

Israel at 50: An American Jewish Perspective

BY ARNOLD M. EISEN

IN EXAMINING THE IMPACT of the State of Israel on American Jewry over the past half century, one is struck repeatedly by the resort made by thoughtful observers to a series of striking and recalcitrant paradoxes.

Israel's creation is one of the most important events in all of Jewish history. The sense of the miracle in Israel's existence is palpable and widespread. Yet it proves rather difficult to define in specific terms what Israel's existence has meant for American Jews.

Studies old and new confirm that Israel is central to the public life of American Jewry, but in terms of the private lives of American Jews, Israel remains by and large a far-off, unknown place; in fact, two-thirds of American Jews have never been there.

Though positively regarded and emotionally powerful, Israel is also profoundly disconcerting to a segment of American Jews. On a day-to-day basis, it is apparently without much consequence.

Events in Israel, both political and religious, fill the pages of the Jewish and the general press. The attention given to Israel in America seems excessive, out of all proportion. The "peace process" and the debate over "Who is a Jew?" give rise to serious conversation in Palo Alto, no less so than to serious arm-twisting in Washington. Israel makes itself felt in every American election cycle and looms large in every American Jewish fund-raising campaign. Yet, with few exceptions, Israel has been a non-subject in American Jewish literature and remains marginal to American Jewish religious thought. As Alvin Rosenfeld noted recently: "What are we to make of the obvious distance that our most serious and accomplished writers have put between themselves and the astonishing successes of political Zionism?"¹

My purpose in this essay is threefold. To begin with, I want to probe the peculiar combination of closeness and distance that characterizes the relationship of American Jews to Israel. Second, I wish to focus on the

¹Alvin Rosenfeld, "Promised Land(s): Zion, America, and American Jewish Writers," *Jewish Social Studies*, n.s. 3, no. 3, Spring/Summer 1997, p.121.

role that Israel has played in American Jewish religious thought. This is an area of special interest to me, and one where Israel's marginality perhaps tells us most about the meaning that Israel *does* have for American Jews. Finally, in keeping with this essay's title, I want to capture through a somewhat more personal perspective what Israel at 50 means for the individual American Jew. My hope is to express in essay form the combination of joy and apprehension, illumination and perplexity, transcendent faith and satisfaction in the everyday that I myself feel toward Israel as it—and I—approach a half-century of life.

The analysis presented here is far from dispassionate, but then again, American Jews as a whole are not dispassionate in their attitudes and behavior toward Israel. That is so even when, or perhaps especially when, American Jews work hard to keep Israel at a safe emotional distance. The pattern of their relationship to Israel is bound up with the most basic ground rules and assumptions of modern Diaspora existence. It is rooted, too, in the deepest loyalties and fears of an American Jewish community still living in the shadow of the Holocaust. Most American Jews are profoundly grateful for Israel's existence, and many understand its importance to their own existence. For them to draw closer to Israel, however, would require a degree of distinctiveness from Gentile America and an intensity of engagement with the burdens of Jewish history and traditions that the majority of American Jews are simply unwilling to undertake. Such Jews will likely not draw much closer to Israel any time soon, barring catastrophe there or here, not because Israel means too little to them, but, paradoxically, because it means too much—in complex ways, and for deeply felt reasons, which this essay aims to describe.

Distant Relations

A. M. Dushkin, a leading Jewish educator in the United States, speculated in an essay published at the very moment of Israel's creation about seven outcomes that might result from the renewal of Jewish sovereignty: renewed faith in the possibility of life; vindication of biblical prophecy; enhancement of Jewish dignity and self-assurance; concretization of modern Judaism inside the Jewish homeland; new content to Judaism as religion and civilization; a new impetus to the renewal of Hebrew; and a new ideal of service for Jewish youth.² Commenting on Dushkin's essay eight years later, Arnold Band argued that the first and the last of

²Alexander Dushkin, "Implications of the Jewish State for American Jewish Education," *Jewish Education* 19, no. 2, Spring 1948, pp. 2–5.

Dushkin's seven potential outcomes should be eliminated from consideration. "Faith in the possibility of life is too subjective a concept and too contingent upon innumerable imponderables to be detected with any certainty," Band maintained. As for the ideal of service to Israel, Band indicated that it "was doomed to a rapid disintegration." Band focused his attention on Dushkin's five other possible outcomes, but after applying them to a study of Jewish schools in Boston, concluded that "there have been no radical changes which have been inspired by the new State."³

Ironically, I would argue that it is the two possible outcomes that Band ruled out, for the reasons that he correctly ruled them out, that have proven of greatest moment in shaping Israel's impact on American Jewry. We will therefore examine each of them in turn — faith in the possibility of life, and a new ideal of service for American youth — the better to understand the dynamics of American Jewry's simultaneous drawing near to and self-distancing from Israel.

