

“Israel on my Mind,” Israel’s Role in World Jewish Identity



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Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations of the American Jewish Committee

The Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations, founded in 1982 as an arm of the American Jewish Committee, is an interpreter of Israeli and American Jewry to each other, and seeks to build bridges between the world's largest Jewish communities.

Specifically, its goals are achieved programmatically through a variety of undertakings, including:

- An intensive immersion seminar for American college faculty in the history, politics, culture, and society of modern Israel, conducted by Brandeis University. The goal is to enable college professors to teach courses on their home campuses on modern Israel, in all its complexity, as a Jewish and democratic state.
- Exchange programs over the years bringing Israeli politicians, academicians, civil servants, and educators to the United States to study the diversity of the American Jewish community and its role in American politics and society. Hundreds of Israelis have participated in these dialogue-oriented missions cosponsored by the Institute and its Israeli partners, the Jerusalem Municipality, the Oranim Teacher Training Institute, and Israel's Ministry of Education.
- Studies of the respective communities, particularly of their interconnectedness, published in both Hebrew and English, in conjunction with the Argov Institute of Bar-Ilan University. These have included monographs, among others, on "Who Is a Jew," "Post-Zionism," and Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel.
- Public conferences to study, discuss, and report on the American Jewish-Israeli relationship. A recent conference was cosponsored with Tel Aviv University and Brandeis University on anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in historical perspective.

The Koppelman Institute has succeeded in reaching out to leaders who ultimately will shape the minds of thousands of followers in developing a more positive and productive relationship between Israel and American Jewry.

Harold T. Shapiro, Ph.D.
Chairman

Steven Bayme, Ph.D.
Director

Contents

Foreword	5
Steven Bayme	7
Arthur Hertzberg	10
Alan D. Hoffman	14
Moshe Itzhaki	19
Aharon Megged	27
Deborah Dash Moore	34
Stephen Joel Trachtenberg	39
S. Ilan Troen	44
Gil Troy	51

Foreword

The balance of strength between Israel and Diaspora Jewry stands today at an historic tipping point. When Israel came into being in 1948, the *yishuv* comprised some 750,000 Jews, less than 10 percent of world Jewry, and they were beleaguered from without and economically and socially fragile from within. Concerned about what would be the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora Jewish communities—particularly with regard to such questions as who speaks for the Jewish people and whether Israel’s Law of Return might jeopardize the citizenship claims of Jews elsewhere—the American Jewish Committee in 1950 undertook an exchange of views between then Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and AJC President Jacob Blaustein to define mutual obligations as well as to articulate a principle of noninterference in each other’s affairs.

Today, fifty-five years later, much has changed, demographically and politically. Israel stands poised to become the largest Jewish community in the world, and both Israel and world Jewry acknowledge the mutuality of responsibilities between themselves. The decades-long Arab-Israeli conflict, the ripple effects of the Palestinian intifada begun in 2000, and the two-way influences of Diaspora and Israeli cultures have made the ties ever more firmly rooted and complex. The American Jewish Committee’s Dorothy and Julius Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations, which was created to deepen and examine the relations between the two largest Jewish communities, viewed this as a particularly meaningful moment in time to convene a written symposium to assess the role of Israel in contemporary Jewish life and Jewish identity.

The following statement was addressed to all the contributors to this volume for their response:

In many ways, Israel has redefined the patterns and rhythms of Jewish living. Frequently, in the Diaspora, Jewish communal life has been built around and upon the accomplishments of Israel and the challenges she faces. Support for the State of Israel has often been correlated with personal Jewish identity and commitment.

Although solidarity with Israel remains fairly constant and overwhelming for American Jewry, American Jews—and particularly younger American Jews—are drifting away from an instinctive connection to Israel. The percentage of American Jews who have visited Israel once (let alone twice) has been decreasing over time. The meaning of Israel for contemporary Jews has become more complex as well. Although in times of crisis world Jewry rallies to Israel’s side, the heady days of post-1967 euphoria are long over and have been replaced by the complexities of Israel’s reality, the

unresolved conflict with Israel's most intractable neighbors, and the internal identity crisis on the meaning of a Jewish democratic state.

We envision a symposium of Israeli and Diaspora Jewish leaders and intellectuals assessing the role and meaning of Israel in contemporary Jewish life. The following questions are offered for your consideration:

- 1) What role does the State of Israel play in the development of Diaspora Jewish identity?
- 2) How does living in a sovereign Jewish state affect the meaning and quality of Jewish identity within that state?
- 3) What are the benefits and challenges of the centrality of Israel in contemporary Jewish life?
- 4) What ought to be the responsibility of Diaspora Jewry toward Israel in the context of the collapse of Oslo and the four-year terror war?
- 5) What ought to be the responsibility of Israel toward ensuring Jewish continuity in the Diaspora? Does this responsibility apply differently toward smaller Diaspora communities that lack a critical mass of Jews?

The nine respondents are a distinguished group of Jewish intellectuals and community leaders, drawn from academia, the literary world, and the Jewish public square, both in Israel and the United States. Their views, presented in alphabetical order, shine a fresh light on the meaning of Jewish peoplehood.

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Israel and World Jewry

Steven Bayme

In 1950, shortly after the creation of Israel as a Jewish state, American Jewish Committee president Jacob Blaustein challenged Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion to clarify Israel's relationship and responsibilities to world Jewry. More specifically, Blaustein was concerned about Israel's claim to represent the entire Jewish people, calls by Israeli emissaries for American *aliya*, and even Israel's Law of Return, guaranteeing immediate Israeli citizenship to any Jew immigrating there. Blaustein wished to secure the principle of Israeli non-intervention in internal Diaspora matters and to define American Jewry as the senior partner in the Israel-Diaspora relationship.

In exchange for specific guarantees on these matters, Blaustein was willing to extend considerable political and diplomatic support for Israel. Already his efforts had succeeded in marginalizing the American Council for Judaism, which opposed the very idea of a Jewish state on the grounds that Judaism constituted a matter of faith rather than membership in a specific people. With the support of the United States State Department, the American Council for Judaism had sponsored a lecture tour by the well-known president of the Hebrew University, Judah Magnes, during the spring of 1948, opposing Jewish statehood and making the case for a binational entity. The Council hoped that AJC would support its program. Many AJC leaders were, in fact, sympathetic to the Council's perspective. However, they felt that their responsibility as Jewish leaders lay in preserving the unity of the Jewish people rather than in fracturing that unity by supporting Magnes's divisive proposals. Now, in 1950, Blaustein was prepared to work toward establishing a pro-Israel consensus within the American Jewish community. That consensus has been sustained through many ups and downs over the decades, and remains critical to maintaining the Washington-Jerusalem "special relationship."

Much has changed since 1950. The Ben-Gurion-Blaustein agreement was reaffirmed in 1961 and again in 1970. Practically, however, the principle of nonintervention, articulated eloquently by Ben-Gurion, has been violated repeatedly. By the 1970s Israel had clearly become the senior partner in the relationship to world Jewry, if for no other reason than considerations of Israeli security had clearly prevailed in Jewish consciousness over Diaspora sensitivities about alleged "dual loyalty"—the specter of which, in fact, rarely materialized. Indeed, by the 1990s some Israeli spokespersons were trivializing American Jewish political and economic assistance as unnecessary at best and a diversion from real Jewish needs at worst. Yossi Beilin, among others, called for an end to the "mobilization



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model” of Israel-Diaspora relations centered on an image of Israel in need of Diaspora assistance. Some Israeli intellectuals went so far as to advocate a “post-Zionist” model of Israel that would cut its ties to world Jewry.

These admittedly extreme statements arose primarily in the context of the optimism of the Oslo years, when many Israeli and American Jewish leaders truly believed that the millennium was on the horizon. The collapse of the Oslo process, and the resurgence of anti-Semitism globally, to say nothing of the threats of international terrorism, underscored the necessity for continued interdependence between Israel and world Jewry. In a world in which empathy and understanding for Israel internationally were expressed so rarely, newfound appreciation for America’s continued support of Israel was credited to the ever-vigilant stance of the American Jewish community.

Where We Are Now: Positive Developments

Where, then, are we today? Clearly we are experiencing a shift in the demographic paradigm. For the first time in 2,700 years of Jewish history, within our very own lifetimes, we will witness a Jewish population in the historic Jewish homeland numerically greater than the Jewish population of the Diaspora. This Israeli demographic ascendancy connotes both the normalization of the Jews as a people living primarily within its homeland and the reality of a Diaspora that is threatened by rampant assimilation, mixed-marriage, and below replacement-level birthrates.

Secondly, American Jews have transcended their ambivalence concerning the Law of Return and unequivocally endorse it today as a bedrock principle of Zionism and Jewish peoplehood. If anything, American Jews are most concerned about efforts by Israel’s Orthodox establishment to limit the Law of Return by precise definition of Jewish status. Repeatedly, American Jewish leaders have called for sustaining the status quo with respect to defining who is a Jew under the Law of Return, i.e., anyone born of a Jewish mother or one who has converted to Judaism.

Lastly, American Jews have become extremely proud of a Jewish state that stands as a shining example of democracy in a region of the world in which models of dictatorship prevail. As Blaustein noted as early as 1950, Israel “has inspired pride and admiration” among Jews worldwide.

Where We Are Now: Areas of Concern

Yet some anxieties remain. Nearly two-thirds of American Jewry have never visited Israel even once over the decades of her existence. Observers bemoan the ever-widening distance between Israel and American Jewry over questions of politics, religion, and Jewish identity. Sadly, Hebraic literacy among American Jews is virtually nonexistent—at a moment when the rebirth of the Hebrew language in the Jewish homeland is one of the most outstanding in a long line of Zionist achievements. Most importantly, as American Jewry confronts the specter of continued assimilation, declining Jewishness invariably connotes decreased attachment to Israel.

Israel's accomplishments, indeed, are considerable. The Jewish state provided refuge to Holocaust survivors and Jews from Arab lands. Israel's role in the Soviet Jewry movement formed a critical component within one of the greatest Jewish foreign policy successes of the twentieth century. By the same token, the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry in the 1980s and the 1990s ought to have buried once and for all the canard that Zionism equals racism.

Yet these achievements lie primarily within the realm of rescue and relief from external threats to Jewish existence. To be sure, rescue and relief connoted critical goals of the Zionist program. Yet the unfinished agenda of Israel's relationship to world Jewry relates more to the meaning of Jewish peoplehood today. For too long, the unity of the Jews as a people has been sustained by external threats and Jewish perceptions of vulnerability. Our challenge for the future is creating a collective national will as a people founded not in response to external threats but upon common heritage, values, and aspirations. To be sure, external threats will continue for the foreseeable future, but shared culture and common Jewishness between Israel and world Jewry must serve as the basis for tomorrow's Jewish peoplehood. As the Zionist theoretician Ahad Ha'am noted many years ago, for a people to survive it must contain both shared memories of the past and a common vision for the future.

Joint Responsibility Is No Picnic

Arthur Hertzberg

One assumption that colors all of the questions asked of the participants in this symposium is that the change in the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora came after 1967. This is simply not true. Such an assumption could be made only by younger people who were not involved in the life of the new State of Israel and the Diaspora after 1948. I am particularly intrigued that these questions should come from the American Jewish Committee, which was headed in those early days by Jacob Blaustein.

Soon after the State of Israel was created, Blaustein confronted David Ben-Gurion, the founding prime minister of Israel, over a fundamental question in the relationship between the Diaspora and the new state. Blaustein refused to be badgered by Israel into assenting to the idea that the Jewish state now existed to draw into its borders all of the Jews of the Diaspora or, at very least, to have the right to command them to accept an order of priorities within Jewish life that was entirely centered on the well-being and strength of Israel. Blaustein insisted that the Diaspora had a life and a set of intentions of its own. The resolution of this quarrel was an agreement between Blaustein and Ben-Gurion on August 23, 1950, that the Israelis would cease insisting on *aliya* as the dominant purpose of Zionism, and, therefore, on the end of the Diaspora in measurable time; and the Jews outside Israel's borders would continue to have the right and the duty to foster their own versions of Jewish life. Once this pact was made, the Diaspora agreed to continue to mount maximum fund-raising and other efforts on behalf of Israel, provided that Israel would cease insisting that the Diaspora regard itself as engaged in the process of coming to an end.

