

# ISRAEL AND THE DIASPORA

## Working Together to Strengthen Jewish Unity and Continuity—Prospects and Problems

DANIEL J. ELAZAR, PH. D.

*President, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Israel*

*It is no longer possible to achieve a simple consensus on many of the critical issues affecting the Israel-Diaspora relationship. We must learn to live with these differences by developing a new world Jewish polity through which disagreements can be resolved and the business of the Jewish people can be conducted. A new politics of Israel-Diaspora relations is therefore required.*

### SOME GROUNDRULES FOR DISCUSSION

Clearly, the Jewish people have now reached a period in which simple consensus on many of the critical issues affecting the Israel-Diaspora relationship will not easily be attained. There are certain critical issues about which there are significant differences of opinion, at least among Israeli and Diaspora leaders, and to some extent among the two Jewish publics as well. Not only will these issues have to be confronted but a process will also have to be developed for dealing with them and resolving them to the extent that will allow the business of the Jewish people to be done and common Jewish interests secured. This will require a new politics of Israel-Diaspora relations.

The Diaspora is much more than simply the American Jewish community. The unspoken assumption among Israelis and American Jews that Israel-Diaspora relations are really relations between the Israeli government (and perhaps the World Zionist leadership) and the American Jewish community has to be set aside and a more complex understanding of Israel-Diaspora relations developed.

There are about 10.5 million Jews in the Diaspora, approximately 6 million of whom

live in the United States. Another million and a half are in Europe outside the Soviet Union. They are slowly beginning to find a voice in world Jewish councils and are hampered only by their own lack of unity, an anomaly that is becoming more anomalous as the European Community moves toward 1992.

There are perhaps an equal number of Jews in the USSR, whose voice as a community is beginning to be heard. Ironically, the relative handful of Jewish activists in the Soviet Union speaking in the name of a Soviet Jewry that has neither the institutions nor the mindset required to be a full-fledged community undoubtedly have more of an impact on Jewish affairs than all of Western European Jewry.

There are perhaps 600,000 Jews in Latin America who have their own perspective on Jewish affairs, which includes very close ties with Israel and which, despite constant reports writing their communities off as viable ones, continue to teach more Hebrew and maintain more deeply rooted communal institutions than any other set of Diaspora communities.

Almost an equal number of Jews live in the other English-speaking countries of the New World—Canada, South Africa, and Australia. Canadian Jewry is developing a special role as the link between U.S. Jewry and the other Diaspora communities because it shares characteristics of both. A growing Australian Jewry is becoming the

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center of a regional network stretching from India to the Pacific islands and north to Japan and China, itself a new frontier for world Jewry.

Thus, the Diaspora of the immediate future will not speak in one voice but in four, five, or six voices, each with a tone and strength of its own.

At the same time, Israel's relative importance in the Jewish world continues to grow. A century ago, at the beginning of the Zionist enterprise there were perhaps 30,000 Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* out of 8 million Jews in the world and less than 500,000 in the United States. In 1939, when the world Jewish population hit its peak of 16.6 million, there were 400,000 Jews in *Eretz Israel* and 5 million in the United States. When the state was established in 1948, there were only 11.5 million Jews in the world, of whom 600,000 or about 5% were in Israel and about 5.5 million in the United States. At about the time of the Six-Day War, the estimated 13.5 million Jews in the world included 2.4 million in Israel, a substantial increase but still under 20% of the world total and just under 6 million in the United States, approximately the same number as two decades earlier. Today there are 3.5 million Jews in Israel out of 14 million in the world, or a quarter of all the Jews in the world. There are still 6 million or slightly less in the United States.

In addition to sheer demographics, Israel is the only major Jewish community whose Jewish population is still growing through natural increase. It is the only Jewish state and the world's second largest Jewish community. As the dynamic center of the Jewish people, Israel's importance continues to grow and is bound to increase further.

There are real differences in the relationship between Israel and American Jewry and the relationship between Israel and the other Diaspora communities. American Jewry remains a unique Jewish community in the degree of its integration into its environment, in its special creative powers, and in its being a Jewish manifestation of

those special characteristics of American culture, such as individualism, pluralism, and antinomianism. Although other Diaspora communities share more of these characteristics today than they did in the past, they still live in very different environments. To be a Jew in the Soviet Union is to be a member of a separate nationality group, outside of any other Soviet nationality, and in Canada national integration is based upon the idea of group pluralism, at least cultural pluralism. The other Diaspora communities are far more sympathetic to Israel's position on certain ethnic, cultural, and religious issues than is American Jewry, although increasingly the leadership of all these communities has come to a similar position with regard to peace in the Middle East.

American Jewry has been playing a leadership role in world Jewry outside of Israel, and that role is increasing. Israel prides itself on being the center of the Jewish people, but in fact many Jewish communities have found that they can learn more from the American Jewish experience in organizing Jewish life in the Diaspora than they can from the Israeli experience, which is so tied up with being a Jewish majority in a Jewish state in its own land. Hence, it is not surprising that the organized American Jewish community has come to play an ever-larger role in helping the other Diaspora communities. This is a reality that must be understood.