Consider the comments made at a symposium held in 1968 to ponder "The Impact of Israel on American Jewry: 20 Years Later."⁴ Rabbi Irving Greenberg argued that the Six Day War had such an enormous impact on Jews in the United States because it confirmed the traditional view of the Jews as a chosen people — a people singled out by God or history. Greenberg and the other symposium participants also took note of a new confrontation with the prophetic dimensions of Jewish existence (Dushkin's second point), and the fostering of a general sense of positive Jewish self-acceptance in the United States (Dushkin's third point) in the wake of the Six Day War. It was left to Marshall Sklare, however, to observe that the outpouring of concern for Israel's existence in 1967 had less to do with attachment to the state per se than with a reliving of Jewish history from the 1930s onward — the "cataclysmic history" from which Jews in the United States had remained exempt and which the threat to Israel in May 1967 had seemed to revive. Elie Wiesel seconded this in noting that American Jews, as they listened to the speeches at the United Nations threatening Israel, had suddenly all become children of the Holocaust.

This exchange highlights what I take to be Israel's most fundamental meaning to American Jews, whether in 1948, 1956, 1967, or 1998: *the triumph of life over death*. Israel signifies the Jewish people's mysterious survival against all odds for over two millennia, a renewed lease on life rarely

³Arnold J. Band, "Trends in the Jewish School System. Boston: A Case Study," *Jewish Social Studies* 21, 1959, pp. 7, 12.

⁴*The Impact of Israel on American Jewry: 20 Years Later* (American Histadrut Cultural Exchange Institute, New York, 1969), pp. 7–9, 39, 58, 72.

granted nations in this world. In 1948 Jewish sovereignty was restored in the Holy Land. A small group of Jewish fighters defeated a powerful enemy, defying near impossible odds. No less amazing, the world saw fit to recognize the new state; Israel's flag flew proudly at the United Nations. And all this happened a mere three years after six million Jews were murdered in Europe. If deserts were blooming in the Jewish homeland, exiles were streaming to build new cities and a new life in the old/new national center, and Jews were singing and dancing again almost everywhere, this was clear testimony to the triumph of life and blessing.

By 1998, of course, these images are utterly trite in their familiarity. I rehearse them nonetheless because their impact on American Jewry has been overwhelming, and because they retain much of their mythic power even today. Israel remains a source of enormous pride to American Jews, who thrill at its vitality, strength, and accomplishments. This is all the more true when Israelis manage to combine strength with compassion, military prowess with achievements in realms such as agriculture and computer technology, excellence in music along with muscle. This is the synthesis of "Athens" and "Sparta" at which Saul Bellow marveled⁵—speaking for many, I think—in *To Jerusalem and Back*, a synthesis which, coming so soon after the death camps, touches Jews the world over at the very core and elicits dedicated efforts aimed at securing Israel's survival.

But Israel has also compelled an anxious confrontation with the perilous facts of Jewish history. Life and death seem to hang in the balance repeatedly where Israel is concerned. Hence a repetition of the age-old nightmares that occur, paradoxically, at the very same moment when Israel enables Jews both inside the state and in the Diaspora to confront the Holocaust in a way that would have been impossible without the margin of safety that Israel provides. Renewed Jewish power and vitality, for all that they remain threatened, have permitted Jews, for once, to contemplate the terrors of Jewish life and history from a standpoint of relative security—on the far shores of the dream, in possession of the Promised Land.

And yet, Jews in the United States have not found ways other than philanthropy, organizational activity, and lobbying, all practiced from afar, to involve themselves in Israel's miraculous new lease on life. That is not in any way to diminish the importance of these modes of service to the state. They have actively engaged tens of thousands of Jews over the past five decades and have elicited philanthropic sums far beyond all expectations. Nonetheless, American Jews have arguably not conceived an "ideal of service" to Israel applicable in moments not characterized by

⁵Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account* (New York, 1976).

life-and-death emergency. Most certainly, they have not found ways to make Israel's day-to-day routines an integral part of their own lives.