The Ben-Gurion-Blaustein agreement was not, on the surface, an ideological document, and yet it was. It presumed the continued existence of both Israel and the Diaspora and continued cooperation and negotiation between the two elements of Jewish life. It was a very short step from this assertion to the further proposition, which I defined in a much-debated essay in my introduction to *The Zionist Idea*, that Israel and the Diaspora were each looking to the other to strengthen it in their divergent purposes: Israel was looking to the Diaspora to be its warehouse of usable parts that would always be well-stocked and available for the purposes of the Jewish state; the Diaspora was looking to Israel to furnish it with pride and verve with which to continue its life and its journey. Each wanted something that the other was not really prepared to grant, so there was trouble brewing from the very beginning.



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No Easy Life Together

I knew as early as the summer of 1949 that Israel and the Diaspora would have no easy life together. I reported this conclusion in some early articles in *Commentary*, the most critical Jewish journal in those days, and in other publications, and I remember very well that hard-bitten American Zionists criticized me for pouring water on the shining and glorious blaze of the new State of Israel. But I did not pour water. I simply emphasized that the glory of Israel would continue to inspire Jewish life all over the world, but it would not necessarily create a single-minded program of mass *aliya*. What the creation of Israel did for Jews all over the world was that it took us from despair about our future as a people in the years of the Holocaust to shining faith that we were not battered and defeated but capable of glorious victories. We looked to Israel for pride and faith in ourselves—and six decades later that faith is not gone. Israel is our assurance—the assurance of all of us, even those who have no intention of ever moving there—that there are deep sources of strength and faith within the Jewish people. Even these days, when we worry about younger generations unaffected directly by either the Holocaust or the battles for the creation of the State of Israel, we know that the 1940s and what followed have left deep spiritual and emotional deposits in all our souls.

Of course, Jewish life, and the experience of Judaism as faith and practice is different in the State of Israel than in the Diaspora. It is only in Israel that Sunday is Monday, that the working week begins immediately after the Jewish Sabbath, and that December 25 is not a holiday. Turning toward the interior dimensions of Jewish life, it is only in Israel that Jews of all persuasions must encounter each other and find ways of living together, because there each of the factions is constrained to live together in political and communal coalitions with all the others. In the Diaspora it is possible for each of the Jewish factions to live its life largely ignoring the others.

To be sure, there is a widespread impression that Israeli life is tending toward the secular while the life of the Jews in the Diaspora is more affected by versions of the Jewish religion, but essentially this is not so. The majority of the Israelis, even those who define themselves as secular, do practice a serious amount of Judaism (Passover *sedarim*, fasting on Yom Kippur, and being married under rabbinic law), while a large proportion of the Jews in the Diaspora are simply using their freedom to opt out. In both communities there is a grow-

ing undertow among people who want to know more about the tradition and to derive some strength from it. The more this happens, and is seen to be happening in Israel, the more such movement will be encouraged in the whole of the Jewish world. We who care about the future of the Jewish people must move the Jews of both Israel and the Diaspora toward relearning the sources of our heritage. We must as a people return to what has been called in Israel the “ark of books.”

The Political Future of Israel

The most difficult contemporary question before the Jewish people as a whole is the political future of Israel. Here, indeed, the aftermath of the war of 1967 introduced a new political fanaticism and intransigence in some parts of the Jewish people. Let it be stated here very bluntly—despite the echoes of this intransigence among sections of the Christian community, the maximalism of the hard-liners cannot be allowed to represent the Jewish people, either in Israel or in the Diaspora. Modern Zionism arose more than a century ago to lead us toward peace among ourselves and especially with our non-Jewish neighbors. Anyone who imagines that our friends in the world will support us in a Jewish jihad for a supposedly divinely ordained state in the undivided Land of Israel—and never mind what happens to millions of Palestinians or their national aspirations—is simply politically insane. Not even the conservatives who are now in power in Washington will offer up the Palestinian Arabs to the hard-line Orthodox Jewish believers. Those who imagine this are prescribing war and presuming that somehow God will send a messiah to save us from its consequences. I have for years been asking the question: Which messiah is going to come? Is it the one who failed to appear in Auschwitz in 1943? The Jews of the Diaspora, who are very much on the political firing line, have a duty to help save Israel from political madness.

There is an old Talmudic principle that “all Jews are responsible for one another.” That means that it is our duty in New York or London or Paris or Stockholm to intervene in Israel’s affairs by supporting those whose political views, such as those currently represented by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, lead toward accommodation and peace. By the same token, the Jews of the Diaspora and of Israel are jointly responsible for the continuity of Jewish life in all of our major centers. For example, a couple of years ago when Argentina was in deepest crisis, Israel joined with the Diaspora in helping to finance

the Jewish schools in Argentina, lest they go bankrupt. Israel and the Diaspora are involved in parallel efforts to raise the level of Jewishness in the former Soviet Union.

We cannot ask of Israel that it make major efforts to help the stronger Jewish communities in the Diaspora. We have the means and the leadership to take care of ourselves, always being grateful for advice and suggestions that come from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. There are no set rules here, except that we must always remember that we cannot abandon any Jew anywhere in the world and that everywhere Jews who are in trouble—whether in political danger or dreading assimilation—are on our doorstep. I grew up reading a daily paper in Yiddish, the *Tog*, which had on its masthead the following motto: “We exist to encourage all creative forces in Jewish life.” That ought to be our worldwide motto for the future.

Israel and the Diaspora: Helping Each Other to Strengthen Jewish Vitality

Alan D. Hoffmann

Consideration of the role of Israel in shaping Diaspora Jewish identity must begin with careful attention to the substantial differences among Diaspora Jewish communities. For communities such as Great Britain, most of Latin America, Australia, South Africa, and to an extent, Canada, the relationship to Israel has been a pivotal cornerstone of community life and the community's self-understanding of its Jewishness.

In the former Soviet Union, the connection to Israel historically predated the emergence of Jewish community and hence in many ways was the essence of Jewish identity. Even today, after the waves of mass *aliya* in the 1990s, the relationship to Israel functions as the major form of Jewish expression for a large segment of the population. One could almost say that Israel, in the Former Soviet Union, is a major "denomination" of Jewish life.

On the other hand, for many communities in Europe, an emphasis on Israel within Jewish life highlights difficult contemporary political issues and hence is often avoided by a leadership seeking consensus and smooth relations with the non-Jewish society. In the United States, the largest Diaspora community, support of Israel is a mainstream pillar of organized Jewish life; at the same time, Israel's role in developing Jewish identity has changed from earlier generations, when Israel was perceived as a source of inspiration and pride for Jewish life and identity. In the United States, and increasingly in other Diaspora communities as well, the Jewish identity of the younger generation has undergone a deep transformation, as described by Profs. Arnold Eisen and Steven M. Cohen in their important book on contemporary American Jewry, *The Jew Within*. As young Diaspora Jews increasingly look inward for meaning and define their Jewishness in private and individualized fashions, the relationship to Israel has been deeply affected as well.

For decades, Israel represented the collective pillar of Jewish life. Jews were drawn into a strong connection to Israel as an expression of their sense of responsibility to the Jewish collective. The epic events of Israel's early years reinforced a sense of shared history and destiny with Israelis for large portions of Diaspora Jewry. Solidarity with Israel became a Jewish imperative because it articulated a deeply felt sense of Jewish collective identity and identification. As the collective dimensions of Jewish identity weakened, the foundations for the relationship with Israel weakened as well. To a degree, changing perspectives on Israel were not only a result of this transformation from the collective to the personal, but perhaps one of the catalysts as well.



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The Dilemma for Jewish Educators

Given this reality of contemporary Jewish life, Jewish educators are now faced with the dilemma of how to respond. I believe deeply that the continued vital existence of the next generation of the Jewish people needs a strong collective dimension. I do not believe that internal and individual sources of meaning and purpose are sufficient, on their own, to allow the Jewish people to continue to thrive, in part because Judaism has always had national and collective elements at its very core. Without translocal loci of meaning and significance, Jewish identity will lack the depth, rigor, and passion to allow young Jews to continue making Jewish choices in contemporary open societies. For this reason, one of the main challenges of Jewish education in the Diaspora today is the engagement of young people with the collective dimensions of the Jewish experience, particularly with Israel—the embodiment par excellence of Jewish collectivity.

Engagement with Israel as privileged Jewish space is made more difficult by the tenuous standing of place in general in an increasingly globalized and virtual world. While cutting-edge transportation and communication technologies open up new possibilities of connection between the Diaspora and Israel, they also contribute to a sense of disorientation and ennui that dampens place-rooted identities.

In actuality, young Jews in Israel are also deeply affected by such dynamics. For generations, Israeli Jews were socialized in a culture that placed primary importance on the connection to land, physical roots, and an often visceral connection to the soil and the landscape. The direct link between the new Jews of Israel and the old Land of Israel was the predominant indicator of Jewish sovereign life in the new state. As this link weakened, a product of the land's rapid economic transformation, deep cultural and social processes, and the politicization of the Land of Israel since 1967, the anchors of the new Israeli Jewish identity have been threatened as well.

Asymmetry of Jewish Identity in Israel and the Diaspora

I am certainly not one to argue that there is symmetry in the extent and severity of the crisis facing Jewish identity in the Diaspora and in Israel. Nevertheless, Jewish identity in Israel faces serious challenges as well. Israel's state school system's curriculum has been justly criticized for its lack of success in engaging young Israelis positively with Jewish content, and the intimate link between politics and religion

dictated so far by Jewish sovereignty has negatively impacted upon the Jewish identity of many of Israel's younger generation. On the other hand, the constant availability of Jewish content and the renewed efforts to improve the encounter of young people with such content, along with the very real impact of living a modern sovereign life according to a Jewish calendar and among a Jewish majority, provide a more solid starting place for important efforts to guarantee the quality of Jewish identity for Israel's next generation.

In this context, I believe that Israelis, like their Diaspora peers, deeply benefit from meaningful encounters with world Jewry. Educational programs and projects that place Diaspora Jews and Israelis in shared and engaging frameworks have the greatest potential to secure a vibrant and passionate future Jewish identity on both sides of the ocean.

The outbreak of violence in the region in September 2000, and the subsequent responses of both Diaspora and Israeli Jews, revealed the fragility of many of the assumptions regarding Jewish life in the Diaspora and in Israel. In the United States, ostensible support for Israel and the mainstream identification and solidarity with Israel now appeared to be only a thin veneer upon a much deeper and complex reality of alienation and distance. American Jewish leadership, distressed by the apparent inability of its younger generation to come to Israel's defense on college campuses, and shocked by the dramatic decline in teen travel to Israel, mobilized to restore Israel's standing and image.

Israel advocacy is an important obligation of Diaspora Jewry, and it has played a significant role in holding the fort during difficult years of hostile media coverage of Israel which has impacted upon domestic opinion and policy in many countries. At the same time, the focus on advocacy does not touch on the deeper problem of Israel's marginal place in Diaspora identity formation, primarily in the United States. In this sense I would argue that, while Diaspora communities bear responsibility toward Israel's security and stability, a responsibility admirably served by advocacy and solidarity, they have no less of an obligation to their own continued Jewish vitality. This vitality is handicapped when the young generation knows little about Israel, feels little connection or involvement, and has its identity untouched by the life experiences of what will soon be the majority of world Jewry living Jewish life under the conditions of national sovereignty in Israel.

Why Israeli and Diaspora Jewry Need Each Other

I would suggest, therefore, that the question of obligations within the relationship of Israel and the Diaspora is primarily a question of obligations that each side bears to itself. Diaspora Jewry needs a vital relationship with Israel and Israelis to fully experience the richness of Jewish experience—the complex interweaving of the personal and collective dimensions that make up a rich and vibrant Jewish identity. It needs to develop ongoing and meaningful encounters with Israelis because such encounters add entirely new levels to the experience of Diaspora Jewishness. It needs to encourage its young people to spend long periods of time in Israel, not just as a way of contributing to Israeli society, but as a way of ratcheting up the quality of Jewish life in the Diaspora by engendering a new generation of Jewish families who have a strong Jewish peoplehood experience embedded in their core biographies. It needs to foster knowledge of Hebrew, familiarity with Israeli reality, and a connection with Israeli culture, because without these, their Jewishness is most likely to be narrow in its dimensionality and shallow in its vibrancy. When Israel becomes a more central part of Diaspora Jewish identity, that identity is itself transformed and enhanced.