We are still building a polity for world Jewry. That must be the context of all of our discussions, far beyond the nineteenth-century notions of fraternal cooperation among "co-religionists" or tribal ties of philanthropy whereby secure Jews are obligated to help those in need. Not that these are no longer valid premises for Jewish unity. They may even be necessary, but they are not sufficient. In the twenty-first century in which the whole world order will be undergoing revision, the Jewish people need more than ties of sentiment or even of faith to keep us united. We need the institutional structure of a polity

with its politics and organizational machinery, as well as its mystic ties of memory and feelings of mutual obligation.

#### SOME SIGNIFICANT ISSUES THAT DIVIDE US

These issues presently divide Jews and play a significant role in dividing Israel and Diaspora Jewry—achieving peace between Israel and its neighbors, reconciling pluralistic and monistic approaches to Jewish religion, and determining the role of organized Jewry with regard to Jewish migration that is not directed toward Israel.

It would be wrong to suggest that these are simply issues of Israel-Diaspora conflict. The divisions are more complex than that, as often as not cross-cutting that particular line of cleavage. For certain reasons, at the very least historical and ideological, there is an Israel-Diaspora dimension to each issue.

With regard to peace, a majority of Israelis are more hesitant to cede territory, negotiate with the PLO, or sacrifice what they perceive to be their military security interests than are a majority of Diaspora Jewry. Indeed this is one issue in which American Jewry is not that separate from the rest of Diaspora Jewry, although in both there are strong minorities that hold other views.

In matters of religion, the existence of a state-recognized rabbinical establishment in Israel, whose positions on such issues as Who is a Jew are still looked upon with sympathy if not actually supported by a majority of Israel's Jewish population, at the very least creates a cleavage between Israel and American Jewry, less so with regard to other Diaspora Jewries.

The question of how to deal with Jewish migration away from Israel is tied up with the strong ideological commitment of Jews in Israel to the Zionist dream of bringing a majority of world Jewry to the Jewish state, coupled with the necessity for manpower for security purposes. Denial of the right of Jews to settle in the Diaspora is

seen by Diaspora Jews as an implicit assault on their integrity and authenticity as Jews.

The question needs to be raised whether underlying these issues are problems of orientation and perhaps culture. The differences on these issues reflect differences of orientation in Israel and the Diaspora as indicated above, some of which are inevitable. We must face the fact that Zionism and diasporism do involve different orientations. Indeed, one of the reasons why the American Jewish Diaspora is different from the other Diaspora communities is that it has a full-fledged diasporist ideology shaped in the American spirit, whereas a majority of activist Jews in most of the other Diasporas, even if they plan to live all their lives outside of Israel, accept Zionist ideology as being most valid.

So, too, pluralism is a particularly important orientation for Jews in the Diaspora, since it is the rock upon which their ability to live as a minority different from the majority rests. In Israel, in contrast, although the democratic ideology of free choice is deeply rooted, it is not accompanied by an ideology of pluralism that sees in pluralism an end in itself. Those are the two most critical differences in orientation.

There may be a third as well. Diaspora Jews tend to be liberals; that is to say, they expect humans to continue to progress indefinitely and have developed a politics of compassion for those defined as underdogs on that basis. In contrast, Israelis tend to be less confident that change is likely to be for the better or that human agency can really transform the difficult structural problems of human existence. This is not to suggest that as Jews most Israelis do not also lean to the politics of compassion just as do Jews in the Diaspora. Indeed, as we have seen in connection with the intifada, that sense runs strongly through Israel too. Nor is it to say that there has not emerged a significant group of Jewish conservatives in the Diaspora who see life as more complex and even tragic than the conventional optimism

associated with liberalism. Yet, again, the predominance in one direction rather than the other is clear.

A larger question is whether these differences of orientation are beginning to be embodied in differences in culture. On one hand, we see how quickly Jews take on the coloration of the environment in which they find themselves. There is no question that Jews in various countries have internalized aspects of the cultures of their countries or have emphasized those dimensions of Jewish culture that are most appropriate to the environments in which they find themselves. This suggests that differences in culture among Jews are possible. On the other hand, many of those acquired characteristics remain relatively superficial and that deep down, "Jews are Jews." What concerns us is what happens in the realm between external appearances and culture.

#### COUNTERVAILING TENDENCIES TOWARD UNITY

As always, change is not unidirectional, nor are assessments of the past unambiguous. Three countervailing tendencies encourage unity between Diaspora and Israeli Jewry.

Those ties to Israel that had to do with the common familial origins of Jews in both Israel and the Diaspora are weakening. As Israel has acquired a Sephardic majority and most of the Diaspora communities have remained overwhelmingly Ashkenazic, the common ancestral memories of Eastern Europe cease to play a role in binding the two societies. Of all the Diaspora communities, only France with a Sephardic majority of its own has those kinds of ties with the new Israel. Although the Ashkenazi-Sephardi difference may have sharpened the process, these "old country" ties were bound to diminish as time went on and the "old country" faded from personal into historical memory.

