

WESTERN DIASPORA AND ISRAEL TODAY

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The mission of committed Jews today—to forge a world-wide Jewish solidarity with a democratic-humanistic Israel at its core—can only be achieved if Israel and the Diaspora work in partnership. Israelis must first work inward to revive humanistic and pluralistic Judaism. Second, Israelis, with the help of the Western Diaspora, must explore and emphasize what links them to the enlightened modern world.

As Israel celebrates its 50th anniversary, it faces a new historical phase in its relations with the Diaspora.

Over two years ago Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated; and Israel is still shaken. We are still shocked and ashamed; we are most gravely concerned because the event reflects persistent, powerful, and threatening undercurrents. The assassin's education and milieu impel us to keenly re-evaluate Jewish and Zionist education in Israel; the hideous event also forces us to honestly and bravely re-examine a series of questions and challenges. Can the State shape a society where such political murder would never happen again? Can Israel, deeply immersed in the Middle East harsh realities, overcome the crisis by itself, without the cooperation of an experienced and external democratic factor? And what is the possible role for the Western Diaspora in this connection?

Israeli society is deeply polarized. Rabin's murder has thrown a frightening light on this sharp division. On the one hand we have the assassin and his circle—products of religiously intensive Jewish education, zealous patriotism, a good knowledge of Eretz Yisrael, and a passion for the Hebrew language. On the other hand, there is the "North Tel-Aviv crowd," products of superficial Jewish education and of great fondness for "things American." They loved Rabin's peace-promising message, and when he died they cried and lit endless candles in his memory. This polarization and the fear of the "Tel Aviv American kind of spirit" hinder the effort desperately needed for reshaping our Israeli and Jewish-Zionist education.

There is an ingrained fear in Israel that a

strong repudiation of nationalist and religious fanaticism might serve the other side—the "Hellenized Tel Aviv" kind of culture. Too many Israelis see Western-oriented, universalistic values as destined to erase the Jewish character of the state, undermine its Zionist rationale, and eventually bring about the loss of our Jewish identity.

Paradoxically, for Israel to be meaningfully integrated in the modern world and to stay at the same time Jewishly functional, it has to earnestly retrieve elements of its historic origins. Zionist ideology in its initial stages, especially during the nineteenth century, envisioned its success via a peaceful process of internationally cooperative patterns that have been part of the international community's agenda in recent years. Zionism also hoped for *tikkun olam* and for organized Jewish contribution toward more *tzedek* (justice) and decency in the world.

The eminent example of Zionism's potential for good in the modern world is Theodore Herzl's *Altneuland*, the utopian novel where he discredited the traditional political national state and depicted instead a New Society that abolished military establishments and repudiated religious and racial intolerance. Herzl's model was crowned by The Peace Palace—a permanent institution devoted to advance international cooperation.

However, in reality, the Zionist enterprise in Eretz Yisrael was advanced through a consistent and often violent conflict with the Arabs. The history of Zionist progress in Palestine is, to a considerable extent, a tale of wars. It is not mere chance that many, perhaps most, Israelis indicate major events in their lives by referring to one or another

war—"My son was born just a year before the Six-Day War," "I was married the year of the Yom Kippur War," "Our City Hall was built precisely during the Attrition War Years." The Arab-Israeli conflict has become our "routine" vocabulary and national psyche for about a century. At the background of all this looms the decisive fact that Zionism forcefully created a state for the Jewish people while overcoming the other people that lived in the land.

Despite a century of arrested hopes, mainstream Zionism in Eretz Yisrael always has been more than a movement for mere Jewish survival or for doing justice to the Jews; at the same time it aspired for a new kind of relationship within the nations, for a more harmonious world, for advancing the Jewish people in the context of a repaired world. Mainstream Zionism often called for universal justice as well, for a progress toward Isaiah's vision of beating swords into plowshares.

And war was not *the* main path of Zionist development; Zionism advanced by positive processes of immigration and building settlements and urban communities, draining swamps, watering arid zones, and the like. The success of Zionism in this country was due to our "greening of Palestine." The United Nations 1947 partition decision was reached largely because we were already a considerable demographic entity, a dynamic economic reality, and a defensible democratic community. Still, it would be a gross historical distortion to ignore the violent nationalist course of Zionist development.

This harsh and painful development does not mean that the human price for Jewish sovereignty was too high. The pogroms, brutal oppression, and finally the Holocaust fully justified creating a national home for the Jews in the land of their ancestors. However, as a result of this moral rationale, Zionist ideology in Eretz Yisrael developed too firmly on negative factors—negating the Arabs, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust. As a result, today too many Israelis embrace a Zionism that focuses on territory and preaches an impatient patriotism anchored in an obsessive "Never Again!" and ever-suspecting

mindset.

