader number of Jews.

### **Other Diaspora Communities**

Although America and Israel form the two most important Jewish communities in the world, sizable communities exist elsewhere as well. The Jewish communities of Britain, France, Argentina, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and in the former Soviet Union are particularly noteworthy for their communal infrastructures and resources. Significant clusters of Jews also exist elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Statements casting doubt on the viability of these Diaspora communities ignore the valiant efforts under way to preserve and renew Jewish life. Such statements deserve the public response of all concerned with enhancing Israel-Diaspora ties.

The formerly classic Zionist theory of "negation of the Diaspora" -- even in its contemporary form of predicting future assimilation -- is pernicious and denigrating to serious efforts under way to preserve Jewish life throughout the world.

As a matter of Jewish tradition and pragmatic necessity, Israel and the Diaspora must, at a minimum, treat each other not merely with civility, but with the respect and concern that members of a family owe each other. The honor of each must be dear to the other. It is the duty of leadership to chastise those who fail to observe this principle.

### **Jewish Continuity**

The problem of the meaning of being a Jew in the modern world has at long last captured the attention of both Israeli and American Jewish leadership. American Jews worry about

increases in intermarriage that threaten to dilute the future numbers and quality of American Jewish life.

Israelis are only beginning to worry about the weakness of Judaic consciousness and knowledge among their youth. In both America and Israel, Jewish women, who constitute a critical resource in enhancing the Jewish future, are seeking avenues for expression of their identity and connectedness to Jewish tradition and securing their equality as women in Jewish communal life.

Jews everywhere share a common struggle to identify the salience of Jewish tradition in a world of person autonomy, freedom of choice, and cultural diversity. Israeli society must ask itself if it is indeed linked to thousands of years of Jewish life in the Diaspora or whether it forms an entirely new entity. Israeli and Diaspora Jews alike have a stake in creating meaningful expressions of Jewish identification in which all Jews can participate and ultimately transmit to the next generation. In turn, an ideology of collective Jewish meaning can help answer the question today of why be Jewish.

More particularly, for American Jewry, Jewish identity is generally personal and voluntary. For Israelis, by contrast, a Jewish society bestows a collective identity suggesting participation in a national endeavor. Both expressions enrich one another.