The gap between the relationship to Israel on the mythic level of death and rebirth, and the nonrelationship that predominates on the day-to-day level, is enormous. One reason for it surely lies in the simple fact that one can know or, better, imagine a myth from afar, whereas reality, complex and always changing, requires a firsthand acquaintance that is in this case woefully lacking. Few American Jews know Hebrew, and not many of those who do not know the language take the trouble to read Israeli literature in translation.⁶ Millions of American Jews of course follow newspaper headlines and television reports concerning the peace process and Israeli religious strife, but not many thousands make the effort to acquire a detailed knowledge of Israeli life. In a 1995 survey, a majority of American Jews did not know that Benjamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres belong to different parties.⁷

The significant structural differences between the two Jewries further impede mutual understanding, despite shared religious and cultural traditions, a common history, and familial connections. Consider, for example, the ethos of daily life in Tel Aviv, Carmiel, or Jerusalem, which—to the degree that it has not been universalized by pop culture, McDonald's, and the worldwide patterns governing professional and personal life—is as different from the ethos in White Plains or Chicago as is the landscape. Israel's ethnic diversity, too, within and beyond the Jewish population, is not that of America. The experience of war and army service, utterly formative to Israelis, is unknown to most American Jews of this generation. Israel's political system is—for good reason—as perplexing to Jews in the United States as its mix of state and synagogue is disturbing. Finally, the preoccupation of Israeli Judaism with land, messiah, and power, all foreign to American Jews, is cause for serious perplexity and possible concern.⁸

Charles Liebman and Steven Cohen, explicating the differences between the American and Israeli Jewish outlooks in *Two Worlds of Judaism*, point to an additional set of divergent orientations that work to distance the two communities.⁹ Jewish history and peoplehood are primary commitments for Israelis, salient in daily experience and featured

⁶Alan Mintz, "Israeli Literature and the American Reader," *AJYB* 1997, pp. 93–114.

⁷*American Jewish Attitudes Toward Israel and the Peace Process: A Public Opinion Survey* (American Jewish Committee, New York, 1995).

⁸For a more detailed presentation of this argument, see my essay *A New Role for Israel in American Jewish Identity* (American Jewish Committee, New York, 1992).

⁹Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences* (New Haven, 1990). See especially chaps. 5–6.

prominently in the culture and the schools. American Jews, for the most part, have far less awareness of Jewish history and a much weaker sense of connection to Jews elsewhere. This is so, in large measure, because Jewish allegiances in America are personalist and voluntarist. They must be chosen, one family, indeed one person, at a time. In Israel, group loyalties come with the territory, and Jewish identity is part of a collective experience that is conveyed and reinforced by the very language in use and the history that decisively shapes one's life. American Jews align themselves more with universal values and see Judaism as propagating those values. Overwhelmingly, they identify Jewish values with liberalism. Israelis are more particularist, and their view of the world, like their state, is characterized by borders not always easy to cross. Liberalism is not central to the Israeli outlook.

All of this makes for distance as a rule, with Orthodox Jews on both sides of the divide constituting the single notable exception. Because Jewish religious observance is so central to their lives, and that observance determined by a Halakhah recognized as authoritative in both countries, Orthodox commonality is increased from the outset. It is further enhanced by higher levels of Jewish learning and Hebrew proficiency among Orthodox Jews in America, and by the tradition of yeshivah study in Israel for American Orthodox young people. Still, some differences between the two Orthodox communities remain. These differences serve to highlight the degree to which, for American Jews as a whole, only the myth of Israel—which foregrounds the state's very existence, rather than the details of actual life there—brings near what is distant.

One suspects, for a variety of reasons, that many American Jews prefer it this way. The distance they maintain from Israel, alongside their relation to it, well suits the implicit contract that they, following a pattern set by other Jewries in the modern West, have made with the state and society of which they are a part. Certainly the mode of American Jewish relation to Israel is as old as American Zionism. This is the case whether one considers the political Zionism first championed by Louis Brandeis in this country or the cultural Zionism popularized in the United States by such figures as Solomon Schechter and Mordecai Kaplan.