In a similar fashion, the major reason why Israelis need to develop common experiences and conversations with Diaspora Jews goes beyond the national imperative to assist distressed Jews in need. Surely Israel does have this obligation: a commitment rooted in basic Jewish values and sentiments. This imperative, and subsequent policy decisions by the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency, continue to play a critical role in saving Jewish lives and in establishing a national home. Today, however, the Jewish world is essentially composed of sustainable and thriving communities of Jews in several major centers, principally in the United States. When the conversation between Israel and these centers begins with the assumption that Israel bears responsibility for ensuring Jewish continuity in the Diaspora, it is tainted with a nagging sense of asymmetry and Israeli hubris. Not only does this conversation, linked often to a similarly barren polemic of Israel's centrality, miss the real ways in which the connection to Israel is necessary from a Diaspora point of view, but it also prevents Israelis from understanding the importance *for themselves* of real connections with Diaspora Jews.

Israelis will remain Jewish without a relationship to the Diaspora, and Israeli society is not dependent on this link for its very existence. Nonetheless, it has become clear that the life experience of Diaspora Jews as minorities in pluralistic societies and the variety of

perspectives that Jewish life around the world offers today are very valuable identity-building components for Israeli Jews. While the future existence of Jewish identity in Israel is not in danger, we should be equally and passionately concerned with its vitality and character. We should care about the Israeli ability not just to sustain Jewishness, but to live up to our national calling of revitalizing Jewish life and experience. For this mission, both in the Diaspora and in Israel, we need each other.

Role and Meaning of Israel in Jewish Life Today

Moshe Itzhaki

I will begin with a bit of personal history, from which I will attempt to weave threads of a wider perspective and an evaluation of the meaning of Israel.

I was born in Israel three years after the establishment of the state, to parents who had emigrated from Eastern Europe after World War II. My father believed in a Marxist-socialist, nation-based Zionism and was a stranger to Jewish spirituality. For him, the Jewish religion had died during the Second World War, or even before. Based on this, he viewed modernity and progressive ideas as opposed to religion.

My mother understood Zionism differently, in a manner like that of A.D. Gordon, who espoused a “religion of labor”: Zionism with all its secular ideas was not anti-religious; on the contrary, it was a movement reborn out of its origins, in order to form a culture for a people attempting to solve its basic problem. My mother would not have put her beliefs in just that way, but this is what I learned from her lifestyle. She felt that Israel was her place, her home. She never turned her back on Jewish symbols and ceremonies. She went to synagogue on Sabbath and holidays, and fulfilled the *mitzvot* directed toward helping fellow human beings (*bein adam l’havero*) with a religious fervor in her secular life.

More fundamentally, beyond ideologies, my parents came to Israel seeking shelter, a place where they could raise their children with no danger of anti-Semitism or assimilation. They would certainly have adopted S.Y. Agnon’s description of the motivation of Yitzhak Kumer, the anti-hero of his novel *T’mol Shilshom (Only Yesterday)*, who came to Israel “to build it out of its ashes and be built by it.”

But even allowing for their strong wish to become part of the Zionist workforce in the Jewish homeland, they remained for me “*galut* Jews,” Jews of the Diaspora. I was particularly embarrassed when they spoke their mother tongue. I refused to speak Rumanian, Yiddish or Ladino with them. In Israel, I told them, we speak only Hebrew.

My Israeli-Jewish identity was formed in the youth movement I belonged to: *Ha’noar Ha’oved ve’Ha’lomed* (Working and Studying Youth). The Zionism I learned was based on the concept of a homeland for the Jewish people on the one hand and a complete negation of the *galut* on the other. The ultimate act of Zionist belief for me was living on a kibbutz. Judaism, the religion, and the Jewish people living in *galut* were perceived as something alien, distant, and inferior. Much later I understood that I had, in fact, adopted the point of view of the “youngsters” of classical Zionist ideology—Micah Joseph



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Berdichevski, Joseph Hayyim Brenner, and others who strongly advocated the negation of the *galut*.

I perceived being an Israeli and being Jewish as one and the same. Both were actualized through the use of the Hebrew language and Hebrew creative activity of all kinds, through working the land (which I saw as an almost religious experience), through learning to know the country by walking its paths, through joining a combat unit in the IDF, and through volunteering and living on a kibbutz. The kibbutz was seen as the realization of all past aspirations for redemption, through the formation of a new society and a new Jewish person. I perceived Jews abroad as a sort of weak, atrophied limb of the Jewish people, whose head, heart, and ability to multiply were in the Land of Israel.

At this point it is worth noting a change that has occurred in the Hebrew language in the last decades: “Dispersion” or Diaspora have taken the place of “*galut*” reflecting a meaningful toning down of the concepts of “*galut* and exile,” as representing a hierarchy of values between Israel and Jews outside of the designated homeland. In one of the classes I taught last year at Oranim College for Israeli students, I put up a map of the world and marked the countries where Jewish communities and Jewish life exist. I asked the students to define Jewish communities worldwide in relation to the concepts of “homeland,” “*galut*,” or “dispersion.” Their reactions were extremely interesting: All Jewish communities with the exception of North America, Britain, and Australia were defined as “*galut*.” These *galut* communities were perceived as being in distress because of anti-Semitism, economic problems, or other serious dangers. North American Jewry was perceived as living in “dispersion,” as a well-off community, living in a “dream or an American film.” Australia was defined by some students as a place where Jewish existence was desirable. Israel was (predictably) defined by some as “homeland”; by others as “dispersion,” and by a few even as “*galut*.”

The change in the terminology describing the relationship between those living in Israel and those living outside calls for a serious, in-depth analysis to clarify the (possibly) changing place of Israel among many Jews in the Diaspora. When I was a young man, the United States was seen by Israelis as a *galut* comprised of distant rich uncles who sent packages and donated money, especially when we were getting killed here, defending the homeland. We used to say about these uncles: “Let them come to Israel or donate money, but don’t let them interfere in our lives.” At the same time, we were presumptuous enough to see Israel as the spokesperson of the entire Jewish people, and its government as the government of the Jewish people.

Unknowingly, I had entered the ancient Jewish argument regarding the relative importance of the Land of Israel and the *galut*, and I had adopted, without any connection to religion or to God, the position of first part of the *baraita* (a teaching not included in the Mishna) in *Ketuboth 110b*:

Our rabbis taught: One should always live in the Land of Israel, even in a town where most of the inhabitants are idolaters, but let no one live outside the Land, even in a town where most of the inhabitants are Israelites; for whoever lives in the Land of Israel may be considered to have a God, but whoever lives outside the Land may be regarded as one who has no God.

(Babylonian Talmud, Soncino translation)

Covenant of Blood, Sweat, Tears, and Money

In my perception at the time, Israelis were connected to U.S. Jewry through a sort of covenant built around the concepts of “blood, sweat, tears and money.” We sweat and bleed, and American Jews give tears and money. Israel’s Jews maintain the national home and its symbols and give world Jewry a feeling that they have a second home; and in return, Jews in positions of power and influence around the world do what they can for Israel and view it as the authority regarding Jewish questions. This balance of power, which for American Jewry was apparently extremely important in defining their connection and commitment to the existence of Israel, was perceived by many Israelis as comfortable, but, on occasion, insensitive to the needs of world Jewry. No wonder then that the suggestions made by Yossi Beilin and Binyamin Netanyahu in the nineties, each of whom in his own way said that Israel no longer needed money from world Jewry, provoked anger and hostility from sectors of American Jewry who saw their financial contributions as important ways of expressing their connection to Judaism and to Israel.

The first chinks in this monolithic viewpoint regarding Israel and Jewish identity, forged through participation in Israeli youth movements, began to show in certain circles, particularly among educators and intellectuals, after the Yom Kippur War, when the euphoria that followed the Six-Day War had evaporated. This crisis that my generation and I experienced had several dimensions:

- a. A sense of loss of the values common to all of Israeli society and a shift toward the Messianic dreams of a “greater Israel.”
- b. A loss of a feeling of basic security, and consequently, massive

- emigration (*yerida*) to other countries.
- c. The break-up of the socialist Labor Movement and a revision of the historical estimation of the founding fathers.
- d. A feeling that secular language alone was insufficient to create the spiritual-cultural dynamics to enable us to teach our children values that strengthen our connection to the land.
- e. A stifling feeling of religious coercion stemming from the problematic relationship between religion and state in Israel, and an “over-centralization” of the Orthodox world, arising from its not being willing to recognize alternative ways of being Jewish.

A Third Way

Written documentation describing this crisis can be found in books like *Past Continuous (Zikhron D'varim)* by Ya'akov Shabtai and *Si'ah Lohamim (The Seventh Day: Soldiers' Talk about the Six-Day War)*, a book recording discussions among young Israeli soldiers and kibbutz members following the Six-Day War. This reality led several groups of educators within the kibbutz movement and outside to the conclusion that, unless it adopted the language of Jewish culture and heritage, Israeli society would face cultural and spiritual extinction, and would become unable to educate its youth in a humanistic Jewish manner while maintaining a democratic lifestyle.

These groups started working toward finding a “third way” of Jewish existence and education—that is, discovering ways of expressing the Jewish identity of those who do not define themselves as religious. This way is situated between the ultra-Orthodox extreme, which claims exclusivity over the questions of who is Jewish and what Judaism is, and its extreme opposite, which manifests indifference, disregard, and alienation from Judaism. This third way is also different from any of the religious streams on the same continuum, each defining its own religiosity. The group that led this development from the beginning was founded in the sixties and was called the Sh'demot circle. It was made up of kibbutz-born people, who, following the Six-Day War and especially the Yom Kippur War, felt a need to drastically change the issue of Jewish identity in Israeli society.

The initial leader of the group was Avraham Shapira, who had encountered during his studies Gershom Scholem, Hugo Bergmann, and Ernst Simon, who greatly influenced his thinking and that of the Sh'demot circle. Other leaders included Muki Tzur and Yariv Ben-Aharon. The Sh'demot group tried to pave a way based on Jewish cul-

ture and creativity throughout the generations, and on commitment to Jewish culture, regarded as a source of inspiration for new and broad creative expressions, giving ancient sources a transformative understanding in the spirit of Ahad Ha'am, Chaim Nachman Bialik, A.D. Gordon, M.J. Berdichevski, J.H. Brenner, Berl Katzenelson, Mordecai M. Kaplan, and others. The Sh'demot circle, in fact, laid the intellectual and educational foundations for other groups that today engage and extend the theoretical and practical bases regarding Jewish existential issues.

Berl Katzenelson, a founder of the Labor Movement and of its newspaper, *Davar*, explained the transformation of sources in the following manner:

A creative and renewing generation does not throw away its legacy. It examines it closely, brings it closer and pushes away. Sometimes it holds on to an existing tradition, adding to it. Sometimes it goes into the garbage heap, exposes forgotten things, cleans them up from rust, and renews an ancient tradition that can feed people's spirits again.

This third way is unfamiliar, both in Israel and among world Jewry. It is simpler to divide the Jewish people into religious and secular camps. This way you can strengthen the side you identify with and try to weaken the others. The narrow definition limits the way Judaism can be expressed, while this way relates mostly, but not exclusively, to people who have given up their Jewish identity and sense of belonging because they could not find what they were seeking spiritually in the religious expressions of Judaism. It is not only a pleasant pastime, or a kind of "optional Judaism," as H.N. Bialik called it, but includes a compulsory dimension of education and the passing on of cultural heritage.

This way also has the potential to create a dialogue with world Jewry. It can pave a road and provide an entry ticket to the Jewish people for those who have been estranged from it. This way looks upon Judaism as a necessary culture for spiritual reawakening, without falling back on the authority of some council of elders. It can create a fruitful and renewing discourse of Jewish identity and culture in Israel and elsewhere.

Steps in Developing an Alternative Jewish Identity

Based on my own personal narrative, as well as that of a growing group within Israeli society, I can say that this unique bonding with the roots of Jewish identity and culture has exposed deep strata con-

necting us to our heritage and moving us in the direction of greater commitment to our society. I have become aware that the Hebrew language—a quintessential Jewish language, in all its diversity—enables me, as a secular person, to give personal and collective expression to my life in the community. Judaism has become a live and nourishing source of the rhythms of my calendar and the cycles of my existence.

Together with others who are secular like myself, I have developed alternative Jewish texts and syllabi around the topics of Jewish identity for children, adolescents, and adults who find the world of Judaism strange, distant, and alienating. This movement has led to a “cultural healing” of the rift between the modern secular Jew and his heritage.