Jewish education in Israel tended to foster this mindset by failing to be sufficiently comprehensive; it often skipped over the exilic generations and marginalized the Diaspora phenomenon while concentrating instead on the two periods of Jewish sovereignty, especially on the First Commonwealth. Israel, steeled by too many wars, has not been prepared—perhaps *could not* be prepared—for the great final struggle—the struggle for survival in a free and peacefully competitive world. Thus, alas, the narrow Israeli Jewish education overshadowed the legacy of the original open-minded course of Zionism.

Actually, the Zionist movement was a success story largely because it was part of the Western world. Despite their nationalistic zeal, responsible European-Israeli Zionist leaders and their American partners always aspired to and succeeded in finding allies in the democratic English-speaking world. The Balfour Declaration, the development and maturity of the Yishuv during the Mandatory years, and the very establishment of Israel owe much to liberal English and American support. However, because of the Holocaust experience and the Middle East conflict, the Israeli mind was hardly shaped in the light of this positive course. Hence, today, too many Israelis fear that the Western assimilatory process is limitless and that this alliance with the democratic world may melt down the unique essence of the small Jewish state.

Today's Israel needs the Diaspora's help in order to learn or re-learn that liberalism is not always a force for assimilation. The English-speaking countries in particular are bound not just to individualistic assimilating forces but also to *pluralism*. Religious, cultural, and ethnic differences are indeed a very important factor in Western societies, especially in the United States. And pluralism, of course, allows for the self-fulfillment of collective groups in its midst. Consequently, the Western impact does not necessarily entail assimilation of small nations.

Nor are there enough Israelis who positively appreciate the benefits of *acculturation*—the qualified absorption of the general society's culture and tenets without giving up

the group's identity and core values system. Actually, there are endless shades of acculturation to choose beyond the "either/or" pattern. Israel has the opportunity to select and shape its own syntheses of Western and Jewish cultures, of universalistic and nationalist values, and of an open future orientation and historic traditionalism. In practice, however, it seems that a great bulk of Israel's population has become too defensive and nervous to creatively use these options.

Israel should elaborate a synthesis of particularism and universalism and re-learn the history of Zionism in the context of the English-speaking world in order to restore to Zionism, in a sophisticated manner, the lost balance between nationalist and humanist values. Unfortunately, the powerful messianic undercurrents in Israel persistently work to isolate Israel; some of these forces try to shape a kind of a fundamentalist state—a monolingual Hebrew Israel of sorts, exclusively bound to Judaism and Jewishness.

Many educators in Israel are rightly concerned about the shaky English knowledge of our students. It is a pity that the reform proposals offered in the early 1990s by the previous minister of education, Amnon Rubinstein, have been shelved because they are seen as challenging the Hebrew language and the purity of Israel's national culture. These reforms would have helped Israelis become fluent both in Hebrew and English and solidly linked with the Western Diaspora and Western culture at their best.

Maintaining the Hebrew language and Israeli culture, however, is not something to be very worried about. It is not the quality of the Hebrew that should arouse our Zionist interest; rather, *what is done* in Hebrew, to others and to ourselves, is what should gravely concern us.

Our course in Israel should have now two foci. First, and this hopefully we Israelis can do by ourselves, we should work inward—for a revival of humanistic and pluralistic Judaism that would bring younger generations closer to the treasures of our ethical Jewish civilization. Second, and this we can do effectively only with the Western Diaspora's help, is an outward direction—to explore and

emphasize in our culture and in general education *the links that connect us to the enlightened modern world.*

The English-speaking Diaspora may prove to be especially useful to the desired kind of humanistic-Judaic revival in Israel. Nationalism in the English-speaking world in general developed along specific civic-democratic lines. The "organic," historic-collectivistic pattern of nationalism that at the time bred fascism and Nazism existed in England and the United States only in small measure. Consequently, the democratic ethos in these countries has remained prominent and stable. For a revived decent Judaism in Israel, considering the particularism-ridden Jewish nationalism in the country, an intensive interaction with English-speaking cultures is hence a most desired factor.

The mission of committed Jews today is to forge a world-wide Jewish solidarity and development with *democratic-humanistic* Israel at its core. If chauvinism and religious intolerance will prevail in the Jewish state, Israel will not "Judaize" the Diaspora, and the latter will become more and more alienated from Israel. The result might be that there will be in the future two Jewish peoples—a Hebrew-speaking, quasi-democratic, tribal Jewish nation in the Middle East and an overtly liberal, faintly Jewish community in the West. It is still not too late to avoid this from happening.

In our quest for a humanistic post-classic Zionism, the Western Diaspora has a singular task. American Jewry, in particular, can play a very significant role as an ongoing provider to Israel of democratic and pluralistic values. Yet, Western Judaism lacks vitality and Hebrew versatility, precisely what we have in Israel in abundance. Hebrew-speaking Jewish Israel can indeed significantly contribute to the continuity and richness of Diaspora life.

Gone is the period of a one-way Zionist street. Today, each side in the partnership must do its share. With timely self-awareness, with love, and mutual respect, the supreme goal of committed modern Jews—a dynamic and enlightened Jewish world with Israel at its heart—is quite attainable.