American Zionism

Brandeis, in the course of making Zionism an option for himself and American Jews like him, stripped the movement as conceived in Europe and Palestine of two related and fundamental elements—the critique of Diaspora existence and the insistence that Zionism constitutes a path to self-fulfillment. It was clear to Brandeis from the outset that American

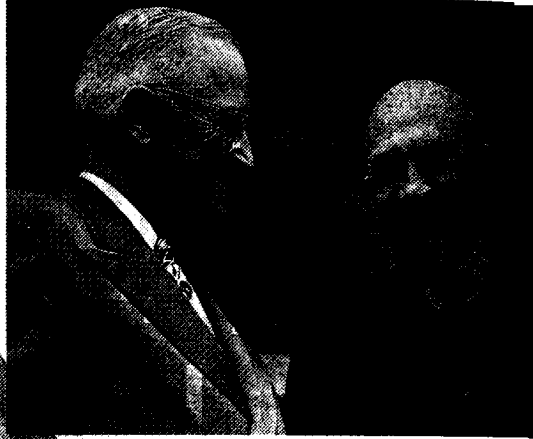
Images of History

The Haganah ship *Exodus*, defying British naval blockade, arrives outside Haifa, July 21, 1947. Its 4,500 refugee passengers are forcibly returned to Europe.



Standing beneath a portrait of Theodor Herzl, David Ben-Gurion proclaims Israel's independence (May 14, 1948)

President Harry Truman greets Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president, in Washington (May 25, 1948)



Israel's flag is raised for the first time at UN headquarters, Lake Success, N.Y. (May 12, 1949), with Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett (r.) and Israeli representative Aubrey (Abba) Eban (l.) assisting

The 1950s . . . Israel's soldier-farmers build the new state and defend its borders.



UNITED JEWISH APPEAL



Gen. Moshe Dayan briefs colleagues on the progress of the 1956 Sinai Campaign

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AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Between 1948 and 1958, Israel absorbs over 850,000 immigrants. Yemenite *olim* being fed after long flight from Aden (May 1950)

Former SS officer Adolf Eichmann, tried for crimes against the Jewish people, stands for the reading of the verdict in a Jerusalem court (Dec. 11, 1961)



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

The Six Day War . . . Gen. Uzi Narkiss, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, and Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin enter the Old City of Jerusalem through the Lions' Gate (June 7, 1967)



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Israeli paratroopers at the Western Wall, the *kotel*, shortly after the capture of the Old City

**Prime Minister Golda Meir,
with Chief of Staff Lt. Gen.
David Elazar (l.), visiting
frontline forces in Egypt during
the 1973 Yom Kippur War**



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**Israeli armored vehicles crossing
the Suez Canal (October 1973)**

**President Anwar Sadat,
President Jimmy Carter,
Prime Minister Menachem Begin,
at the White House . . .
the signing of the Camp David
Accords with Egypt
(March 26, 1979)**



Israeli soldiers overlooking Beirut during the 1982 war in Lebanon

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REUTERS/CORBIS-BETTMANN

Between 1984-1990, Labor and Likud shared power in a series of national unity governments. Here, Shimon Peres, prime minister, and Yitzhak Shamir, foreign minister, exchange positions (Oct. 20, 1986).

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Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky, released from Soviet prison and reunited with his wife, Avital, in Israel, with Minister of Industry and Trade Ariel Sharon (Feb. 1986)



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Intifada . . . mass violence erupts in Gaza and the West Bank, as Palestinians protest Israeli occupation (Dec. 1987)

The Gulf War forced Israeli families into sealed rooms, wearing gas masks, as Iraqi missiles caused extensive damage and personal injury, primarily in the Tel Aviv area (Jan.-Feb. 1991)



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Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, President Bill Clinton, and PLO chairman Yasir Arafat, at the White House . . . the signing of a "Declaration of Principles" (Sept. 13, 1993)

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, President Bill Clinton, and King Hussein of Jordan, on the Israel-Jordan border . . . the signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty (Oct. 26, 1994)



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Peace rally in Tel Aviv at which Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated (Nov. 4, 1995)



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

World leaders attend the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem (Nov. 6, 1995)



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Likud prime ministerial candidate Benjamin Netanyahu, who successfully challenged incumbent Shimon Peres, casts his ballot in Jerusalem (May 29, 1996)

Jews were not homeless or in exile; that they were not fated to encounter an inevitable anti-Semitism. Jewish existence in the United States, he maintained, was to be celebrated and enhanced rather than critiqued or abandoned. The aim of Zionism in America, therefore, was to secure a comparable homeland in Palestine for the millions of Jews who needed it; the means for accomplishing this task were political and philanthropic. Emigration was not to be expected or urged. American Zionists did not envision being “built up” by the land of Israel as they helped to build up that land, on the ground. Indeed, they hoped to export an American version of fulfillment—including such “prophetic” ideals as freedom, equality of opportunity, individual responsibility, and technological know-how—to Palestine. This has of course remained the American Zionist credo until the present day.