Another step in the process of building my Jewish identity and connection with the Jewish people took place when I, as part of an Israeli delegation, met with people, institutions, and communities of American Jewry in a nonstereotypical manner, for the first time. The initiative and responsibility for this crucial meeting lay with the leaders of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in New York and Jerusalem. In this crucially important meeting I found the missing dimensions to my Jewish identity as an Israeli: the concept of religious pluralism, which includes varied expressions of belief; the idea of belonging to a community and volunteering, based on Jewish concepts that emphasize the notion of responsibility for other Jews, (“*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh*,” “All Jews are responsible one for another”); the efforts to prevent assimilation; and other components centering on continuity and Jewish renaissance.

In this process, I also found quite a few contradictions and challenges, such as the “hug” America gives the Jews, causing them to assimilate, and the ambivalence toward Israel as to its role in Jewish education worldwide. The question of Hebrew as the language of our heritage and a source of Jewish renewal, in which Israel plays a crucial role, is a complicated, difficult one to solve. But it is these challenges, together with the recognition of what world Jewry is capable of giving to Israeli Jewish society, that have prompted my activism in the Israeli educational system.

These meaningful dialogues have built personal ties with distant relatives. These ties have opened a new window to another, different Jewish world. My ability to strengthen my identity as a Jew in Israel, and at the same time, to widen the foci of my identification with Israel through encountering modern Hebrew literature are the outcomes of these meetings, which have the potential to bring Jews closer to their heritage and to close the gap between Israel and world Jewry.

What made this dialogue possible was the change in the discourse between Israel and world Jewry. It is no longer a discourse between those guarding the Jewish state and those sitting on the rivers of Babylon, crying as they remember Zion. It is no longer a relationship in which we demand that American Jews immigrate to Israel, expecting them to share the burden of defending the motherland. It is no longer a defensive or aggressive response on the part of Israelis and American Jews: No more guilt or money covering up for this guilt, but rather direct eye contact—recognizing the missing components on each side and comprehending that we may utilize each other's strengths to improve the vulnerabilities on the other side.

My encounter with Russian Jewry (Odessa) was a very different one, presenting the question of Israel's role vis-à-vis Diaspora Jewry in a different light. Is Israel's role toward Jewry in distress to encourage immigration to Israel, thus emptying the local Jewish community of its spiritual and cultural leadership? Or is it to nurture local forces that will remain in these communities, to lead the Jews who stay there and help them to preserve their Jewish cultural heritage? To answer these questions requires common study between Israel and world Jewry.

My personal journey, both intellectual and experiential, which includes encounters with Jews around the world, has led me to the conclusion that, in addition to the question of the role and meaning of Israel in Jewish life today, we must examine the role of world Jewry and its contribution to the deepening of Jewish Israeli awareness. The aim will be to redefine, in a more authentic and deep manner, the place of the Jewish homeland and its citizens in Jewry's continued existence and renewal.

What's Next?

It is no secret that Israel today—after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, the breakdown of the Oslo agreement, and four years of terrorism on the one hand and continued occupation on the other—is facing an extremely difficult crossroads. Splits and polarities among different elements of society are threatening its unity and strength. The question is: Will we have a state comprised of two nationalities, which will herald the end of the dream of the return of Zion in our times, or a democratic Jewish state that will enable us to develop and invest in education, industry, agriculture, science, the narrowing of social gaps, and the deepening of national Jewish awareness, beside a Palestinian state? This is a question facing not only Israeli society, but world Jewry.

The strengthening of Jewish education and the connection with Israel, as well as the strengthening of the awareness of world Jewry of its role, must take precedence in the agendas of religious, educational, economic, and political leaderships in Israel and abroad. The educational program should include:

- ▶ Encouraging long-term teacher education toward this mission, in Israel and abroad.
- ▶ Forging spiritual, cultural, and educational ties through dynamic, change-making meetings in Israel and overseas.
- ▶ Learning of alternative Jewish means of expression in Israel and overseas.
- ▶ Taking joint trips aimed at getting to know Jewish communities in Israel and overseas.
- ▶ Promoting the teaching and internalization of Hebrew at all levels as a basis for the building of a common Jewish language, connecting different streams, and reconciling contradictions.

A change-inducing learning process in this area can take place only when we are able to combine a cognitive deepening of Jewish awareness with an ability to thoughtfully encounter others with a differing discourse, an experience that creates a spiritual experience. Individuals and groups who have experienced this are the standard-bearers for this activity in their communities today. Only if we have many more such individuals and groups on both sides of the ocean who cooperate with each other will Israel be able to provide a meaningful contribution to the continuation of Jewish life. As Israel stands at the crossroads, our decisions will determine if the Jewish people are headed towards a third *galut*, or the strengthening of the state as a home, whose physical and spiritual existence enables Jewish existence overseas, through the creation of a mutual Jewish space, both virtual and real.

To Be a Jew

Aharon Megged

Every square inch of me, whether I want it or not, is painted with the brushstroke of my Jewishness. Like the proverbial Ethiopian of the book of Jeremiah, I remain what I am. I may change my name from Cohen to Quinn or from Levi to Lowell, but my Jewish hue will not erase.

Throughout their history and in every nook and cranny of their dispersion, Jews have attempted to alter, as it were, their Jewish “hue.” They have done so for various reasons: out of an attempt to survive in a world where prejudice, xenophobia, and hatred of “the other” were permanent fixtures; or out of self-hate, a feeling of repulsion toward Jewish “traits,” the Jewish religion, etc. These attempts, sometimes called “apostasy,” sometimes called “assimilation,” have generally failed. You can change your religion, your language, your customs and manners, your social milieu, your opinion, but you cannot change the basic tint of your being. In spite of yourself, you will be exposed for all to see.

Jews of renown such as Otto Weininger or Karl Krauss could pontificate about their hatred of the Jewish “race.” Noam Chomsky and Harold Pinter can declare on American and British television that there is no difference between the State of Israel and the Nazis. No such pronouncements, however, can “purify” them in the eyes of the anti-Semites. Jews they are, and Jews they shall remain.

Attempts like these have not ceased with the emergence of a Jewish state, an entity founded partly in order to emancipate the Jew once and forever from all “exilic complexes.” Already in the 1940s, the relatively small “Canaanite” movement declared that the “Hebrew” people, now reestablished in its homeland, had no part in Judaism, which they defined as the culture created in the exile following the destruction of the Second Temple. “The Hebrew,” stated their manifesto, “is not a Jew and cannot be a Jew.” He is instead rooted in the proto-Jewish, Hebrew-Canaanite-Phoenician culture that developed in the Fertile Crescent during pagan antiquity. The Canaanites have had followers. Before the 1967 Six-Day War, there was a widespread phenomenon among Israelis, including many intellectuals and members of the younger generation, to declare themselves Israelis but not Jews. The reasons behind these attempts to shrug off Jewish labels were not all too different from the “exilic” phenomenon: a yearning to be accepted in the world at large and to be freed of a past laced with unpleasant memories; in short, a feeling of revulsion toward the exilic heritage. *Don't look at us as Jews; we are Israelis—and that's another thing altogether!* During the past few decades an opposite tendency has emerged: to liberate oneself from the stigma of “Israelihood”—the “occupying power,” the “oppressor



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state”—to be identified only as Jews of a certain liberal bent, rather than as Israelis. This phenomenon engendered the idea that Israel must be “a state of all its citizens,” that is, without the Law of Return, which has been dismissed as “racist”—namely, not a “Jewish state.”

Defining Jewish Identity in Positive Terms

But the “Jewish hue,” in the sense of separateness from other people, is a negative definition. The question that we must ask ourselves, for the present and for the future, is how to redefine this identity in positive terms. In other words: whether one can find in oneself specific values worthy of possessing and being proud of. For one who is not religiously observant, what are his “Jewish” values?

We stand at the threshold of the third generation of Israel. The terms and concepts of today are totally different from what kindled the creative powers and possessed the souls of secular Jews in earlier days, such as Golda Meir, David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Rabin, and their ilk. What do Judaism and Jewishness mean for those born after or shortly before the 1967 Six-Day War? Is there something there in which they can take pride?

Not long ago Thomas Cahill, himself an Irish Catholic, authored a book entitled *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*. Cahill argues that Judaism invented Western culture. In an interview with David Gergen on the Public Broadcasting Service, Cahill said:

The Jews are the beginning of the Western world. They are the fountainhead. Before the Jews there is no West. And we have come to live their ideas in such a way that we think that our reactions to things are the ordinary human reactions that everybody in the world has always had.

Among the gifts he includes the idea of the individual, human ethics, civil and economic justice, the linear view of history, the ideas of individual and social progress, and much more. Cahill is not by any means the only example of a non-Jew who has written admiringly about the Jews or Judaism. The seventeenth-century French philosopher and theologian Blaise Pascal wrote in praise of the Jewish people. And so, too, did Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who authored the play *Nathan the Wise*, in the eighteenth century, as well as the twentieth-century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and many others. No educated person can ignore the Jews’ tremendous contributions, beyond all proportion to their percentage in the population, to

world culture, science, the arts, and every avenue of intellectual life and deed.

But the knowledge that your people gave birth to geniuses such as Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, and Franz Kafka, and whose members overpopulate the rolls of Nobel Prize winners, does not, in and of itself, necessarily enrich the Jewish content of one's own life. One cannot simply preen in the beautiful feathers of others who happen to share one's origins.

On one of my overseas flights many years ago, I was on the plane with a large contingent of ultra-Orthodox Jews. The men were dressed in black, and their ritual fringes, their *tzitzit*, dangled over their thighs. When it came time for the afternoon *mincha* prayers, they got up, congregated in the aisles, and began praying as they would in *shul*: out loud, swaying back and forth, bowing this way and that, without any consideration for the other passengers, a large portion of whom were non-Jewish. This, I admit, kindled in me what I grudgingly would call "anti-Semitic feelings."

Nevertheless, as I thought about it more deeply, I realized that these Jews, with their deep love for their faith, possessed the moral fortitude (i.e., "chutzpah") to cleave to their practices, even if this might "turn off" those around them or engender contempt. This was how Jews had behaved throughout the ages as they lived among the nations. They were not ashamed of their Judaism or its rituals, and this moral power enabled them to survive as long as their hosts did not destroy them physically. How many nonobservant Jews would feel so secure in their nonreligious beliefs that it would not matter to them what others thought?

For a long time, starting from the beginning of the Zionist endeavor, the secular Jews of the land of Israel did nurture a similar pride in their Jewishness, rooted in their intense faith in Zionism and in socialist and national ideals. They were not embarrassed by their Jewishness, whether they were in the land or traveling outside it.

This faith has slackened over the past few decades, especially after the 1967 Six-Day War. Many "seekers of justice" have seized upon "the Occupation" (namely, our role as military occupiers, which was forced upon us by the outcome of the 1967 Six-Day War, which we won) to begin questioning the very justification of Zionism, and eventually came to regret our return to this land, *in principio*, and if the state you live in is founded, as it were, on injustice and oppression—you begin to view yourself as part of an evil process. You are filled with shame, and you walk about with your eyes toward

the ground. What is there for you to be proud of? Your “universal” values? You have no monopoly on these. Everybody else in the wider, cultured world shares these same values. So, too, you are not proud of being an Israeli, much less a Zionist, and, since you are not religious and have lost the Zionist attributes of secular Israeli Jewry, you are basically clueless about what it means to be a Jew living in Israel in the first place.

The Self-Identity of a “People that Dwells Apart”

The problem of self-identity is complex and is unique to us, because the Jewish nation is not quite “normal.” The words of the Aramean prophet Balaam have been true for the past three thousand years: “There is a people that dwells apart/ Not reckoned among the nations” [Numbers 23:9, New Jewish Publication Society translation]. Here is a people whose religion, unlike other religions, belongs exclusively to it; a people, at once universal, scattered among the other nations, who considers itself responsible for the whole of humanity, carrying the banner of humanistic ideals and eager to effectuate them, while, at the same time, throughout its history, it has been linked religiously, emotionally, and mystically to one land as its spiritual center.

The earliest Zionist thinkers believed that the people’s return to its land, the renewal of its independence, and its spiritual revival would abolish the anomaly of its existence, and it would become “a people like all peoples.” This never occurred. Even in Israel, in the revitalized ancestral homeland, we have remained an abnormal people, from the standpoint of our mentality and behavior, and from the standpoint of the world’s attitude to us. And just as “the Glory of Israel does not deceive or change His mind” (I Samuel 15:29), so too Jew-hatred has not died. It was a bitter delusion to assume that national independence (i.e., the attempt to become “a people like all people”) would make us “acceptable” to the world. Jew-hatred is alive and well, very well, unfortunately, in all the countries in which Jews live and do not live, in countries that have never seen a Jewish face, in the Christian and Muslim worlds, and even in the Hindu and Buddhist worlds. There are umpteen reasons for this phenomenon, each one refuting the next.

