

Israel and American Jewry: Oslo and Beyond

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- The Oslo years and the promise of Arab-Israeli peace led to a recalibrating of relations between Israel and world Jewry. Israeli leaders in effect pronounced the end of the "Israel in need" model of relations.
- Post-Zionist elites dismissed the very concept of a relationship with Diaspora Jewry as retarding the process of Israel's integration into the Middle East.
- The collapse of the Oslo process "resecuritized" the agenda of Israeli-Diaspora relations. Israeli spokespersons argued that a strong Jewish community in North America was vital to preserving Israeli security.
- The problem of Diaspora assimilation threatened to undermine Israel's position within American society and public opinion. Absent a critical mass of Jews sufficiently committed to the Jewish enterprise to make the case for Israel in the battle of ideas, U.S. Middle Eastern policy could well come to approximate the policies of European democracies.

Israeli-Diaspora relations were significantly revised during the heady days of Oslo. An agenda that had primarily focused on world Jewry's political and economic support for Israel receded in favor of the seemingly more pressing need for Israel to assist Diaspora Jewry in preserving its own future continuity—an agenda that stood in pronounced contrast to classical Zionist ideology. However, as the Oslo process collapsed, the traditional agenda of Israeli-Diaspora relations reemerged albeit in modified form. Israeli spokespersons in the twenty-first century emphasized a strong North American Jewish community as critical to Israel's security concerns.

The famed handshake on the White House lawn between Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat allegedly changed everything—including the course of Israeli-Diaspora relations. Assumptions that peace was at hand permeated Jewish discourse. Even the ads of Israel's Tourism Ministry touted Oslo as heralding a new era. The following winter, the Board of Governors of the American Jewish Committee titled its meeting in [Jerusalem](#) "When Peace Comes."

Ill-advised as these assumptions actually were, they compelled a rethinking, if not a recalibration, of relations between Israel and world Jewry. The traditional agenda of "Israel in need" of Diaspora support no longer seemed the critical priority. In its place, American Jewish leaders, alarmed by the findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study that reported a mixed marriage rate of 52 percent, began to question whether Israel now might come to the rescue of American Jewry from the dangers of assimilation.

Disparaging the Diaspora

Israeli leaders, however, were far more outspoken, even dismissive of the importance of American Jewish economic and political support in the putative new age of Arab-Israeli peace. Prime Minister Rabin, in his first year in office, criticized AIPAC's political advocacy as unnecessary to the Israeli-American relationship. Shortly afterward, Finance Minister Avraham

Shochat commented that Israel Bonds were overpriced and that Israel could do better borrowing on the open markets.

At a later point Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, addressing the International Conference of the Woman's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), shocked the delegates by urging that they cease supporting Israel and instead channel their efforts to strengthening Jewish education in North America. Lastly, President Ezer Weizman, appearing before the AJC Board of Governors, declared that all he asked of American Jews was aliyah (emigration to Israel) and he had no need of their influence within the American polity.

The motives behind these statements were varied. Beilin envisaged Israel as a prosperous state able to satisfy its own needs without reliance on Jews or others abroad. He hoped to recast Israel's image as a nation-state, advocating that visiting politicians from abroad no longer be brought to Yad Vashem because Holocaust memory, in his view, represented too vulnerable an image for Israel. He realized that American Jewry's most pressing problem was assimilation, to which Jewish education seemed the primary antidote. More philosophically, he noted that since 1948 Jewish unity had mainly centered on perceptions of vulnerabilities rather than aspirations for a common Jewish future. In an era of great Oslo optimism, Beilin hoped to build a new Jewish unity on Jewish hopes and cultural treasures rather than the fears that had so dominated Jewish discourse since the Holocaust.¹

Rabin's case was much simpler but in many ways more devastating to American Jewish self-perceptions. Rabin claimed to have no need for Jewish lobbying or representations. Bilateral U.S.-Israeli contacts were adequate to secure the "special relationship." Although Rabin subsequently explained that his disparagement was limited to AIPAC, most American Jews believed he was belittling pro-Israeli advocacy in general much as Beilin had dismissed American Jewish economic support.