No less so, Schechter and the other communal leaders who transplanted cultural Zionism to American shores made significant alterations in the doctrine set forth by the leading European theoretician of that school of thought, Ahad Ha'am. They agreed that Jews in America, as elsewhere, all too often languished in spiritual exile; that knowledge of Jewish history and acquaintance with the Hebrew language were at a low level; and that religious practice was giving way to secularization and assimilation. Schechter and Kaplan followed Ahad Ha'am's lead in arguing that the immediate aim of Zionism should be the establishment of a “spiritual center” in Palestine, which would nurture the development of a revived Jewish culture that could then be exported to Jews throughout the world. However, Schechter stressed the need for a spiritual center in Palestine precisely so that Jewish culture—and with it Jewish religion—could be renewed in the United States, no less than in Palestine. With the assistance of the new center in Palestine, Schechter maintained, a religious flowering of Judaism could take place in the United States.

The center was to serve its periphery. Ahad Ha'am too had envisioned this, but he had not imagined that religion could “trump” culture in the way that Schechter and others in America argued. This too is a point of view that has endured, as evident in Kaplan's stunning reformulation of the purpose of Zionism in 1955: “Zionism has to be redefined so as to assure a permanent place for Diaspora Judaism.” Israel's role, Kaplan continued, should be “based on the desire to provide the setting in which the Jewish People could become a fit instrument of this-worldly salvation for every Jew, wherever he resides.”¹⁰

A distinctive American variant of Zionism found expression in a vari-

¹⁰Mordecai M. Kaplan, *A New Zionism* (New York, 1955), pp. 41, 119.

ety of ways. For example, when the Zionist Organization of America adopted a platform in 1918, it stressed progressive principles of pluralist democracy and a mixed public-private economy. Similarly, Arthur Goren has indicated how the ideal of the *halutz*, the pioneer, was Americanized for promotion here.¹¹ The dominant image became that of the young intellectual or professional who left a promising career in order to redeem the land and build a moral society. In institutional terms, the Young Judaea movement rejected pioneering elitism in favor of an “all-Jewish program” addressed to the masses of Jews, while Habonim declared itself in favor of a Zionism born of individual choice. The decision to become a *halutz*, it was argued, should be private, reached without coercion, and undertaken for positive reasons. Such distinctively American permissiveness and pluralism, Goren observes, ran counter to European Zionist notions of party discipline and ideological collectivism. “Limited halutzit,” rather than emigration, became the order of the day—service to Israel through summer camps, study programs, and the like.

American Jewish responses to the Zionist idea reflected genuine national feeling and a strong Jewish commitment. At the same time, it is clear that American Zionists took their cue from the American scene. Zionist, and later Jewish communal, leaders, have consistently striven to strike the proper balance between minority citizenship in a developing American democracy and Jewish loyalties arising out of common history, shared religious commitments, and an enduring sense of Jewish peoplehood. As part of the effort to harmonize these two commitments, the Jews in Palestine were for a long time depicted as people not unlike those in the United States, committed to ideals not unlike those that animated Americans, but not yet fortunate enough to enjoy the full blessings of America. The job of American Jews was not to join them there, but to help them from here; to change Jewish history rather than to change American Jews, much less America.

The famous agreement reached in 1950 between Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion and American Jewish Committee president Jacob Blaustein gave classic expression to an understanding of the proper relationship between citizenship in the United States and membership in the Jewish people. Ben-Gurion wrote in his letter:

The Jews of the United States, as a community and as individuals, have only one political attachment and that is to the United States of America. They owe no political allegiance to Israel. . . . We, the people of Israel, have no

¹¹Arthur Aryeh Goren, “‘Anu banu artza’ in America: The Americanization of the Halutz Ideal,” in *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal (Jerusalem, 1996), pp. 83–88, 95, 104, 109.

desire and no intention to interfere in any way with the internal affairs of Jewish communities abroad. The Government and the people of Israel fully respect the right and integrity of the Jewish communities in other countries to develop their own mode of life and their indigenous social, economic and cultural institutions in accordance with their own needs and aspirations.

In his response, Blaustein paid tribute to Israel's great progress and expressed confidence in the new nation's ability to overcome the difficult problems it still faced. On behalf of the American Jewish Committee, he promised: "We shall do all we can to increase further our share in the great historic task of helping Israel to solve its problems and develop as a free, independent and flourishing democracy."¹²

In line with the Ben-Gurion–Blaustein agreement, American Jewish public life would concern itself in part with voluntary assistance to Israel, and for the rest with the welfare of the American Jewish community. Both elements were important to the assertion of collective Jewish identity in the United States and contributed mightily to the maintenance of Jewish distinctiveness. For many Jews in America, over an extended period, communal commitments focused on Israel defined the essence of their Jewishness. Still, as far as American Jewry as a whole was concerned, Israel was not in the forefront of consciousness or of Jewish public life prior to 1967. Neither Israel nor the Holocaust was even mentioned in the questions posed in an August 1966 *Commentary* symposium on "The State of Jewish Belief," and none of the respondents saw fit to bring them up.