To My Grandfather

As a secular Jew who lives in Israel and who sees himself as no less Jewish than or inferior to religious Jews, I would like to address my

grandfather of blessed memory with the following words:

Dearest Avraham Meir Reichgot, your soul in Paradise, your body on the Mount of Olives:

When you came from Poland to the Land of Israel with your wife, Perl, in the footsteps of your Zionist daughter and her husband, I was a ten- or eleven-year-old boy. Our parents built a small house for you on our plot of land in the small colony of Ra'anana, right between our simple cottage and the chicken coop, in the midst of the trees. You stayed in your small house most of the day. You, a Hasidic disciple of the Rebbe of Gur, used to sit at your table in the narrow room. A large Talmud lay open before you. You would read and reread it, wiping the sweat from your brow from the stifling heat and the flies. In your own private space, everything was as it had been in your *shtetl* of Szrensk. You and Perl did not speak Hebrew, and we, the children, learned Yiddish from you, so that we could answer your questions. You didn't eat with us, because we didn't keep kosher. You suffered greatly from seeing the infractions of Jewish law that we and our parents committed in front of you, as on Shabbat how we poured bran seeds into the feeding troughs in the chicken coop, or how we played soccer in the neighboring field. You suffered in silence. Finally, when you couldn't take our desecrations, you moved to B'nei Brak, where you lived out your years, and you instructed us to bury both you and our grandmother on the Mount of Olives in the Holy City.

Sometimes, rather infrequently, you, a gentle man, began to speak to me about how I had strayed from the right path. I could not answer you. Your world was as distant from my world as mine was from yours. I respected you and your devotion, how you sat there for hours learning, by yourself. "And God? You don't believe in God?" you used to ask. But for me, God, to the extent that I believed, was not your God who dwells on high, who judges all the earth. You did not allow me the right to doubt, to test, to choose, or to be a heretic. That was the deep unbridgeable gap between us. It is still, to this day, the gap between me and those who believe as you believed and who live as you live.

A few years after the death of my father, Moshe David, I wrote a piece in his memory, entitled "A Jewish Man." Here are some of the things that I said:

My father was not a religiously observant man. But he was a believer. He knew that there is an Eye that sees and an Ear that hears, and that all deeds are recorded. He was the quintessential ethical man depicted in *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers: a kind eye, easy to pacify, pursuing peace, distancing himself from

adulation. When he came to the Land of Israel, he did not have to make intrinsic distinctions between the sacred and the mundane. He was satisfied with his lot, he loved labor, and he walked humbly. He considered as his contemporaries all the generations of Jewish learning from the Bible to Chaim Nachman Bialik, from the Mishna to Yehezkel Kaufman, from rabbinic tales to S.Y. Agnon: There were no demarcations or divisions. He observed certain Jewish customs, not out of religious piety, but because he was a Jew. Although a socialist and an egalitarian, a member of the workers' party, his Jewishness was not something he compartmentalized. It was all-encompassing and inclusive, and all things proceeded from it. He felt a need for something beyond the mundane, and this was his Jewishness.

And so today, more than four decades after his passing, I look upon his way of life and his worldview as an ideal harmony of Judaism and humanism. He was the first schoolteacher in Ra'anana, at a time where there were only three or four dozen families there. (Today the city has a population of over sixty thousand.) That was his philosophy of teaching his pupils, and us, his own children. Every Shabbat afternoon he would have us sit at the table with him to learn a page of Talmud. It was from the strength of his own Jewish outlook, his "secular" outlook, as it were, that he introduced the daily reading of biblical verses on the radio, the *Voice of Jerusalem*, which later became *Kol Israel*, the *Voice of Israel*.

We, his children, did not follow precisely in his footsteps. We were members of the pioneer youth movement, and after completing our high school education, we went out to "actualize" our ideology in labor and other national endeavors of the prestate period of the 1930s and '40s, and to work in the kibbutzim. But thanks to him, we were imbued with the idea that Zionism was a shoot from the larger Jewish tree. Thanks to him, we were filled with a love for this new and ancient land, the cradle of our culture. This love was deeply imprinted upon us as we hiked across the land. The larger Jewish tree included the Bible, rabbinics, and poetry, both ancient and modern. These were things whose value was beyond measure. We received from him an elated, spiritual attachment to the larger Jewish family in the Exile, of which, during his adult life, six million of its members were wiped out, with only their memory preserved in his heart.

My own sons were born after the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel. They never knew the British Mandate, the years of struggle with the Mandatory power, the defense against Arab marauders, the pioneering period of our history. They likewise

missed the War of Independence and the rebirth of our nation. They went to schools whose teachers had been educated, not in the Talmudic academies, *yeshivot*, and Tarbut Hebrew seminaries of Poland and Lithuania, as had my teachers, but rather locally, in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Nevertheless, they too knew how to draw on traditional commentaries on the Bible and to supplement them with more secular, academic commentaries.

Unlike us, their parents, our sons, although they celebrate the Jewish holidays, can no longer let the verses of Scripture roll off their tongues as they used to roll off ours, for we knew them by heart, always ready to use them in our spoken and written language. The saying and parables of the Mishna, Talmud, prayer book, and the Hasidic songs, which had once been so popular in the secular pioneering youth movements, kindle in them no feelings of nostalgia for a way of life. They have new idols, new songs, new writers, and poets whom they love and admire. And too, they are free from many of the prejudices in which we were entrapped, and from shackling ideologies.

So what kind of Jews are my sons, then?

They are Jews in every square inch of their being—whether they are conscious of it or not. The Hebrew that they speak and write, every expression and idiom are preserved in them as “memories from time immemorial,” in the words of the poet Rachel. They are imbued with Jewish history and culture, and with the mysterious and mythic depth of that multifaceted, riddling entity called “Judaism.” They are no less Jewish than their ancestors, because their roots are in this land. Its landscapes and its ancient sites are their natural surroundings.

They are the “natural Jews,” one might say. And they are citizens of this Jewish state, living its life in body and in soul, involved with its political and social happenings, concerned for its existence and its future. Resting in them is that wondrous feeling that cannot be verbalized, the secret of Jewish existence: that they belong to a people against whom “in every generation arose those to destroy us,” but which survives and lives on.

Translated from the Hebrew by Robert Whitehill

Reimagining Transnationalism

Deborah Dash Moore

“What role does the state of Israel play in the development of Diaspora Jewish identity?” This first question sets out important parameters. It asks about the relationship between the State of Israel—not Israelis, their society and culture—and “Diaspora Jewish identity”—not American Jews, their community and culture. That is, it juxtaposes a nation-state (that modern hyphenated entity looking for trouble) and, by implication, its politics, with personal and individual aspects of Jewish consciousness and self-consciousness, what we call “identity.”

But before we can answer the question of the impact of Israel’s politics on the consciousness of Jews living outside of the state, we must first inquire: How aware are Diaspora Jewish men and women of Israel’s politics? Are Jews still avid readers of newspapers? Do they watch television news regularly? Do they consult the Internet for diverse sources of information and opinion? I can’t answer these questions, which makes my reflection far more personal than I suspect is desirable.

I do know, however, that the news about Israel reported in the general press and on television in the United States is far more sympathetic to Israeli political and military decisions than such reporting in European news outlets. Thus, American Jews who never bother to read Israeli or Jewish publications can know about the four years of intifada, the many terror bombings of Israeli civilians, the mounting death toll of innocent bystanders and armed combatants, the Israeli raids on Palestinian cities and refugee camps, the uprooting of olive trees and razing of homes, the construction of a massive wall of separation, the failure of alternative peace initiatives proposed by Europeans and dissenting Israelis and Palestinians, the deep commitment of Jewish settlers on the West Bank and Gaza to remain in their homes at all costs, and the fervent dedication of Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups to armed struggle against Israel. These are issues reported in the general press, often with an effort to present a “balanced” perspective. Assuming that Jews read the press and watch the news, they would receive such information.

How does this information affect their identity? Perhaps an historical analogy might help to answer this question. (As an historian, I am inclined to turn to the past when contemplating the present.) During the Depression, Jews who supported the Communist Party idealized the Soviet Union. Much of the news about the U.S.S.R. in the general press described its policies as oppressive and economically devastating to large sectors of the population. Yet Jewish Communists largely dismissed such reports. They pointed to the evident antagonism of much of the capitalist and fascist worlds to Commu-



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nism. They saw the Soviet Union as beleaguered, struggling alone against enemies determined to put an end to its extraordinary experiment in collectivism. Negative reports on famines and purges did not shake their faith. They turned to their own Communist press for explanations. There were, in addition, Jews who were fellow travelers, sympathetic to many but not all of the goals of Communism, supporters of a welfare state, opponents of fascism, racism, and anti-Semitism, proponents of a more just international order. These Jews worried about the reports of repression coming out of the Soviet Union; they wondered whom they should believe; they looked for an alternative that would enable them to maintain some idealism in politics. Most Jews, of course, belonged neither to the Communist Party nor to the more amorphous group of fellow travelers, but dedicated ideologues often set the terms of political debate.

I am not suggesting that fervent supporters of the State of Israel, and especially of the Likud and Ariel Sharon's policies during the last four years, resemble Depression-era Jewish Communists, or that advocates of Oslo and the peace process resemble fellow travelers. I am suggesting that the comparison might reveal how bad political news about a state that is idealized reinforces commitments rather than provoking questions. For those who might be characterized as fellow travelers, Israel's response to the intifada has stimulated doubts, questions as to whether the bad news might mean there is something wrong with the Zionist ideal. Jews living outside of Israel and the United States might be more prone to articulate such doubts, because the news they receive about Israel is more sympathetic toward Palestinian violence and demands and more critical of Israeli responses, especially its assassinations, military attacks, mass arrests, and unwillingness to negotiate.

Furthermore, these latter Diaspora Jews make their lives in societies where anti-Semitism has reappeared with surprising vigor, unlike the United States. Thus we read, particularly from European Jews, proposals suggesting that Israel does not need to exist as a Jewish state, that binationalism would make a better alternative, that Israel's presence and the violence and hatred it seems to inspire in the Arab and Muslim worlds endanger Jews rather than securing their lives in the Diaspora. The revival of these debates indicates that Israel's politics have made some Diaspora Jews profoundly uneasy, even to the point of trying to dissociate Jewish identity from identification with Israel.

Influencing Jewish Life in Both Directions

However, these reflections don't respond to what I think is the coded concern of this symposium, namely, the relationship of American Jews to Israel, rather than the relationship of Diaspora Jews to Israel. Furthermore, the issue is not just the state and its politics, but Israeli society and culture. "In many ways, Israel has redefined the patterns and rhythms of Jewish living." Yes, but in many ways, American Jews, flourishing alongside of Israel, have also redefined the patterns and rhythms of Jewish living. If we turn to religious creativity, American Jews have redefined the meaning of Judaism through incorporation of women as almost equal members of communal life. This change, reverberating throughout the Jewish world, including Israel, has transformed Jewish education, ritual, ethics, and leadership. Jewish women's issues that flow from the fundamental assumption of their equality with men have stimulated innovations that make twenty-first century Judaism radically different from its twentieth-century predecessor. The Diaspora, specifically the United States, produced these new patterns of Jewish life that have influenced development in Israel.

On the other hand, the ethnic pluralism of Israeli society has encouraged American Jews to recognize how all sorts of people could be Jews and to embrace diversity within their communal institutions. American Jews seldom cite this diversity in their debates on outreach, conversion to Judaism, and intermarriage. Still, the willingness of Israelis to offer citizenship to men and women related to Jews by marriage or distantly connected to Judaism in past centuries helps to offset the ongoing conflict over Jewish identity within the state itself. Thus the move toward inclusion on grounds both of gender and ethnicity is one of the results of Israeli and American Jewish interaction in the past half century. Hopefully, as American Jews move toward inclusion on grounds of sexuality as well, they will also inspire Israelis to adapt.

Living in a sovereign Jewish state makes Jewish identity an aspect of national identity for most Israeli Jews. Most Israeli Jews feel Jewish the way most American Jews feel American. It's natural. It comes with the territory, with school and language, with home and culture. It is not something that requires contemplation or self-consciousness, unless one travels abroad. But along with their national Jewish identity, many Israelis also experience Judaism as something set apart, fixed, controlled by rabbis, unresponsive to personal needs.