President Weizman, ever flamboyant and outspoken, followed up his remarks to AJC by convening an international conference of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem on the future course of Jewish peoplehood. Yet after several days of deliberations amid stifling heat, he concluded the conference by reiterating that he was interested in world Jewry only for purposes of aliyah. It was as if the gathering itself had never occurred. American Jewish communal leader Shoshana Cardin responded immediately that American Jewry did not perceive itself as "cannon fodder" for aliyah.²

Finance Minister Shochat presented a different case. In the early years of Israel's history, Israel Bonds had fulfilled vital functions. Israel had difficulty borrowing on the open markets and had yet to establish credibility for debt repayment. The mere fact that Israel Bonds had always repaid debts with interest had helped Israel build its bona fides as a nation that met its obligations. By the 1990s, as a result, Israel had little difficulty securing loans in the international markets, often at rates lower than those offered by Israel Bonds. In effect, Shochat, like his governmental colleagues, was challenging the "Israel in need" model of relations with the Diaspora.³

Yet Shochat committed almost precisely the same error as his colleagues. By downplaying the significance of Israel Bonds, he was symbolically downplaying the significance of Jews extending credit to the Jewish state as an expression of mutual responsibility. Similarly, Beilin and Rabin had belittled American Jewish support and ignored its implications for the concept of Jewish peoplehood. The optimism of Oslo inspired a vision of Israeli independence and normalization, which, in turn, made Diaspora Jewish support appear unimportant despite its key role in maintaining Diaspora ties with Israel and the Jewish people as a whole.

Even when, by the close of the twentieth century, Israeli leadership had grasped the significance of American Jews to Israeli national security, it failed to understand the self-perception and identity of American Jews. An Israeli diplomat, addressing an elite group of Israeli visitors to the United States, announced that he was interested in American Jewry only for its importance in Washington. Challenged as to whether he was revising classical Zionist ideology that called for the "withering of the Diaspora," he replied that American Jewry must remain strong "strictly for

reasons of Israeli security." Any significance of American Jewry for future Jewish peoplehood was seemingly lost on him.

The Post-Zionist Trend

Perhaps the clearest expression of an Israeli desire for normalization and rejecting the Diaspora during the Oslo years was the intellectual current known as post-Zionism. Intellectual circles placed great confidence in the peace process. This optimism often fostered a new reading of Israeli culture, society, and history. Heavily influenced by currents of postmodernism and postnationalism, the post-Zionists undertook an entire reevaluation of the Zionist narrative, including its relationship with world Jewry.

Even before the Oslo signing revisionist historians had been rewriting Israel's story, arguing that the country was born in sin—namely, the expulsion of Palestinian refugees. In place of a "heroic" Israel that routed a host of Arab armies, the new historians depicted an Israel in collusion with colonialist powers that repressed Arab independence. Similarly, the "new archaeologists" invoked the absence of material remains to belittle claims of Jewish presence and sovereignty in biblical times. Although in theory these scholars wrote works of objective scholarship and open-minded inquiry, the effect of their writings was to undermine the Jewish state's legitimacy as based on historical attachments to the land and as a beleaguered state that had successfully resisted existential Arab threats.

In the new era of Oslo, post-Zionists looked to an Israel that truly would become part of the region rather than remain in confrontation with its neighbors. More specifically, they debated whether Israel was a Jewish state, a state of the Jewish people or, most ominously, a state of all its citizens.

Within this debate, world Jewry's relationship with Israel was particularly problematic. If Israel's future was indeed to be part of the region, it needed to orient itself toward the Middle East rather than Diaspora Jewry. The attachment to Diaspora Jewry might well retard the integration process and underline the Jewish elements of the state rather than evolving into a state of all of its citizens. The cause of Jewish peoplehood interested post-Zionists much less than their vision of a future multicultural Israel sensitive to minority rights and offering no preferential treatment to born Jews, who might or might not continue to constitute its majority population.

More specifically, the post-Zionists criticized the Israeli national anthem "Hatikvah" for portraying Israel as a realization of the age-old dreams of the Jewish people. They similarly criticized the Law of Return, a bedrock symbol of the Zionist nature of the Jewish state, as having at best lost its historical significance or, at worst, representing everything wrong with a Jewish state by offering preferential treatment to Diaspora Jews who had never set foot in Israel while Arabs who had fled in terror could not return to their homes.

The extent of the post-Zionists' influence remains a matter of contention. Clearly they never attained a critical mass of support within Israel's Jewish population. Even in intellectual circles their numbers remained relatively few. Instead they gained disproportionate influence through their prominence in the universities and their access to leading media. Some took up residence in European universities where they became the "exception Israelis" who could satisfy the criteria of the European Left. Others became major sources for citations by Arab intellectuals mounting an assault on the principles and values of Zionism.⁴

The Ne'eman Commission: Promise and Disappointment

Taken together, the statements of all these groups—political figures and intellectuals alike—were heard primarily by Jewish leaders whose attachment to Israel in fact was never in doubt. Although they warned that American Jewish support for Israel should never be taken for granted, and viewed these statements as damaging to intra-Jewish relations, rarely did the various assertions penetrate Diaspora Jewish communities. Ironically, claims by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate

delegitimizing Conservative and Reform Judaism evoked far greater anger from active American Jews, most of whom identified with these two denominations. The very same people, however, paid little attention to political statements that were dismissive of Diaspora Jewry as a whole, much less to post-Zionists seeking to uproot Israel from its historical Jewish ties.