After 1967—with the Six Day War's traumatic reminder of the singled-out Jewish condition, followed by Israel's miraculous deliverance—Israel took center stage in American Jewish public life, a position it held for over two decades. The mythic meaning of Israel to American Jews, operating at the deepest level of personal existence, became joined to the dominant communal agenda, operating at the most visible level in newspapers, meetings, and philanthropy. In this context, the unity of the Jewish people and the centrality of Israel to Jewish life became key elements in Jewish civil religion. Jewish giving to Israel increased dramatically. Jack Wertheimer points out that American Jews gave over \$100 million in the two-week period between May 22 and June 10, 1967, and have since donated about \$6 billion to Israel via the United Jewish Appeal alone.¹³ Parallel to this, Israel's place on the agenda of Jewish organizational life has grown enormously. As Wertheimer indicates:

¹²In *Vigilant Brotherhood: The American Jewish Committee's Relationship to Palestine and Israel* (American Jewish Committee, New York, 1964), pp. 54–55.

¹³Jack Wertheimer, "Jewish Organizational Life in the United States Since 1945," *AJYB* 1995, pp. 48–49.

In the 1970s, then, sectors of the organized community that previously had paid scant attention to Israel-related matters now threw their energies and resources into such lobbying. The Council of Jewish Federations formed an Israel Task Force, and the community relations field shifted much of its personnel and budget to the task of explaining Israel's needs to the American public. In the early 1970s, for example, NJCRAC estimated that 65 percent of its budget was spent on activities for Israel and Soviet Jewry. The American Jewish Committee spent between 25 and 50 percent of its budgets on Israel-related programs, while the ADL allocated 30 percent to Israel programming. . . .¹⁴

There is some evidence that in the last few years Israel's importance for American Jews, both mythic and public, has diminished somewhat. The policies of the current Israeli government are far less popular in the United States, both among Jews and in Washington, than those of its predecessor, and the continuing attempts by Orthodox Jews in Israel to delegitimize and exclude other forms of Judaism have made the situation worse. Moreover, these developments have coincided with an American Jewish communal agenda increasingly focused on "continuity," with funding priorities shifted to "local needs" such as education.

At the same time, American Jews are expressing more interest than ever before in spirituality and/or religion, and are more inclined than ever toward "universalist" and "personalist" aspects of Jewishness rather than the "ethnic" dimensions of Jewish existence. They are correspondingly less inclined than in past decades to award Israel a significant role in their Jewish emotional loyalties. Asked in a recent survey by Steven M. Cohen whether they agreed that Israel is "critical to sustaining American Jewish life," just over half of a representative sample of American Jews agreed that it was; asked "how emotionally attached are you to Israel?" only 27 percent said they were "extremely" or "very" attached (down from 37 percent as recently as 1988), while 42 percent said they were "somewhat attached" and over 25 percent said "not attached." About a third saw Israel as extremely important to their own sense of being Jewish—fewer, Cohen notes, than "those who said the same for the Torah, High Holidays, the Jewish family, American anti-Semitism, the Jewish people, and the Holocaust (where, for each, about half the sample answered in like fashion)."¹⁵

I would contend that the disengagement indicated by these developments is not merely the effect of current Israeli government policy or of recurring conflicts over "Who is a Jew?" Rather, it represents still another

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 54–55.

¹⁵Steven M. Cohen, "The Fall of Public Judaism: The 1997 JCCA Survey of American Jews" (unpublished manuscript), p. 24. For earlier figures and the conceptualization employed here, see Cohen and Liebman, *Two Worlds of Judaism*.

attempt to fine-tune the pattern of distance and relationship that has always characterized the American Jewish approach to Israel. An examination of Israel's place in American Jewish religious thought will provide further insight into the dynamics of this process.