So many Israeli Jews understand Jewishness in rather diametrically opposed fashions: as ineluctable yet potentially immaterial, and as inert yet potentially vital. Traditionally observant Israeli Jews, of course, find personal meaning in Jewishness through Judaism as well as through politics, but they are a minority of Israeli Jews, just as traditionally observant American Jews are a minority of American Jews. Increasingly, the latter, too, are seeking personal meaning not only through religious practice, but also through political action.

It is not clear to me that Israel retains its centrality in contemporary Jewish life in the United States. Zionist sentiments continue to animate many American Jews, and the Jewish press energetically covers Israel, but even a cursory examination of congregational life suggests that Israel is far from central. In communal politics, support for Israeli policies remains a touchstone of inclusion; groups that openly espouse alternatives (e.g., B'rit Tzedek v'Shalom) exist on the margins of the organized Jewish community. In cultural life, translations of Israeli writing, film festivals, art exhibits, and music concerts indicate Israel's presence, but these exist alongside American Jewish writing, films, art, and music.

Were Israel more central to American Jews, the diverse voices of its writers and artists would allow American Jews to identify with sectors of the Israeli population rather than with the state and its policies. These connections would inform and inspire American Jews. Hearing from many different types of Israelis would help to move American Jews away from an idealized understanding of Israel; American Jews would come to appreciate the complexities of the issues Israelis confront. This possibility, rather than the type of connections developed in the 1970s and 1980s between individual donor communities in the United States and local neighborhoods or towns in Israel, seems to me to hold more promise for moving to a new type of transnationalism that could reconfigure what is implied in the term "Jewish state."

A Model of Transnational Citizenship

American Jews need to pioneer in producing a model of transnational citizenship that involves participation in Israeli society. American Jews also need to permit a variety of Diasporic perspectives to be expressed. Participation and expression form two elements of responsible transnationalism. A term describing the identity and practices of contemporary immigrants, transnationalism assumes

multiple social relationships—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political—that link together societies of origin and settlement. An essential element of transnationalism is multiplicity of involvements, operating at various levels from intimate to institutional. American Jews do not need to become immigrants, though they do need to adopt migrant practices, such as regular visits to the country where one is not living (i.e., regular visits to Israel). That is, they need to build upon the customs of contemporary immigrants to fashion a Jewish transnationalism. Multiplicity rather than uniformity should be recognized as the best way to support and sustain Israel in the context of its political struggles with the Palestinians. Thus American Jews would fulfill their responsibilities to Israel, not only to the state and its policies, but also to the people and their concerns. Cultural exchange, mutual support, political engagement, religious dialogue, social interchange, economic cooperation, educational fellowship—all these make up elements of transnational Jewish citizenship.

Israel, in turn, ought to seek to redefine its understanding of a “Jewish state” to include a commitment to the well-being of Jews. This would involve reexamining Zionist belief in the negation of the Diaspora and the corresponding assumption that only Jewish life in the State of Israel is viable. Discussion about far-flung Diaspora communities that lack a critical mass of Jews should be shared with Jews from the United States and other large communities. The creation of a Jewish convocation could provide the forum for such debates as well as for decisions regarding distribution of assistance. Cooperation rather than competition should characterize responses to changing circumstances. In addition, Israeli Jews should share in transnational Jewish citizenship, visiting Jewish communities outside of Israel on a regular basis and forging those multiple ties of involvement that would broaden and deepen their understanding of Jewish peoplehood.

Should Jews be able to develop a new form of ethical peoplehood, one that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state, they would help the world reimagine the possibilities of religious community and responsibility. At a time when religious politics involve placing strictures on the lives of women, Jews could propose alternatives that liberate and extend democratic processes to all members of the Jewish people. The transnational model possesses the potential to transcend the accepted binary poles of Jewish thinking, Israel vs. Diaspora, with multiple relationships. It lets us move beyond the tensions and traumas of the present moment toward a new, invigorated future.

Defying Geography: Israel and Diaspora Jewry

Stephen Joel Trachtenberg

The Diaspora is a fact of Jewish life. Thus what makes a Jew a Jew in the Diaspora is a daunting question. This was driven home to me a year or two ago, when I gave a talk at my synagogue in Washington on Jewish identity. Preparing for that talk was intellectually bracing, but the talk turned out to be vexingly speculative, if not tentative, in its results. There are many ways to be a Jew, I realized, because what constitutes American Jewish identity may lie for one person chiefly in observance and for another chiefly in culture, yet these two Jews may belong to the same congregation. As William James wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, “Religion ... shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude.”

James, I think, was right. Excepting the Orthodox, we are on our own, in “solitude,” because we are free to practice as we will and, more significantly, we cannot really know the feelings, acts, and experiences of others completely. I assume, therefore, that the existence of Israel as a nation-state has deep significance for most Jews of the Diaspora, but little or none for some others. Consequently, my observations will reflect my own thoughts as an American Jew and to some extent those of friends, relatives, and acquaintances with whom I have spoken over the years on the subject. What I offer is hardly absolute or dispositive, but is an attempt to break out of solitude.

Israel’s Ability to “Normalize” Jewish Identity in Diaspora

The existence of Israel has had a normative effect on being Jewish. Identity in America, a land of immigrants, is both tangible and mythic. A fourth-generation Italian American, for example, has the tangible, real existence of Italy, and even of a particular region or town, as a part of his identity. He has as well a mythic, or psychological, connection with Italy—a sense of “Italianness,” however he or anyone else might define it. In this sense, he is very like those whose families have “always” lived, say, in France or Sweden.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. and with the beginning of the European Diaspora, Jews had only a mythic connection to the Land of Israel. Being frequently and forcibly moved or exiled, as from England in 1290 or just after the Muslims from Spain in 1492, made a homeland seem both unlikely and desirable. There is no contradiction, I believe, in this duality: We often most want what we believe we are least likely to get, especially if what we want seems so self-evidently right and justified. The desire for the



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tangible connection was expressed in the classic phrase, “Next year in Jerusalem.” “Next year,” of course, was a long time coming and seemed unlikely until the very last moment. But when the time came in 1948, a tangible Israel was created: Jews now had a homeland, a place where they came from, a place they could go back to if they wanted (guaranteed by Israel’s Law of Return), and finally a sense that they were like others.

This normative quality of Israel’s existence makes Jews seem more like other people in their own eyes and, I am quite sure, in the eyes of others. It firms up their identity as a nation rather than just as “a people” (even if “chosen”), while dimming the old, pernicious notion of the “cosmopolitan” Jew—the perennial, rootless outsider or the guest in another land. I may have a hard time deciding if I am an American Jew or a Jewish American, but now I, like many in the Diaspora, realize that we are wrestling with the same question that my hypothetical Italian-American neighbor is wrestling with as well.

Of course, there are benefits and challenges in having a nation of one’s own, but again, it is at best speculative to say what they are, because Israel may play little or no central role in the identity of certain Jews. For those for whom it plays some role, the prime benefit, which I have laid out, is the normative quality of a homeland that is also a nation-state. A secondary benefit is that it makes the Jews of the Diaspora focus more intently on affairs in the Middle East. This second benefit may also be the greatest challenge, because the policies of various Israeli governments have, at times, entranced some Diaspora Jews and troubled others. (I could say the same of various administrations of the United States.) Being a country, and a democracy at that, means enacting domestic and foreign policies that will never please all of the residential or dispersed citizenry. Given Israel’s beleaguered situation since its birth, that normal problem of democratic governance is simply compounded: Living in a state of war, as we discovered during Vietnam and are rediscovering now in Iraq, can shape policy, public opinion, and personal psychology in ways quite different from living in a time of peace, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. It would be interesting to contrast my point of view with that of an Israeli, but for that I would need to be a careful and attuned listener, since I have not lived in Israel and am not immersed in its culture and politics.

But not living in Israel does not exempt Diaspora Jews from some responsibility for its survival and success, especially since the collapse of the Oslo Accords and the terrorism of the last several years. It is precisely because Israel exists as a tangible, normative country, and thus benefits all Jews, even those who claim little inter-

est in it, that both Israel's survival and peace throughout that melancholy region of the world are important and compelling.

The Job of Encouraging Peace

The first job of American Jews is to encourage any efforts that are likely to bring peace and prosperity to the *entire* region. It is perhaps understandable for us to look first to Israel and to give it emotional and material support. But if we do not look beyond Israel's borders and at its more and less hostile neighbors, the chances for peace will grow dimmer. Thus we should be prepared to speak out on American policy in that region where we can presumably have the greatest influence. We should no less robustly engage with Israeli foreign policy and with the foreign policies of Israel's neighbors.

I hasten to add that whatever words we speak or actions we take need not always be of one nature. If we think Israeli policy on a certain matter is correct, we should say so. If we think it is wrong, we should say so. We need to abandon the old idea that American Jews have an obligation of silence about Israeli affairs. That idea, which persists, said that it was better to keep quiet than to criticize Israel. Doing otherwise, the argument went (and still goes, in some places), is no less than giving aid and comfort to Israel's antagonists. I think this idea is foolish. Criticism does not strengthen terrorism, nor do I believe the Israeli people and government to be so thin-skinned and small-minded that disagreement from an American Jewish individual or organization would be seen as the moral equivalent of betrayal.

It is equally incumbent on us to refuse to see a war of terror as a legitimate expression of a nationalistic aspiration. It is one thing to say that the Palestinians should have a homeland of their own: What is normative for the Jews should be normative for the Palestinians. It is quite another thing, however, to go about it by means of terror, deception, and abrogation of accords and agreements. There are many Jews who are not pleased with the ways that the current Israeli government has dealt with the Palestinians, and they can make some persuasive arguments when they discuss military tactics or the future of the settlements. However, I cannot understand Jews who generally describe themselves as leftist, who support the tactics of terror or who say it is legitimate to use any means, however violent, against an "occupying force." This, it seems to me, is not a progressive viewpoint, but rather resembles giving aid and comfort to the enemy; it is far worse than constructively criticizing Israeli foreign policy and proposing an alternative.

The Implications of Being Virtually, if not Actually, Closer

There is no question that offering praise or criticism for Israeli policy has been possible since its creation as a modern state in 1948. But two things have changed: The first is the amount of information we can get if we desire it. There is more, and often more profound and serious, media coverage of the Middle East than existed more than half a century ago. The second change is related: The kind of media we have—the Internet, live satellite broadcasts, comparatively cheap long-distance telephone calls, among others—have made it possible to act upon or respond to the information we acquire virtually on the spot. A good initiative, thus, can be analyzed, supported, and praised immediately, giving it, one might say, Diaspora Jewry's thumbs-up, when needed most. The same would apply to a thumbs-down. Diaspora Jews are closer to Israel, if only virtually, than ever before.

This has implications for Israel in its role in assuring Jewish continuity in the Diaspora. Israel needs to reach out. Especially for younger Jews, who have grown up taking the Internet and e-mail for granted, Israel provides opportunities for blogs, chat rooms, and threaded conversations that could reach a Jew in the Diaspora anywhere, at any time. The Internet, through dedicated Web sites, for example, could also project Israeli "soft power."

The Internet may also help solve the conundrum of outreach to the Jews of the Diaspora who live in very small communities. I think it a good, if hardly novel, idea for members of Israel's government and cultural organizations to travel abroad and speak to Jews who do not live in places like New York, where there is a large population of Jews. It might not be cost-effective, or even affordable, to go to, for example, Reykjavik, but virtual visits, like other virtues of the Internet, might work wonders in such communities—might make the oil last for longer than eight days, in fact.

But the Internet and other modern media are intangible. If, as I believe, a tangible Israel is critical to Diaspora Jewry, then Israel's continuing outreach must take tangible shapes, and many are possible. Inviting more young Jews from abroad to study in Israel is clearly a good thing. A year abroad or even a summer program makes the connection between the nonresident Jew and Israel that much stronger and, over time, more durable. The same would be true of any cultural or exchange programs. Having Diaspora Jews participate in the Maccabi Games helps reveal Jewish jocks dispersed around the world, whose interest in sports opens the path to their

interest in Judaism and Israel. Another possibility (and this is really tourism of a sort) is to encourage more weddings and bar and bat mitzvas to be held in Israel.

These are simply suggestions. Some initiatives of these kinds are already in place. The common idea behind all of them is that Israel should present itself as both a religious and cultural resource for Jews: It should go out of its way to invite both the pious and the acculturated Jews of the Diaspora to come see for themselves the real, tangible Israel. Diaspora Jews should begin to think of a trip to Israel the way Muslims think of the *hajj*—something you really must do, if at all possible, at least once in your life.

