

THE FUTURE OF THE NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY—ISRAEL RELATIONSHIP

The Dawn of a New Covenant

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The confluence of the ongoing violence in Israel and the September 11 terrorist attacks provides the opportunity for a new covenant in the relationship between American Jewry and Israel. This covenant is based on a shared sense of deep caring and unity. In the past year, the American Jewish community has been galvanized, as federations have provided the opportunity for people to come together and express their sense of concern and connection with Israel.

My friend and long-time colleague, Stephen Solender, and the topic of this article are suited to each other. Israel is the product of the Jewish people at their ideological and pragmatic core. Steve Solender is nothing if not a consummate professional who has married the world of ideas to the universe of practice. This article about our current Jewish circumstance is dedicated to a man who lives the principle that ideas are conceived in the intellectual realm but are best understood when tested in the laboratory of reality.

In the year 59 B.C.E., L. Valerius Flaccus, a former governor of the Roman province of Asia, came under indictment for a variety of alleged crimes. One of those crimes was his prohibition of the export of gold and silver from Asia. This prohibition had significant consequences for the Jewish people, since four years earlier, Judea had fallen under Roman domination after Pompey entered Jerusalem and Diaspora Jewish communities in Asia and elsewhere had long contributed an annual half-shekel to the Temple in Jerusalem for its maintenance and for its sacrifices. When Flaccus was placed on trial in the Senate in Rome, the Jewish community thus organized itself against him. The Jews of Rome came out in force to the area of the Aurelian Steps and made their presence felt. Cicero, the Roman senator and orator, called upon his fellow senators "to defy the crowd of Jews. When sometimes in

our assemblies they were hot with passion." In other words, Cicero was aware that Jews from Italy and other Roman provinces sent contributions to Jerusalem, and he, Cicero, was prepared to defend the ex-governor, who had prohibited this practice.

A reading of this moment in history suggests that the Jewish community in Rome was in the habit of standing in solidarity with its fellow Jews in the land of Israel. Indeed, Cicero says to his fellow senators, in reference to the Jewish people demonstrating on behalf of Israel, "You know what a big crowd it is, how they stick together, how influential they are in informal assemblies."¹

Cicero's musings regarding the government of Rome being lobbied by Jews are reminiscent of the complaint made by the first President Bush about "a thousand lobbyists on the Hill" who had come to Washington in support of Loan Guarantees for Israel. (Press Conference, September 12, 1991). Clearly, the relationship of Diaspora Jewish communities to Israel is more than two thousand years old. It precedes the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 C.E. Separated by twenty-one centuries after the episode in Rome, the identification of a Di-

¹ For a comprehensive treatment of this episode in Roman Jewish history, see the recently published book, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans*, Erich S. Gruen, Harvard University Press, 2002, pgs 19–23.

aspora Jewish community with Israel continues to manifest itself and continues to serve to bind Jewish individuals together into a cohesive community.

Over the course of those centuries and certainly after 1948, the subject of Israel-Diaspora relations has been considered, observed, researched, lived, discussed, and written about incessantly. The focus on this issue speaks to its power and importance. Its placement in this journal at this time is directly related to the last two years of terrible violence in Israel, to September 11th in America, and to the corollary existential issues for Israel, Jews, and Western civilization. The confluence of these events brings us to a moment not only of grief, pain, and worry but also of an opportunity for a new covenant in the relationship between American Jewry and Israel. In thinking about the possibility of that transformational moment, we need to ask, Where are we and what is the nature of Jewish civilization and Jewish self-understanding at this moment?

THE MODERN PERIOD IN JEWISH HISTORY

Modernity begins when the Jewish people, or a significant number of Jewish communities, no longer view Jewish history as moving between the poles of exile and redemption. Modernity begins when the Jewish people, weary of waiting for the arrival of the messiah, decide to take matters into their own hands, to redeem themselves by seeking full participation as citizens in non-Jewish states and/or to establish the Zionist movement. To be sure, there were other responses to this weariness: among them conversion, assimilation, socialism, and a variety of new expressions of Judaism, such as Classical Reform, Hasidism, and Modern Orthodoxy. These responses to modernity were first expressed during the nineteenth century in European Jewish communities. That civilization is no more.

Jewish civilization today is defined in two ways unimaginable to the tradition, to Jewish

thought, and to the Jewish people in the past three thousand years of Jewish history.