In contrast, however, there is an immense growth in contact among Jews in Israel

and the Diaspora. The percentage of Jews visiting Israel has risen dramatically in the last two decades. Taking only the U.S. figures, the National Jewish Population Study of 1970 indicated that only 14% of American Jews had visited Israel. The studies of the 1980s suggest that today over 15% have visited Israel more than once and over 40% of American Jews have visited Israel at least once. More important, many of the young people from whom the Jewish leadership of the future will be drawn now routinely spend time in Israel—a summer, a semester, a year, or whatever. In addition, Israelis are traveling abroad in greater numbers so that as many Israelis have visited the Diaspora as vice versa.

Finally, although *aliya* from the West has not been as high as anticipated, still there are enough Western *olim* in Israel to have created a new set of family ties between Israel and the various Diaspora communities. Less happy for certain purposes but certainly a factor in strengthening the Israel-Diaspora relationship is the fact that the increase in Israeli *yordim* has created ties in the other direction as well. Given the present state of transportation and communications, these ties are indeed contact ties; that is, regular contact by telephone and frequent visits back and forth have become the norm.

The communications links between Israel and the Diaspora are strong and will be strengthened even further in the future. We are now at the threshold of a period in which there will soon be one worldwide system of telecommunications via satellite with television channels beamed worldwide for all and of computer-based communications, (E-mail, fax and beyond) allowing two-way communication for any point on the globe to any other. Instant daily contact for all who desire it will be within everyone's reach.

From 1948 onward many have commented on the very real differences between a politically sovereign state and voluntary Diaspora communities in their governance, responsibilities, and politics.

On one level, the differences are not likely to diminish. On another, they may be counterbalanced by two factors. The first is the development of a stronger civic sector in Israel that will increasingly provide for the expression of the Jewish dimension of the state, especially as the Jewish population of Israel becomes more diverse in its expression of Jewishness. That sector is more likely to link with its counterparts in the Diaspora than are Israeli political leaders, officials, and civil servants, although more can be done to foster that linkage as well.

Second, there has developed a certain community of interest and fate at the highest echelons of Jewish political leadership, whether they lead the government of Israel or lead the major Diaspora Jewish communities. In the last analysis, people carrying those kinds of responsibilities tend to talk the same language, even if the responsibilities are not exactly identical.

If the Israel that emerges in any peace settlement becomes any less of a demographically Jewish state than it is today because of an increase in the size of its non-Jewish minority the transfer of the Jewish dimension of statehood to the civic sector is likely to grow.

#### HOW CAN WE DEAL WITH THESE TRENDS?

First, we must recognize that the Israel-Diaspora relationship will not continue to be based upon that consensus of sentiment that not only animated but dominated the first generation after 1948. Rather, consensus will have to be forged in spite of conflicts of ideology and interest, as is the case in a more mature polity. These kinds of differences still make many Jews tense, stemming from the feeling that we as an embattled minority cannot afford to have internal differences. Yet, internal differences exist and we must learn how to live with them.

Learning how to live with differences means finding ways to deal with normal

disagreements through a policy process that allows for their operational resolution so that we can act as a unified people after we have all had our say. It means more self-discipline, especially in the Diaspora. It means improving the processes of decision making so that all legitimate points of view will be heard and so that reasonable people will accept the discipline of the final decision as legitimate. It means understanding that, although what Jews do will make headlines, we should not try to carry on our battles through the external media. We cannot prevent the external media from following what we do, but at least we should not dishonor ourselves in the process.

Human behavior is played out through a combination of what is manifest in the human mind, in human culture, and in human institutions. Hence the first step in the resolution of these differences is the development of an appropriate mindset, with appropriate orientations toward the questions at hand. With that mindset, we can then pull out of our culture those elements that are most likely to strengthen or reinforce our orientations and try to redirect those most antipathetic to them.

Finally, all of this must find expression through appropriate institutions. Institutions and their working can only reflect the culture and mindsets of the people they serve, but, in the last analysis, humans need institutions to do what needs to be done. With the right institutions, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Think of the Jewish people today. In matters of culture and identity we are like an eroding sand dune, yet because of our institutional structure—the State of Israel, our organized communities—we have achieved so much that Jewish history will record this as a golden age. We have begun to build an appropriate network of institutions with and around the Jewish Agency. The Jewish Agency is much criticized, in certain respects deservedly. It is also much maligned, blamed as an institution for the failings of our political culture and orien-

tations when it should be used as an institution to try to come to grips with those failings. It is the subject of two contrary pulls: those from the Diaspora who see its role primarily as a philanthropic one and those in Israel who see it merely as an adjunct to the Israeli political system. Neither of those views is adequate.

To meet the needs of world Jewry both in Israel and the Diaspora, a new view must be developed that understands that

our generation has the task of building a world Jewish polity, with an appropriate institutional structure, resting upon an appropriate set of understandings and orientations of the Jewish people and the world in which we live. Nobody said that would be an easy task. If we fail at it, Israel and the Diaspora will indeed grow apart. Yet, since we have every opportunity to succeed, if we do fail the fault will not be in the stars but in ourselves.