God, Torah, Israel, and the State

Scholars of contemporary Judaism have made much of the fact that Abraham Joshua Heschel, without question one of the most profound and influential Jewish thinkers to have worked in the United States in the century, conceived of Judaism as a religion that “sanctifies time rather than space.” Heschel certainly did not intend this as an argument on behalf of the Diaspora or against a territorial homeland. His point had much more to do with the distinction between Sabbath and weekday, the actual context in which he used the phrase, or, in a larger sense, between spirit and normalcy—between the demand for justice and the practice of business as usual. Heschel's contrast between space and time somewhat matches the categories of Joseph Soloveitchik, the leading American Orthodox thinker, who distinguishes between the world of “majesty” and the world of “covenant.” We misunderstand Heschel and Soloveitchik if we read them as dismissing the importance of the land or State of Israel. But we also misread them if we fail to see that neither they nor other American Jewish religious thinkers have placed land and state at the center of their thought. Here, too, both distance and relationship are apparent.¹⁶

Consider, for example, a passage in the only work by Heschel in which he deals at any length with the State of Israel—*Israel: An Echo of Eternity*—written, not coincidentally, in the wake of the Six Day War. Heschel offers praise to Jerusalem, surveys its role in Jewish faith, and traces the Jewish people's “covenant of engagement” to the land of Israel over the ages. He then enlarges on the centuries-long story of Jewish longing for return to the land of Israel, and argues that, while the creation of the State of Israel is in no way an “answer to Auschwitz,” it does “enable us to bear the agony of Auschwitz without radical despair.” Then comes the following passage:

Our imperishable homeland is in God's time. We enter God's time through the gate of sacred deeds. The deeds, acts of sanctifying time, are the old an-

¹⁶See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, in *The Earth Is the Lord's and The Sabbath* (New York, 1966), and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York, 1992). For a more extensive discussion of these issues see my book *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 156–80.

central ground where we meet Him again and again. The great sacred deed for us today is to build the land of Israel.¹⁷

In this passage, “homeland” remains a metaphor until the final sentence. It is imperishable—eternal rather than temporal, spiritual rather than material, and as such necessarily attainable in every time and place. Zionism and the State of Israel enter this passage only through the category of the sacred deed, a paramount sacred deed to which Jews in this time are called. Thus Heschel chastises American Jews for having taken Israel’s existence for granted until the Six Day War. Israel’s rebirth is cause for wonder and celebration, though not for *aliyah*, which is nowhere recommended. Israel’s existence should be taken as “a challenge . . . an urging for spiritual renewal, for moral re-examination,” but not as the reason for any larger questioning of the fundamentals of Jewish life in the United States.

A similar pattern is evident in the work of Soloveitchik, who barely mentions Israel in most of his writings and deals with it extensively only when Israel’s status as a sign of God’s continuing providence over the Jewish people is the issue. In his classic essay “Hark, My Beloved Knocks,” published in 1956, Soloveitchik argued that the establishment of the State of Israel was proof that the hiding of God’s countenance in the Holocaust had come to an end: “Let us not view this matter lightly! It is the voice of my Beloved that knocketh!”¹⁸ In this case, the response demanded apparently is *aliyah*, though the word is never used. But note that Soloveitchik urges participation in a divine rather than a human project. Moreover, he goes on to argue that the building of the Jewish homeland, if it is to retain God’s blessing, must follow the dictates of Torah. In a series of addresses to Orthodox Zionist audiences, Soloveitchik chastised Orthodox Jews for not appreciating and joining in the divine activity under way in Israel.¹⁹ At the same time, he made it clear that only Jews loyal to the Torah were fit to direct those efforts on the ground. Note too the following declaration in an essay by Soloveitchik offering support to Israel’s religious parties:

I understand the greatness, value and importance of the State, the wonder of its establishment and preservation, only from the point of view of the

¹⁷Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York, 1967), pp. 127–28.

¹⁸Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Hark, My Beloved Knocks,” in *Torah and Kingship*, ed. Simon Federbush (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1961), pp. 11–44. For partial English translation, see Soloveitchik article in *Theological and Halakhic Perspectives: Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Bernhard Rosenberg and Fred Heuman (Hoboken, 1992), p. 76.

¹⁹Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses* (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 26–36, 73–77; see also pp. 155–56, 198.

uniqueness of the people of Israel and its relation to the God of Israel. As a secular-historical entity that is not animated by any covenantal goal, the State does not excite me. . . . And I cannot imagine any tie between the Jews of the Diaspora and a State insofar as it is secular.²⁰

As American Jewish thinkers, both Heschel and Soloveitchik devoted the bulk of their efforts to strengthening Judaism in the United States, rather than to deepening the relation of American Jews to Israel. Both thinkers, moreover, articulated the place that the land and state occupy—central and yet peripheral; mythic in focus rather than everyday—in consonance with their larger views about God, Torah, and Jewish peoplehood, the last of these also of course known as Israel. Finally, both fended off the challenge posed by Israel to the personal decision not to live there; not to participate firsthand in the ingathering for which they prayed daily; not to observe the commandments that could only be observed in the land; not to contribute every day and directly to a project that they believed to be somehow in accord with, or even directed by, divine providence.

