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American Jewish Committee Statement on Judaism, Pluralism and Peoplehood

Approved by the AJC National Council/Board of Governors
September 9, 1996

Jews everywhere are connected by ties of history, covenant, and heritage. Although we often disagree vigorously over the interpretation of tradition and over a vision for the future, these disagreements reflect our passionate concern for the Jewish people and its future. Judaism is often the focal point of our internal controversies, even as it represents the shared treasure of all Jews. Ideological differences are a measure of our communal health, as they reflect our commitment to Judaism as our common heritage. Currently, we confront serious divides within the Jewish people over politics, ideology, religion, and culture. Growing fissures prevail, both in Israel and the Diaspora, between Jews who define themselves as religious or secular, traditionalists or liberals. Differences over fundamental issues--who is a Jew, what does it mean to be a Jew, the meaning of a Jewish state, and the future agenda of the Jewish people-- are real and warrant significant attention. Artificial statements of unity are illusory at best and harmful at worst.

In spite of our differences, ties of peoplehood and heritage remain deep. We must never permit our disagreements, no matter how passionately debated, to undermine our commitment to klal yisrael, our devotion to one another, and our covenant of participation in the ongoing Jewish historical enterprise. Our disagreements should not be permitted to spill over into delegitimation of one group of Jews by another.

Jews the world over confront the problem of continuity, of insuring that future generations remain Jews. AJC has repeatedly expressed its concerns over high rates of mixed marriage and assimilation and has undertaken serious efforts to enhance Judaic literacy and awareness. An obvious and major challenge for world Jewry lies in strengthening the connection of Jews to their religious and cultural heritage. Concern has been expressed by many in Israel and in the U.S. over the weakening of Jewish identity among American Jews and Israelis. In both communities, indifference and apathy to the Jewish heritage are troubling.

The availability of diverse avenues for expression of Jewish identity, wherever Jews live, enriches the entire Jewish community. Policies that limit the full expression of Jewish religious options have real negative impact on the goal of Jewish continuity. Thus, it is especially troubling that in Israel the non-Orthodox movements which have the potential to reach secular Israelis searching for modern religious approaches to Judaism are severely limited by the Orthodox religious establishment and are not treated on an equal footing. The existence of varied Jewish religious and cultural options is a positive force here in the U.S. and in those other countries where similar conditions prevail. They could have a very positive impact as well on the way many Israelis relate to Judaism. We believe that religious pluralism poses no threat to Jewish continuity. Conversely, we believe that apathy and indifference to Judaism and Judaic heritage constitute fundamental threats to the Jewish future.

Historically, the ability of Jews to marry one another has been critical to preserving Jewish unity and peoplehood. When sectarian differences arose over defining who is a Jew, making marriage a halakhic impossibility between particular Jewish groupings, e.g. Karaites and Samaritans, a schism resulted that split these groups off from the Jewish people. Today, the problem of preserving marriage eligibility among Jews is quite real given conflicting criteria of defining who is a Jew. Therefore it is imperative that greater

attention be paid once again to seeking common conversion procedures, acceptable to all the major religious streams.

In addressing these questions, ways must be found in Israel to include rather than exclude the Conservative and Reform movements, whose goal is the full flowering of Judaism in Israel. Actions taken within Israel ought to recognize the legitimacy of these movements. Political institutions should refrain from action that would result in the delegitimization of the major religious streams within Judaism. Whatever our differences over religion, Jews relate to Israel as a Jewish state and are concerned about the quality of Israel's Jewishness. Therefore, all the religious movements will be far better served by working to expose all Jews to the beauties inherent in Judaic tradition.

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin has taught us that violence and extremist rhetoric have no place in a Jewish civil society and should be condemned by Jews everywhere. Our serious differences need to be engaged in ways that build bridges, expand common ground, and deepen understanding. We need dialogue, not diatribe. AJC remains ready programmatically to assist in this endeavor.