First, large numbers of Jewish people have returned to the land of Israel, have established a sovereign and self-governing state as well as a majority Jewish culture, and have done so without a messianic figure but rather on their own, using all of the modern tools available to peoples and their national liberation movements. In short, a secular democratic state has been established, where Jewish experience and the classic tradition imagined only a divinely ordained biblical or messianic state.

Second, the largest Jewish community in the world today is American Jewry. This is the first and only exilic or Diaspora Jewish community that does not see itself as—and is not—powerless; that does not view its existence in the Diaspora as an exile or as punishment; that does not view its presence as limited; that is fully integrated within the general culture; and that lives in unprecedented freedom, so that it enjoys autonomy, power, and self-determination, both as a Jewish community and as a community among other communities in the United States. This kind of Jewish community, in exile, in the Diaspora, outside the land of Israel, was unimaginable even a little more than a century ago. Indeed, this American Jewish community enjoys one other necessary, vital, and unprecedented feature. With all due respect to ancient Rome, it is the first modern Jewish community to live in the world's only existing superpower. At the same time, it enjoys an impact beyond its numbers within that superpower. What was never dreamed and never imagined has come to be.

Thus, a new era of Jewish history began with the establishment of the State of Israel and with the development of the North American Jewish community in its present form. These two events took place simultaneously in the second half of the twentieth century. In other words, the two largest Jewish communities, the only two significant Jewish civilizations remaining after the de-

struction of European Jewry and the collapse of the traditional world, were both involved, at the very same time, two oceans apart, in heretofore unprecedented Jewish projects. To be sure, both were possessed of a series of Jewish experiences, Jewish ideas, Jewish values, and a sense of responsibility for the welfare of the Jewish people that they had inherited from the past. But rarely does history provide, after two millennia of consistency, such utterly new circumstances. North American Jewry and Israel began their work essentially at the same time. In the post-World War II era, North American Jewry set about building a non-exilic Diaspora community, and the Zionist movement and the Jewish people in the land of Israel set about the creation of a non-biblical and non-divinely mandated Jewish state.

In retrospect we can divide this unique relationship into two periods: (1) from the establishment of the State in 1948 until some time in the 1970s, when we can identify the Israel of defense and security with the American Jewish community as a supporter; and (2) from the 1970s to the September 2001 violence and demise of the Oslo peace process, when we see Israel as a source of Jewish identity and education for American Jewry.

In the post-Holocaust environment the Israel established by the early Zionists provided a home and a refuge for Jews who could not go anywhere else. In this period, it was the job of North American Jewry to provide support for Israel to help it fulfill its defense, security, and in-gathering mission. Over time, some degree of mutuality and coordination developed, especially in developing strategies for opening the gates of the former Soviet Union, significant resettlement in Israel, and Israel advocacy in the halls of Congress, the White House, and throughout America.

In a way, the post-World War II American Jewish community, much of which was euphoric at the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, proceeded to take Israel's existence somewhat for granted. American

Jews were greatly involved with defining their own place while helping shape American society. The Six-Day War in 1967 however, was a shock. Suddenly it appeared that, rather than being a refuge to protect Jews from genocide, the State of Israel's own very existence, as well as the lives of its citizens, was at risk. The escape from that danger and the pride in how it was achieved through Israeli courage and military accomplishment left American Jewry relieved and proud, with a new sense of the way in which its own identification was inexorably linked to Israel and with an intensified commitment to ensuring the continued security of the State and the safety of its citizens.

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, then, the more successful Israel became, strategically and economically, and the more the Holocaust receded from memory, the more did American Jewry come to see Israel as fulfilling a critical Jewish identity and Jewish education task. This role meant much more than learning about Israel. It meant much more than Israel's serving as a source of Jewish education. Rather, stimulated by a growing sense of crisis over the disengagement from the community of many young people—and, hence, a crisis of insecurity—Israel came to be seen as the panacea that, by virtue of its modernity, its success, its vibrancy, its popularly accessible Jewish but not religious culture, would inspire Jewish identification in young American Jews. What emerged out of this period, of course, was a whole host of Israel-based programs designed for North American Jews of all ages.

STRAINS IN THE RELATIONSHIP

What both of these Israels shared in common—the Israel securing the material welfare of the Jewish people and the Israel securing the spiritual, cultural welfare of the Jewish people—was that North American Jewry was placed by Israel largely in a supportive role. Israel engaged in the work, while North American Jewry played an important but secondary role in determining how some of

this work would be achieved. In truth, this perspective was too simplistic. Beginning with Project Renewal, for example, and then moving on toward the era of Partnership 2000, many Jewish federations in North America began to develop real and ongoing working partnerships with a variety of cities, communities, institutions, and projects throughout the State of Israel. As these partnerships developed and deepened, so did the common sense of a shared American-Israel custodianship of the welfare of the Jewish people. At the same time though, as the decades proceeded, certain strains developed between the two communities.