Indeed, the core reason for world Jewry's distancing from Israel was more Diaspora assimilation than any particular Israeli statements. American Jews who have little involvement with Jewish matters in general also, naturally, have little to do with Israel. Dismissive assertions about American Jewry or their religious leaders clearly antagonized many, but the people who were most riled were precisely the most identified as Jews and therefore the least likely to turn indifferent toward Israel as a Jewish state. Although great attention was given to these statements, and some efforts indeed were made to repair relations, the real distancing took place not between committed albeit disappointed American Jews with Israel but rather among those with minimal connection with Jewish affairs in the first place.⁵

Among efforts to repair relations, the Ne'eman Commission held out great, albeit unfulfilled, promise to strengthen Israeli-Diaspora relations and, more generally, to strengthen the Jewish people itself by resolving issues of personal status, particularly conversion to Judaism.⁶ For one thing, representatives of each of the major religious movements met jointly and respectfully as colleagues to address the question of conversion to Judaism.

The formula they reached may be described as "polydoxy/orthopraxy": plurality of teaching yet uniformity of practice. The commission recommended that the religious movements establish joint conversion institutes in Israel that would incorporate instructors from each sector. Graduates of these institutes would then be presented as candidates for conversion to the Chief Rabbinate, which was expected to perform their conversions in accordance with halachic practice.

The Chief Rabbinate's immediate reaction, however, was harshly negative. The Rabbinate did agree that it should continue performing conversions but offered no guarantees that it would affirm candidates of the joint conversion institutes. It added that cooperation with the non-Orthodox movements was forbidden in principle—a statement that embarrassed American Orthodox colleagues while expressing utter contempt for non-Orthodox rabbis.

In practice, however, the Ne'eman Commission's recommendations enjoyed a somewhat longer life. Representatives of each of the movements did agree on a common yet demanding curriculum for conversion, in itself a minor miracle of intra-Jewish cooperation. Examining each case on its own merits, the Chief Rabbinate did convert graduates of the conversion institutes. Although many remained disappointed that the Ne'eman Commission had failed to secure a breakthrough in principle in favor of religious pluralism, it facilitated about three thousand conversions per year in the early twenty-first century. Many observers anticipated future growth in the number of conversions, resolving the issue of Russian immigrants of problematic halachic status, and symbolically expressing cooperation rather than confrontation between the religious movements to the collective benefit of the Jewish people.⁷

Yet by 2007 matters had turned for the worse. A former chief rabbi declared that the Holocaust represented divine punishment for the sins of Reform Judaism, a theological insult both to those who perished and to the largest sector of American Judaism. An Israeli Reform rabbi who had lost a son in one of Israel's wars was disinvited from reciting the Memorial Prayer in his town's ceremony for Remembrance Day. A former chief rabbi sermonized that "the reek of hell wafts" from Conservative and Reform synagogues.

Most important, the Chief Rabbinate ceased performing conversions for graduates of the joint conversion institutes. The bar of halachic observance for potential converts was raised so high as to make most graduates ineligible for conversion. The Ne'eman Commission, which ten years earlier had suffered a defeat in principle, now suffered one in practice, harming both specific individuals and the Jewish people collectively.

The Successes of birthright Israel

By contrast, the birthright Israel program was conceptualized as a revolutionary step both in Jewish education and in Israeli-Diaspora relations. The program's founders hoped to address the problem of Jewish continuity with a ten-day all-expenses-paid trip to Israel, offered to North American Jews aged eighteen to twenty-five who had not been on an organized trip to Israel previously. Although the founders realized that a ten-day tour was hardly a panacea, they hoped it would lead to further Jewish involvement including return trips, study programs, and social action under Jewish auspices. By 2007 birthright Israel had registered over 125,000 participants and still had a waiting list. To be sure, whether the program would succeed in its long-term aspirations to secure Jewish continuity remained an open question. It had, however, attracted much larger numbers of Jews than most had expected.

Yet perhaps more profound than the numbers were the philosophical messages of birthright. First, the program signaled the centrality of a connection with Israel for Jews in the twenty-first century. The name "birthright" clearly connoted that the state of Israel itself had changed the map and meaning of Jewish peoplehood and identity in major and irrevocable ways. Simply by virtue of being a Jew, one had a claim to a visit to Israel. In turn, by agreeing to participate in funding the program, the state of Israel, together with the Jewish federations of North America and leading megaphilanthropists, were expressing Israel's responsibility to help preserve Jewish life in North America.