The geographical Diaspora is most likely irreversible. Many Jews living outside Israel would not want to live in the Jewish state, and even if they did, Israel could not accommodate all of them. There are more or less 13 million Jews worldwide. Five million live in Israel. It is no easy thing to contemplate squeezing all of the balance into Israel, unless perhaps we look to China as our model. But it is possible to defy both geography and solitude, to quote William James, by many means. They are available, as I have tried to suggest in this brief text; they are comprehensible, and they can lead toward a sense of common heritage and shared interests in the existence of Israel as a real country like any other that remains—and, God willing, will always remain—a common homeland.

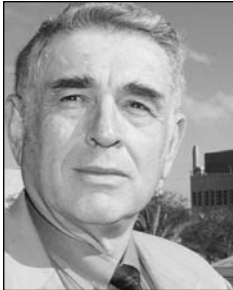
Israeli and American Jews: Divergence and Unity

S. Ilan Troen

Distinctions between the Jewish experience in Israel and the United States are real and profound, but do not justify jeremiads about the unity of the Jewish people. For more than a century, American and Israeli Jews have developed distinctive cultures that are products of the social and political ecologies in which they live. Through the centuries Jewish solidarity has flourished despite significant variance in how Jews expressed their identities. Uniformity was not the historic reality and cannot be now. Jewish identities in Israel and America are not only distinct from one another, but from their common forebears in Europe. However diverse Jewish experience, if Jews, of whatever affiliation and definition, maintain a commitment to a common peoplehood, an appreciation for a shared past, and an obligation to mutual responsibility in the future, then national unity and cohesion are possible.

The differences between American and Israeli Jews were set in motion by the destinations of their recent ancestors. In 1900 more than 80 percent of world Jewry was European, with the greatest proportion still located in Eastern Europe. A century later, both through emigration and physical destruction, more than 80 percent are now located in the United States and Israel, with an approaching parity between them. Very few Middle Eastern or North African Jews remained in the countries of their birth. Jews who emigrated to the United States became a small and apparently steadily diminishing minority, surely now less than 2 percent, however one counts Jews, in a vast, expansive, diverse, and democratic society. This is a condition that American Jews celebrate, viewing it on the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the first Jews to North America as evidence of success. They have found their place in the New World and are confident of their future, despite dire predictions based on demographic projections.

Those who have built their lives in Zion have done so as a majority in a sovereign state of their own. The popularity of the decision to build the security fence dividing Israelis from Palestinians, as well as the overwhelming support for withdrawal from Gaza and significant portions of the West Bank, indicates the intention to maintain and defend a Jewish state rather than exchange it for a binational polity or a “state of all its citizens,” a model informed by the American example. The choice to continue as a majority, a situation unknown for nearly two millennia, bespeaks the positive experience of generations of Israelis as well as an existential necessity for security.



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Neither minority nor majority status need mitigate the confidence of either community. Different situations, however, require distinctive strategies for ensuring continuity and establishing viable identities. While Judaism, in its various manifestations, may be understood in universal terms, Jewish behavior and culture, in their secular manifestations, reflect the discrete societies in which Jews live. As a consequence, important aspects of secular Jewish identity may not be transferable between America and Israel.

Divergent Centers

While Israel and the United States share democratic values, their citizens live in markedly different democracies whose ideologies and political cultures impact on individual and group identity. The values and culture of the United States are rooted in a commitment to a liberal individualism. Israeli democracy maintains a strong particularistic, ethnic, and collective national identity. The United States celebrates pluralism and multiculturalism. Israel is a Jewish state with all the ambiguities and problems inherent in such a characterization. Its Jewish character is manifest and omnipresent in language and literature, canonized history, immigration legislation, national anthem, public holidays and national calendar, museums and monuments, the curriculum of the schools, and public rhetoric. Even as Israelis criticize and question it, they are deeply enmeshed in their collective identity.

It is not surprising that after more than half a century of independence, some Israelis have come to seek “normalization” of the national culture through privatization, and privileging individual rights over national or collective ones. For them, the model is an idealized America. They protest the long hegemony of Labor Zionism with its emphasis on making Jews responsive to the objectives of the collective rather than seeking to cultivate the liberal society that emphasizes protecting individuals from the state. The difference may well be expressed in the popular slogans of “doing one’s own thing” as opposed to accepting “*din ha-tenu’ah*” or the “mandate of the movement.” The first celebrates the individual; the second privileges the nation. The tendency to ignore this crucial distinction is captured by the common mistake of translating *halutz* as “pioneer.” The American version idealizes the individualist settler of frontiers. In biblical Hebrew *halutz* is used to describe those who went before all others, as when Joshua organized the encirclement of Jericho (Joshua

6: 7-9). The word was rehabilitated by Zionists at the end of the nineteenth century to describe the avant-garde, heroic individuals entirely devoted to fulfilling national needs. The *halutz* produced the kibbutz; American pioneers produced the solitary “little house on the prairie.”

The emergence of the Likud, a party committed to a nationalistic ethos, even though it objects to socialist and statist economics, continued and even strengthened the emphasis on the nation. The imported traditions of Israel’s founders from nearly all points of the political spectrum and the exigencies of security encouraged a strong central government and national culture capable of mobilizing citizens for nation-building.

Aside from the ultra-Orthodox, Israeli Jews expect to serve in the army. This crucial and formative commitment has been cast in Jewish terms. Contemporary Israelis are still asked to understand themselves as following in the tradition of Joshua, David, and the Maccabees in reestablishing, maintaining, and defending a unique national culture. Ubiquitous historical markers above and below the landscape shape and reinforce this identity. No remotely similar phenomenon is available to American Jews, even after 350 years of history. However much at home Jews may legitimately and authentically feel in America, they constitute yet another Diaspora community with a newly vigorous and vital homeland elsewhere.

Tourists and students spending a year in Israel may experience this identity with an immediacy of contact that arouses the senses as well as stimulates the intellect and imagination. But even if the visit makes a permanent impression, it is an experience of a different order. Reciprocal visits by Israelis to American Jewish households might enhance solidarity and widen horizons, but the secular American society beyond would likely have at least an equally strong impact. As important as such exchanges are for mutual understanding, they underline the asymmetry of Israeli and Diaspora Jewish identity.

American society appeals to Israel’s internal critics who fear the overwhelming power of the national ethos may smother individualism. They have produced a flood of critical writing faulting the national and collective traditions and urging their replacement with an explicitly American-inspired individualistic ethos. This demand can be found in many academic disciplines, including “critical” sociology and postmodern and deconstructionist critiques; in recent decisions in Israeli courts; in Israeli literature, theatre, and film; in the movement to privatize government or Histadrut-controlled companies and institutions; and in the Americanization of the political

system through the direct election of the prime minister.

Critics regularly attack even such formerly sacred icons as the kibbutz for inhibiting the development of individualism and the culture of the self, which, as Yaron Ezrahi observes, are “two aspects of democratic life that have been essential for the formation of assertive, competent, critical, and largely independent citizens in other Western countries.” Using an extraordinarily graphic image, he writes that “Israeli cemeteries are in fact an illuminating iconography of the poverty of Israeli individualism.” Gravestones and headstones are so close to one another “that one’s experience of mourning is almost inescapably social.” This is but a reflection of a search for private space and individualistic expression. Throughout, he urges the transformation of the Israeli ethnic nation-state into an individualistic civil society. Cohesion and intimacy are, in fact, more readily experienced in Israel than in America, and what such critics decry, others find hugely attractive but not exportable. Ironically, Israel’s internal critics fail to take account of the rich tradition of American self-criticism that faults an excessively individualistic society for producing personal alienation and social dysfunction.

Differences are a consequence of political and social ecologies. Despite Philip Roth’s recent cautionary tale (*The Plot against America*, Houghton Mifflin, 2004), Jews may certainly feel entirely at home in America, but Israel is the Jewish homeland. The significance of this distinction cannot be exaggerated. American Jews have had to adapt to and integrate into the host society. An important consequence is that they have had to negotiate and explain their identity as “others.” This has led to creativity induced by introspection and comparison. On the other hand, for all the energies released in the rebuilding of the homeland, Israeli identity is shaped by a rich and intensive internal discourse, but largely without the cross-fertilization of this kind of fruitful interaction.

Cultural distinctions are intensified by language. Employing Hebrew or English has far-reaching consequences emblematic of a profound phenomenon. Language is a means of accessing and reflecting culture, and a badge of identity. When Hebrew was only a sacred tongue, it naturally bound Jews together. Its secularization may, in fact, engender distance. Living life in English makes one part of a large international culture where Jews and even Judaism is filtered by translation. Living in Hebrew, in the land of the Hebrews, inevitably enriches and deepens Jewish identity, even as it may narrow it on a universal scale.

An unexpected and surprising indication is found in how tradi-

tional Jewish texts can be read differently. A significant bond throughout Jewish history had been the ability to read the identical Bible and use each other's Siddur, or prayer book, despite all the diversity of melodies and rituals in different communities. Many Israelis are unlikely to be competent or even familiar with the Siddur, once read even more frequently than the Bible, and still ubiquitous in the Diaspora, with multiple editions offering English translations and commentary spawned by denominational variety. On the other hand, American Jews are unlikely to read the Bible beyond the synagogue, and when they do, it is usually in translation. Even allowing for this difference, the Bible is still not a common text.

The "people of the book" now have different texts, not merely in language but in the sections they tend to read. Secular Israelis, who constitute about 80 percent of the Jewish population, read the Bible as history, not Divine revelation. The Bible is studied repeatedly from the elementary grades through high school, but largely emphasizing historical episodes, such as in Judges and Kings, that describe regaining the Promised Land. The Israeli curriculum nearly ignores Leviticus, for centuries the traditional first text because it centers on religious ritual. Israeli children read only those verses that deal with the jubilee, when land is restored to original owners and slaves set free, and the few verses requiring that workers must receive their wages at the end of the day. In effect, this reading of the "Israeli" Bible reflects the enormous influence of Labor Zionism and emphasizes the creation of the state, rather than familiarity with traditional religious practices, for which few feel affinity.

Moreover, although Americans and Israelis share a common past, they interpret it differently. That certainly has been the case with the *shtetl* and even the Holocaust. Israeli scholarship or theatre could not have produced *World of our Fathers* or *Fiddler on the Roof*. After World War II, Americans related to their European roots with nostalgia and sentimentality. In Zionist thought and practice, the exile was to be rejected. The *shtetl* reflected a world of poverty, suffering, and tragedy immeasurably deprecated further because Jews did not engage in proper "productive" labor nor did they adequately defend themselves. Interpretations of the Holocaust affirm this negative bias. In Israel, memorialization of the Holocaust is part of the national civic culture and is commemorated as "Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day." During Israel's first decades, ghetto fighters and partisans enjoyed far greater prestige than victims. Visitors to Yad Vashem are invited to consider Israel the proper response to the Holocaust, a suggestion heightened by its location in

Jerusalem, the rebuilt and vital capital of the Jewish state. The same message is made explicit to Israel's young who participate in the March of the Living to the camps in Poland and in public rhetoric back home. The message of the Holocaust Museum in Washington is necessarily more universal and also bears a distinctively American perspective. A carousel near the exit offers continuous videos featuring survivors who now live in America and who express gratitude to the land that enabled them to rebuild their personal lives.

Search for Unity

It may be equally impossible to “Americanize” Israel or to export the intimacies and immediacies of life in a Jewish state. Still, I would conclude where I began. Differences need not lead to separation. Both Americans and Israelis are making significant efforts to establish programs and institutions for young Jews to nurture identities that are inclusive of the other. But it is clear that this requires a conscious and consistent effort. One can readily trace the repeated warnings of Zionist educators since the beginning of the last century lest the youth become disconnected from their Jewish heritage and from brethren in the Diaspora: Ahad Ha'am before World War I; the national program to enhance “Jewish consciousness” [*toda'ah yehudit*] in the decade after independence; down to the recent Shenhar Report (1993). The issues are enduring. They have engendered both repeated crises and continual attempts to marshal national resources to secure Jewish continuity and national solidarity. There is every indication this will continue. Paradoxically, while insularity and disconnectedness may be inherent in a small nation-state, Israel defines itself as Jewish, and its *raison d'être* as affirming and transmitting a national culture that extends beyond its temporal and geographic borders.