First of all, classic Zionist thought was always grounded in the negation of the Diaspora. Full actualization for Jews could only be possible for those living in Israel. The fact that since 1948 aliyah had been in the main accomplished by the movement of Jews from distressed communities and not massive immigration from free societies was, and is, an insult to pure Zionist ideology. Over time most Jews in Israel and in America who cared to think about this situation made peace with the reality. A new Zionism was embraced that held that a Jew could live a fully Jewish life outside Israel while loving Israel and supporting the building up of the land and that engagement was a positive, not negative, affirmation.

A more recent strain in the relationship involved reactions to the post-Zionism that was promoted in some circles in Israel in the 1990s and that brought with it a weakening of the attachment to Jewish peoplehood. Some American Jews embraced the conclusions of the new historians, especially when their undermining of Zionist "mythology" dovetailed with their own post-colonial ideology. Others, however, who may have been inclined to see the impact of post-Zionist thinking as more widespread in Israel than it probably really was, were appalled. In some cases they went so far as to begin to regard themselves and not the Israelis as the true keepers of the Zionist flame. More recently, with Israel under direct attack, with the vast

majority of Israelis demonstrating by their unified defense of their nation that post-Zionist thinking had not struck much of a popular chord, and with some of the new historians themselves now holding different views, this controversy seems to have receded significantly—though not without leaving some open sores.

Another cause of strain was the call by some high-profile Israeli public figures for American Jews to stop their philanthropic support for programs in Israel. Such persons argued that the continued financial assistance harmed rather than helped Israel's social welfare, health, and educational institutions. They suggested that dependence on Diaspora sources of funds prevented institutional fiscal responsibility and independence. Some Israelis also felt the psychological need to conscientiously disconnect from the slightest appearance of dependence on financial support from Jews in the Diaspora. This thinking held that Israel is an independent and democratic state with a modern economy, system of education, and successful army, not a state of "schleppers" that need to beg for help.

In the same fashion, some also suggested that North American Jewry, with its growing rate of intermarriage, should spend its money at home, investing more in Jewish education.

Those Israelis who disdained philanthropic support from the Diaspora did not understand that this issue was not about the money and that few in America saw Israel as begging. Rather, this support stemmed from the need and desire by Jews outside Israel to connect themselves to the continued building of its land and people. This need was and remains an incredibly powerful force. By giving to Israel in whatever way they choose, Diaspora Jews in the main are not just supporting important human needs, but are giving because of what the gift does for them. To dismiss that as a motivation is to miss quite a bit about our collective future. In addition, on a practical level, the connection between giving for Israel and advocating for Israel in the larger community, in the media, and with elected public officials, and the

concomitant billions of U.S. government dollars appropriated each year to Israel is clear and unbroken. The phenomenal success of advocacy on behalf of Israel is directly related to the phenomena of Jewish giving and caring for Israel. You can't have one without the other.

Another source of strain is the internecine conflict in Israel among the various strains of Jewish life. Truth be told, American Jewry's connections with Israel were not based on a full understanding of the nature of Israeli society, particularly the manner in which traditional Jewish practices played out in Israel and the way in which politics and religion mix there. American Jews have not understood fully, the division between religious and secular, which creates one of the splits in Israeli society, and the way in which coalition building within Israel's parliamentary system has given leverage to religious parties. Thus, when the "who is a Jew" issue surfaced and the question of whose conversions could or could not be recognized in Israel came on the scene, serious controversies were sparked in a climate where there was only partial understanding, on the one hand, and much anger on the other within large segments of American Jewry. The legitimacy and authenticity of the Judaism of those majority members of the American Jewish community active in the Reform and Conservative movements appeared to be challenged, and a sense of alienation was sparked. On the other hand, the intensity with which American Jewry responded can be seen as evidence of how being connected with Israel—and having the option of aliyah for oneself and one's children sustained—continued to matter to American Jewry. Furthermore, by becoming directly involved in this issue, American Jews were breaking from a pattern. Some continued to say that in matters involving war, peace, and security, it is the Israelis themselves who make the decisions, but they went on to add that in cases like these, which are not of a security nature and that directly involve the entire Jewish people, different principles apply. Thus, at

the same time that these controversies strained the relationship, they also made American Jewry more aware of Israeli life and, for better or worse, propelled American Jewry directly into Israeli power politics.