Thus birthright was a positive step in strengthening Israeli-American Jewish relations in two regards. First, the program did increase the number of American Jews who had actually visited Israel. By the close of the twentieth century only about 35 percent of American Jews had ever done so—little more than half the rate of other English-speaking Diaspora communities. Bringing over 125,000 young people clearly affirmed the need to nurture closer ties between young American Jews and the Jewish state.

Second, birthright marked a departure in how Israeli and American Jewish leaders perceive one another. Both sides accepted responsibility for one another's health and vitality. For Israelis this marked a sharp break with previous models of the withering of the Diaspora and greater desire to strengthen the Jewish people by utilizing the Israel experience to help fight assimilation. To be sure, that battle required far more than a quick trip to Israel and probably would be won only through enhanced Jewish education. At minimum, though, birthright underlined Israel's role and responsibility within that larger agenda of securing Jewish continuity in North America.

Where Are We?

The optimism of the Oslo years, which in turn had led to recalibrating Israeli-Diaspora relations, quickly gave way to pessimism after the collapse of the Camp David negotiations in summer 2000. As late as the eve of the talks, some American Jewish leaders were still proclaiming a golden era of peace between Israel and its neighbors that in turn would permit American Jewry to focus on its internal needs of Jewish education and securing continuity. Such optimism overlooked Arafat's reluctance to come to Camp David at all, let alone his unwillingness to reach a final agreement on issues such as Jerusalem and refugees.

With the failure of Camp David, American Jews not only had to confront their mistaken conceptions about the peace process but also the very negative developments on the global Jewish agenda. The promise of Oslo that disputes could be peacefully negotiated proved empty in the face of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Moreover, violence against Jews was hardly limited to Israel's borders. Anti-Semitism, relatively quiescent in Europe in recent years, now reemerged in virtually daily attacks on European Jews.

This new round of anti-Semitism challenged traditional Diaspora assumptions that democratic societies and Holocaust education were safeguards for Jewish security. The anti-Semitic attacks occurred precisely in Western democratic societies, including those that had most actively

promoted Holocaust education. Moreover, although intellectuals-with the exception of media cartoonists-generally avoided crude anti-Semitism, the intellectual assault on Israel's legitimacy and on Diaspora pro-Israeli advocacy manifested a new anti-Zionism generally indistinguishable from traditional anti-Semitism.

By contrast, American society, with some notable exceptions, remained inhospitable to anti-Semitism. Since the end of World War II, American Jewry had seen the growing marginalization of anti-Semitism. No doubt American Jews had no shortage of worries, but the anti-Semitism that took root in Europe following the collapse of Camp David gained little traction in the United States. For example, Jewish forebodings about the much-publicized Mel Gibson movie *The Passion* appeared greatly exaggerated in retrospect. The film, with its negative portrayals of Jews and iconic anti-Semitism, came and went with little impact on Jewish security. American Jews remained so well integrated into American society and were so esteemed by Americans that anti-Semitism still constituted at most a peripheral threat.

What did concern American Jews was the growing assault on Israel in intellectual circles. Although Americans generally overwhelmingly favored Israel over the Palestinians, opinion was far more sharply divided among intellectuals, journalists, and university professors. A number of high-profile incidents of anti-Zionism on leading American campuses symbolized the decline of Israel's image in academia. Ironically, American Jews had embraced the university system as a symbol of America's receptivity to Jewish participation. Jews formed only 2 percent of the general population but 5 percent of the university student population, 10 percent of the professoriate, and on elite campuses over 20 percent of university faculties. Some institutions, particularly in the Ivy League, reported that over 25 percent of their students were Jewish. The University of Florida at Gainesville claimed it had the single largest Jewish student population anywhere in the Diaspora with over seven thousand Jews in attendance.

Overall, Jews' position on American campuses remained secure notwithstanding widespread claims that the campuses had become anti-Semitic. What was not questioned, however, was the growing intellectual hostility to Israel. It took diverse forms including pro-Palestinian rallies, Middle Eastern studies departments that excluded or marginalized the teaching of Zionism and modern Israel, and growing calls for a binational solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict with Israel as a Jewish state viewed as an anachronism at best and racist at worst.⁸ Perhaps most ominously, the intellectual assault involved attacks on American Jewish pro-Israeli advocacy as detrimental to American interests and even, some claimed, to Israel's interests.