Complementary efforts have long been under way among American Jews. While news from the Middle East causes discomfort and alienation, there are significant signs of a desire for connection: the popularity of the birthright and study-abroad programs; the growing demand for Israel Studies in Jewish schools and in the university; and the popularity of Hebrew literature in translation. Israel is part of the public agenda in the United States and particularly among Jews. For all the differences, American Jews are likely to extract from their exposure to Israel and Israeli culture, whether vicariously or from actual contact, meanings and experience that will enable them to deepen their commitments as Jews, however these are differently defined or expressed.

The challenge for those concerned with national Jewish solidarity is to encourage direct and indirect contact, with the expectation that it will be mutually beneficial. What cannot work is imagining a standard template out of which a single identity should or could be shaped. A kind of normalcy has been attained with the creation of a Diaspora and homeland. To expect more is unrealistic and unattainable. Divergence and unity can coexist. Pluralism in approach and expectations is a realistic and hopeful prospect. A dialogue on identity in which Israeli and American Jews constitute an “other” is likely to yield rich dividends for both.

Israel in a Post-Mythological Age

Gil Troy

Israel—and a dynamic, challenging Zionist identity—should be the answer to the modern Jew’s secular, ethnic, individualistic, non-denominational prayer. Israel should be the premier Jewish identity-builder, inspiring Jews worldwide, be they religious or secular, left or right, Israeli or Diaspora-based.

Israel should be a living laboratory allowing modern Jews to experiment in the Jewish people’s fertile, energetic, pluralistic, old-new land, with the different elements shaping their identities. Jews in Israel should be generating exciting formulas synthesizing tradition and modernity, liberalism and Judaism, tribalism and humanitarianism, ethnicity and cosmopolitanism, nationalism and idealism, democracy and spirituality, East and West, the “I” and the “us.” The country’s intimacy, the land’s grandeur, history’s echoes, the society’s vitality, the state’s idealism—all should provide that sense of community, pride in heritage, framework for meaning, vessel of values, vehicle for self-fulfillment, and forum for self-expression that many modern Jews lack in the leisure-oriented, materialistic world we live in, and love.

It is easy to blame the obvious suspects for the gap between this idealistic vision and reality: Arab exterminationists, Palestinian terrorists, hysterical journalists, and hostile leftists have battered Israel’s self-image and clouded the Jewish people’s collective vision of the Jewish homeland. In Israel, scheming politicians, unreasonable zealots, greedy rabbis, and carping academics have done damage, aided unconsciously throughout the Diaspora by heavy-handed educators, guilt-generating community leaders, and lazy parents. An unhappy mélange of good and bad intentions has unduly politicized Zionism, making Israel advocacy the primary vehicle for expression of concern for Israel—and often for Jewish identity building.

Obstacles to a Positive Relationship

Beyond today’s tensions, broader ideological obstacles are blocking a healthier, more positive role for Israel and Zionism in building modern Jewish identity.

For starters, the narratives clash. The American Jewish narrative, like the narratives of many immigrant-driven Diaspora communities, is triumphal, emphasizing America’s centrality as redeemer. Arrival there was the great leap forward, guaranteeing all ensuing progress. Israel’s narrative weaves triumph with tragedy—“*d’vash v’oketz*,” “the honey and the sting”—striking a more sober tone, a less assured resolution.



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Also, Zionism posits a different center—Israel. Beyond the obvious ensuing clash of loyalties, competing cultural impulses collide too. Western consumer culture offers the weightless lure of freedom transcending the gravitational force of tradition. We live in a world of radical selfishness, of dizzying pluralism, of contingencies, not commitments. Americans “bowl alone,” Harvard’s Robert Putnam observes, not in leagues. “Bowling alone” discourages working or singing or praying or building together. In our throwaway society, being rooted in history or community or morality or faith is tragically unhip.

Belonging and committing are passé in today’s Western culture of doubt. There is a clash of epistemologies. Judaism teaches *na’aseh v’nishma*, we will do and obey; the Zionist imperative is *livnot u’lhibanot*, to build and be rebuilt; to which the lazy, dismissive American responds, “Whatever.” If a previous generation of Jews tended to oversell, idealizing Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir, today we undersell, demonizing promiscuously. Our cynical world, with Jon Stewart and Jay Leno feeding us news, mocks leaps of faith, fostering loyalty to communities, common mythologies, shared identities. In a post-mythological age of expose, it is hard to build faith in Zionism, Israel, or God. How do we learn complexity and maintain love? How do we acknowledge imperfection while still supporting Israel, America, our parents?

Of course, few of these hyper-discerning doubters acknowledge how addicted they are to the latest fads and celebrity demigods. We consider ourselves savvy because we did not buy Janet Jackson’s claim that her wardrobe “malfunctioned,” but we are not self-critical enough to consider what it means that so many months later, so many of us still have an opinion about the same football halftime show. Still, this “whateverism” encourages holding back rather than plunging ahead, prizing individuality and disdaining community. We seek custom-fit, idiosyncratic notions rather than collective “isms” and enduring ideals.

Sources of Continuing Vitality

Considering the sobering headlines, failed leaders, clashing narratives and loyalties, epistemologies and sensibilities, the continuing vitality of Israel-Diaspora ties appears almost miraculous. Decoding that ongoing miracle provides the potential genomes for redemption. And acknowledging that many of these cultural challenges have been exported to Israel and embraced by young Israelis suggests that a renewed Zionism could help Jews in Israel as well.

Modernity not only offers freedom from age-old constraints and contemporary truisms. We also have “freedom to”—freedom to commit, to take stands, to be bold. My mother warned me, “Don’t be so open-minded that your brain falls out.” To live is to choose, to stand for something, to be one thing and not something else. Better to choose with integrity, for you can choose consciously or unconsciously. Not choosing is also choosing.

Thank you, Yasir Arafat. Arafat’s war, waged in Jerusalem and Mombasa, not just Hebron and Gush Katif, launched against women and children, and assailing Israel’s very legitimacy, imposed a moral clarity lacking during the easy-living 1990s. Arafat returned us to the fundamental building block of Jewish and Zionist identity—our shared destiny as a people. The Jewish people’s nerve endings are uniquely entangled; when one is cut, many of us bleed and mourn. Jews who were mystified by Western Christians’ silence when Christians were enslaved in Sudan or slaughtered in Pakistan demonstrate that they take this peoplehood thing so for granted that they ignore its uniqueness and its grip on our imaginations, emotions, and identities.

While these last bloody years have evoked comparisons to the horrific 1930s and 1940s, it may be more instructive to consider the 1960s and 1970s. Both the 1967 and 1973 wars galvanized Diaspora Jews, solidifying Israel as a central pillar of a modern, upbeat, secularized Jewish identity. Even while the stereotypical “sixties kids” fled to ashrams or rebelled against their parents and upbringings, the Jewish activist baby-boomers triggered an ideological and institutional renaissance and redirection.

We are now poised for a similar communal jujitsu, transforming the negative force of Palestinian terror into a positive force for Zionist and Jewish renewal. A generation that “feels Jewish”—often without an accompanying theology or much Jewish education—can embrace the Zionist trinity of peoplehood, history, and homeland. If we ask, “What’s Israel got that America doesn’t?” we see that Israel’s got ancient history and contemporary mystery, which fosters fascination; it’s got intimacy and intensity, which invites engagement. Isaiah Berlin said that Winston Churchill in 1940 lifted “a large number of inhabitants of the British Isles out of their normal selves, and, by dramatizing their lives and making them seem to themselves and to each other clad in the fabulous garments appropriate to a great historic moment, transformed cowards into brave men, and so fulfilled the purpose of shining armor.” Plunging into Israel’s story, both “the honey and the sting,” can similarly transform modern American Jews.

A Ladder of Israel Identification Initiatives

In fact, over the last five years, at every stage of a young Jew's educational journey, new initiatives have buffed this "shining armor," building a positive, contemporary Jewish and Zionist identity:

- ▶ Jewish day schools and camps—enjoying their own 1990s-fed resurgence—have pioneered new curricula for teaching Israel. These initiatives acknowledge the complexities of Israeli politics while celebrating the strengths of Israeli society and delighting in the sights, sounds, tastes, and smells of Israeli culture.
- ▶ Resurrecting an idea that the 1970s Soviet Jewry movement popularized, many bar and bat mitzvah celebrants have begun twinning with Israeli children victimized by terror. The best of the twinning projects use the Israel link to push bar or bat mitzvahs beyond materialism, shifting the questions of celebrants from "What did you get?" to "What did you give?"
- ▶ And speaking of rites of passage, the group trip to Israel has begun embedding itself in the American Jewish mind as a new "rite of passage," thanks especially to birthright Israel's magic carpet ride for young adults between the ages of 18 and 26, with a follow-up program of growing effectiveness in building Jewish identity through a positive group Israel experience.
- ▶ For the same age group, a new generation of Israel advocates who are hipper, savvier, more individualistic, more careerist, more media-fluent have emerged—with armies of blue-blazered undergraduates convening across the country to develop a new pro-Israel language tailored to today's ambivalences and complexities.
- ▶ Academically, students are not just challenging the anti-Zionist orthodoxies of so many Middle East studies departments, but developing a new branch called Israel studies. This model builds on the proliferation of Holocaust studies, while delivering a message of pride and empowerment, not just pity.
- ▶ And the latest Jewish Agency undertaking, Masa, seeks to increase the number of young Jews studying or living for six months to a year in Israel from 5,000 to 20,000, thus providing an exciting culminating step to this emerging ladder of Zionist achievement and Jewish identity building.

Each of these initiatives reflects a key idea essential to building a positive Israel-Diaspora relationship. The curricular revolution—with a positive, proactive, yet authentic Israel-oriented curriculum—focuses on education and could be transformative. The twinning

programs, transcending the traditional model of Diaspora Jews as social workers or philanthropists to emphasize Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews as friends—cultivate empathy. Birthright Israel and other programs emphasize experiencing Israel, not just reading about it, or even defending it. A new brand of Israel advocacy provides young Jews with an opportunity to engage Israel, honing important skills, cementing emotional, social, political, and ideological ties among fellow Zionists in Israel and at home. A wave of Israel studies courses will enlighten American Jews, going beyond the depressing facts of Holocaust victimology. And Masa will promote entanglements—those messy, complex, often emotionally draining and confusing, yet enriching and inspiring ties to a home six thousand miles away—encouraging friendships to bud, professional associations to sprout, and serious connections to Israel to take root.

These new stops on the Jewish journey should become as ubiquitous as Hebrew schools and bar mitzvahs were in the 1960s and 1970s—but hopefully far more inspiring, and constructive. If this happens, Diaspora Jews will enjoy a richer relationship with Israel and their own communities, as demonstrated by the birthright bounce, the epidemic of enthusiasm that birthright returnees have been spreading these last few years.

Learning from birthright

With birthright as the model, a renewed Israel-Diaspora relationship will benefit Israelis, too. One unexpected consequence of birthright has been a birthright bounce among Israelis, the positive impact of “*Mifgash*” meetings between Israeli and Diaspora peers on the Israeli hosts. Even brief, two-day *mifgashim* have taught Israeli soldiers about their role on the world stage, shining their proverbial “armor” to participate in the Jewish historical epic. Many IDF education officers have become quite enthusiastic about giving soldiers days off to get turned on to a new appreciation for Israel’s role in Jewish history and the modern Jewish world. Other so-called secular Israelis have described—with tears in their eyes—their excitement at discovering from North American Jews different forms of Jewish expression that have nothing to do with the either-or of a “rabbi’s way or the highway,” a stereotype nurtured in too many nontraditional Israeli households (and fed by a ham-handed rabbinate).

Savvy Israel advocates have discovered that pro-Israel students, both Jewish and non-Jewish, respond to retail not wholesale approaches. Customized messages work better than mass sloganeering, and the most effective Israel advocacy is the result of a positive

relationship with Israel, rather than being the only dimension of an Israel connection.

Similarly, the Zionist rebirth here envisioned cannot be mass produced on either side of the Atlantic, nor can it be too politicized. We need a big-tent Zionism—broad, inclusive, using Zionism as a response to the challenges of modern world and the lure of assimilation, not as a social work project, a political initiative, or a guilt trip. The ingredients are there; the need is growing; the timing is ripe, for a step-by-step Zionist resurgence. Perhaps we can start by taking back the term “Zionism” from its enemies and its more cynical friends, making it again a term of pride, openness, and one-on-one, culturally savvy creativity. One hundred years ago, Zionism brought pride to the label “Jew”; modern Jews need to bring pride back to the label “Zionist”—not just for Israel, but for ourselves.



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