In the political arena beginning with the election of Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1977, some American Jews became so identified with specific policies and parties in Israel that the principle of one voice from many places unified in support of Israel vis a vis Congress, White House, media, and the like, was tested in the extreme. During the 1990s, many elected officeholders expressed surprise and confusion upon being lobbied at 10:00 a.m. by one group of Jews seemingly in support of the Israel government's peace, policy and then meeting at 11:00 a.m. with another group of American Jews who would urge the opposite. The setting aside of the unity principle when applied to matters of Israel's vital national interest was unfortunately embraced by elements of both the left and the right. It did not seem to matter who the party in power was at the time—Labor or Likud. Many with opposite views expressed their dissent in the public arena and in the closed offices of U.S. elected officials in the same passionate way their Israel compatriots of the same political view did as free citizens in Israel. In addition, leadership from Israel's opposition party often would advance their perspective in America apparently without full appreciation of the possible damage in formal U.S.-Israel relations and corollary difficulties and divisions within the American Jewish community. In any case, whether one views this development positively or negatively, the genie was out of the jar probably forever, and the relationship between Israel and the American Jewish community was affected by the change.

Another change in the 1990s was the conscious de-emphasis by some federation annual campaigns of needs in Israel: the reduction in overseas allocations; cutbacks in collective funding, and the concomitant greater emphasis on local needs. One of the results in the aggregate was a significant

reduction in the overseas allocation in both percentage and actual dollars. In 1980, 56.7% of annual campaign dollars pledged went for overseas needs, which, in the main, went for programs and projects in or connected to Israel. In 1990, the annual campaign raised \$756,281,000 and allocated \$353,807,000 or 46.8% for overseas purposes. Eleven years later, in 2001, \$873,333,000 was pledged and \$290,000,000 (33.2%) was directed overseas.

Some communities apparently gave serious consideration to the suggestions of those Israeli leaders calling for the cessation of sending funds to Israel. Did the shift in allocation reflect a growing disengagement from Israel? Perhaps in some instances it did. In others, the decreased allocation was as much about reduced fundraising in that particular community and the concomitant local problems resulting from the decrease as it was about dissatisfaction with the relationship to Israel. A ten-year analysis of campaign increases in the largest federations compared to the percentage allocated overseas shows a direct and positive correlation between the success of a campaign and the percentage of overseas allocations. That correlation is not terribly surprising from a strictly fundraising perspective. For many years, the conventional wisdom has held that the UJC (UJA)/Federation annual campaign growth, especially following 1967, 1973 and other periods of dramatic overseas needs in Israel, propels the annual campaign to new, higher, and retained baseline giving.

Of course there have been strains in a relationship that involves millions of people, connected by religion and peoplehood but separated by distance, language, experience, and different forms of government.

This mix of conflicting political ideologies, classic negation of the Diaspora, post-Zionism, religious pluralism, and discouraging of philanthropic support, when added together with a fair measure of indifference, ignorance, and arrogance on both sides, makes a strong brew.

Yet, notwithstanding the strains in the re-

lationship, I have never believed that the so-called split in the relationship ever took place in the hearts and minds of *Amcha*, the people. For all of the claims regarding a turning inward by American Jewry and a turning away from Israel, for all of the claims that a new era was at hand in which the two communities were no longer tied by emotional bonds and would continue to grow further and further apart—when the disappointing collapse of the Oslo Peace Process came and with that an upsurge of Palestinian violence in September of 2000, the reaction on both sides of the relationship told a very different story. With terrorism escalating and the safety of individual Israelis increasingly threatened, American Jewry felt the intensity of its visceral connection with the people and the State of Israel. That sense of caring and solidarity intensified as America too suffered the severity of Islamic terror on September 11, 2001, as the Palestinian terror against the people of Israel showed its depths during the Seder Massacre in Netanya at Pesach 2002, and as anti-Israel behavior and incitement have become linked to an upsurge in anti-Semitism around the globe. With Israel's very right to exist being questioned, its people under relentless attack, the Palestinian propaganda offensive going full steam and resonating in Europe and other corridors, and even the American media not always seeming to "get it," American Jewry was asked to mobilize by the Prime Minister of Israel and has been mobilized, in significant part under the leadership of the nationwide federation system. The community has been galvanized, and federations have provided its members with the opportunities to come together and to express their sense of concern and connection with Israel. Jews have rallied for Israel in cities throughout America and in the nation's capital. Smaller rallies have been put together on short notice. In my own community of Chicago, on what we called Israel Solidarity Day on April 28, 2002, some 25,000 Chicagoans came together on the lakefront to hear from a member of the Israeli Cabinet, a U.S. Senator, and two U.S.