Nevertheless, the events of 9/11 brought home to America and American Jews the reality of global terrorism. The willingness to attack civilian targets had long been a staple of Palestinian terror. Many American Jews and Israelis now concluded that America and Israel were "in the same boat," constituting the Great Satan and Little Satan, respectively, for the terrorist forces.

The contrast between this new mindset and the Oslo years was especially striking. The Oslo assumptions of changed Palestinian priorities and willingness to accept Israel as a permanent reality now rang hollow in a world where [Hamas](#) gained an electoral victory while promising that it would never recognize Israel. Moreover, the statements by Israeli leaders in the 1990s that Israel no longer had any need for American Jewish support now seemed clearly mistaken in a world where Israel had so few backers outside of the United States. Threats by the [Iranian](#) president to obliterate Israel only added to the new, grim situation.

For all these reasons the Israeli-American Jewish relationship has reverted, in modified form, to the more traditional agenda. American Jewish leaders again maintained that their most important task was to marshal U.S. political support for Israel. Although the dangers of assimilation remained real, including the specter of a resulting decline in Jewish support for Israel, Jewish leaders again focused on politics, Washington-based lobbying, and winning the debate over the ongoing "special relationship" between America and Israel. Efforts to secure Jewish continuity, of course, kept going but now took second priority to enhancing Israel's position in American culture. Put another way, the collapse of Oslo "resecuritized" the Israeli-Diaspora relationship.⁹ In effect,

Oslo had failed not only as a peace process but also as a change agent in Israeli-American Jewish relations.

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Notes

1. Yossi Beilin, *Death of the Uncle from America* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot Books, 1999), passim [Hebrew]. See also Steven Bayme, "Round Table on Yossi Beilin's 'The Death of the American Uncle,'" *Jewish Arguments and Counter-Arguments* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav and American Jewish Committee, 2002), 407-12.

2. In an exchange of letters preceding the conference with David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, Weizman considerably softened his stance and expressed his high regard for American Jewry's role in supporting Israel. Subsequently, however, at the conference itself, he reportedly minimized the American Jewish community's significance. See "An Exchange of Letters with President Ezer Weizman of Israel Regarding American Jewry," in David Harris, *In the Trenches*, vol. 1 (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2000), 201-05.

3. Charles S. Liebman, "Has the Romance Ended?" *Society*, May-June 1999, 16. See also Steven M. Cohen and Charles Liebman, "Israel and American Jewry in the Twenty-First Century," in Allon Gal and Alfred Gottschalk, eds., *Beyond Survival and Philanthropy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000), 11. Shochat apparently changed his view in subsequent years. See the letter by Israel Bonds director Raphael Rothstein, *New York Jewish Week*, 31 August 2007, 9, in response to comments of Steven M. Cohen, *New York Jewish Week*, 17 August 2007, 23.

4. On post-Zionism generally, see Rochelle Furstenberg, *Post-Zionism: The Challenge to Israel* (New York: American Jewish Committee and Bar-Ilan University, 1997), passim. On the influence of post-Zionism within Israeli elites, see Charles Liebman, "Cultural Conflict in Israeli Society," in Charles Liebman and Elihu Katz eds., *The Jewishness of Israelis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 109-12.

5. Steven T. Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences?* (Hanover, NH, and London: Brandeis University Press, 2001), ch. 10.

6. The Ne'eman Commission was established in 1996 by the then prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu. The immediate catalyst had been controversy over a proposed Conversion Bill to limit conversion performed within Israel to Orthodox rabbis. The debate over the bill ignited all the passionate controversies over religious pluralism and Israel's relationship with Diaspora Jewry. Netanyahu asked Finance Minister Yaakov Ne'eman to form a commission of individuals representing all the Jewish religious streams. Their initial mandate was to examine conversion, and it was hoped that the commission would establish a model of intra-Jewish cooperation and dialogue that could in turn be applied to the plethora of issues concerning religious pluralism in Israel, such as laws of personal status, prayer at the Western Wall, and so on. As noted, the commission's report was initially received very favorably but was quickly condemned by the Chief Rabbinate.

7. Bayme, "Continue the Ne'eman Formula," *Jewish Arguments*, 104-06.

8. Tony Judt, "Israel: The Alternative," *New York Review of Books*, 25 September 2003, 2-6.

9. Yossi Shain and Barry Bristman, cited in Danny Ben-Moshe, "The New Anti-Semitism, Jewish Identity, and the Question of Zionism," in Danny Ben-Moshe and Zohar Segev, eds., *Israel, the Diaspora, and Jewish Identity* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), 17. See also Steven Bayme, "Jewish Vulnerability and Critical Barometers," *ibid.*, 309-14.

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