Representatives, and most especially to raise their own voices in support of Israel. Participation is up for everything done locally in connection with Israel—community events, attendance at memorial services for the victims of terrorist outrages, educational programs, attention to the media and the writing of letters to the editor, the thirst for information via the Internet, advocacy with public officials, and, of course the support of fundraising.

Some communities, including my own, had already determined that support for terror relief in Israel would, in one way or another, receive special attention as part of their annual fundraising campaigns. Then, in April 2002, United Jewish Communities introduced an additional, special continent-wide Israel Emergency Campaign. Within 4 months Chicago, for example, raised over \$25 million—as part of a national system total of approximately \$300 million during this first phase. This total represents more than 100,000 gifts. Many, perhaps as high as 15%, are first-time givers. During the next phase of the Israel Emergency Campaign, which will run through calendar year 2003, many millions more will be raised over and above an increased regular campaign. It is hoped that hundreds of thousands of additional Israel Emergency Campaign gifts will be secured, representing a tangible expression of American Jews wanting and needing to connect to Israel at this time.

The funds, meaningful in themselves as a means of addressing the suffering and the needs of the people of Israel, demonstrate the continuing strength of the ties of American Jewry with Israel. Taken all together, it is no surprise that the recent U.S. survey, conducted by pollster Stanley Greenberg for the American Jewish Committee in July, 2002, shows that 86 percent of American Jews express strong ties to Israel.

CURRENT ROLE OF FEDERATIONS

In earlier years, the federation system had developed a form of functional Zionism whereby it became the community's primary

implementer of the principles of Zionism in the contemporary world. During the current crisis, its centrality in bringing the community together with Israel—offering vehicles for the expression of solidarity, for the carrying out of an advocacy agenda, and for providing tangible philanthropic support—has been powerfully affirmed. The communal involvement, meanwhile, has come from all demographic quarters. Any feeling that the generation of 20–30 year olds—growing up without direct familiarity with the crises of 1967 and 1973, let alone the founding of the State in 1948—might be more detached than their elders had been was quickly put to rest. The broadest cross-section of the community has been involved in events, has participated in programs and activities, and has let its concerns be known. And at the same time as all of this has been happening in the United States, those Israelis familiar with what has been happening in America have felt themselves connected with their brothers and sisters here as perhaps, never before. With a sense of isolation and abandonment from so much of the rest of the world, it is America alone, and to a great extent the Jews of America above all, who have been seen as ready to stand tall with and for the people of Israel. While the ongoing violence has drastically affected the numbers of those going to Israel, the federation system has maintained its missions program, and anyone visiting on any of the solidarity missions that have taken place will know what it feels like to have your presence acknowledged, to be told how important it is, and to sense that, in your way, you have contributed to the sea change in the sense of mutual need at the core of these recent developments.

Early in this article I suggested that we may be at a point in time of developing a new covenant in the relationship between these important centers of Jewish life. I believe that a new covenant is being forged between the Jews of America and the people of Israel, based on a shared sense of deep caring and recognition that indeed "We are one."

The situation that Israel faces today is terribly difficult, and the future remains uncertain. The Palestinian turn to violence dashed hopes for a resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and in the now two years of continuing violence, the potential path to a way out of this crisis has eluded discovery. Though the terrorism directed against Israel has failed in many of its goals, including that of demoralizing the Israelis, the forces of hostility and hatred—however much prevented from fulfilling all of their evil ends—remain undeterred. Meanwhile, weakened as the terrorist network that targeted America on September 11 has been, it and the “axis of evil” defined by President Bush remain a threat to our nation as well. In that context, with an international community failing to keep pace, America itself continues to stand against the forces of evil, and the American

Jewish community, disturbed as it might be in witnessing the situation in Israel and the global upsurge in anti-Semitism, stands firmly with Israel, with the federation system offering it the necessary framework for doing that. We know not from what setting we will look back at the present moment. But we know for certain that a communal structure put in place in this country by a strong and vibrant community found itself able to come to the aid of its brothers and sisters at time of need, at this time, and in so doing reaffirmed its own basic identity.

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WITH RESPECT AND AFFECTION
WE SALUTE ONE
WHO HAS GIVEN SO MUCH
TO OUR WORLD JEWISH COMMUNITY.**

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