Jewish religion here not only trumps Zionism, but also contextualizes its claims, thereby limiting them. By legitimating Diaspora Judaism, Heschel and Soloveitchik silence competing Jewish claims which, if heard loud and clear, might well cast doubt on the adequacy or feasibility of Jewish religious life in the United States.

I want to offer some further examples of this same pattern selected from American Jewish religious thought of the last few years—the *Commentary* symposium of 1996²¹ and a sampling of recent volumes by prominent American Jewish religious thinkers.

Contributors to the *Commentary* symposium fall into a number of categories on the subject of Israel. Some did not mention the state at all, despite a question this time around on how the Holocaust and Israel—paired by the editors, as they are often joined in popular consciousness—had influenced faith, religious identity, and observance of the respondents. Others did discuss Israel, but only in the mythic terms of life after death, miracle, hope, “Zion.” Israel’s function as a proof for divine providence, or of God’s renewed presence in history, was mentioned frequently. Only Blu Greenberg, however, declared that Israel was a thrilling miracle that engaged her more than any other Jewish involvement. Few

²⁰Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Concerning Love of the Torah and Salvation of the Soul of This Generation,” in *In Aloneness, In Togetherness*, ed. Pinchas Peli (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1967), p. 430.

²¹“What Do American Jews Believe? A Symposium,” *Commentary* 102, no. 2, Aug. 1996, pp. 18–96.

contributors ascribed importance to Israel in terms of their own Jewish lives without an immediate qualification that returned the emphasis to America. None, of course, advocated *aliyah*. All in all, the *Commentary* symposium gives expression to much love of and pride in Israel, while treating it as a distinctly minor element in terms of theological reflection.

Recent volumes of Jewish religious thought differ in degree but not in kind from the thrust of the *Commentary* symposium. For example, Daniel Gordis, in a popular work on Jewish spirituality, *God Was Not in the Fire*, indicates that he will not be treating the subject of Israel, because his topic does not demand it.²² In a second volume, this one dealing with contemporary Jewish existence as a whole—*Does the World Need the Jews?*—Gordis does raise the subject of Israel, but only in order to refute the claim that it should occupy center stage in current Jewish life.²³

Arthur Green, in a work rooted in the Jewish mystical tradition, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name*, deals with Israel briefly in the section on redemption.²⁴ A new Judaism is being articulated in Israel, Green contends, “one that involves land and language more than it does observance of tradition.” This stress, Green is aware, makes American Jews uncomfortable, but they can profit from it, because Diaspora Jews have become too urbanized and too intellectualized to “take cognizance of divinity in our natural surroundings.”

Judith Plaskow, in *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, builds on the traditional structure of God, Torah, and Israel and focuses on the State of Israel in a chapter entitled “Israel: Toward a New Concept of Community.”²⁵ The redefinition of the people of Israel, Plaskow argues, necessarily involves consideration of the state, because “the human difficulties in dealing with difference, the social implications of traditional attitudes toward difference, the continuities between the modern Jewish construction of difference and historical Jewish treatment of others all emerge with special vividness in the context of the State of Israel.” Considered in these terms, Plaskow maintains, Israel’s treatment of both the Palestinians and gender inequality in the country needs to be critiqued: “It seems that the Jewish experience of oppression has led not to the just exercise of power by Jews in power, but to the Jewish repetition of strategies of domination.” Plaskow, then, draws a negative lesson from Israel about what Jewish life should be like in the United States.

²²Daniel Gordis, *God Was Not in the Fire* (New York, 1995).

²³Daniel Gordis, *Does the World Need the Jews?* (New York, 1997).

²⁴Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name* (Northvale, N.J., 1992), p. 176.

²⁵Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, 1990), pp.107–19.

Two other recent works oriented neither to feminism nor to spirituality do accord Israel more sustained and complicated treatment, though neither moves very far from the themes enunciated in this essay thus far. Irving Greenberg's *The Jewish Way*, organized according to the cycle of the Jewish calendar, ends with a chapter on Israeli Independence Day that carries the title—using the mythic terms with which we are familiar—“Resurrection and Redemption.”²⁶ Greenberg labels Zionism “the new exodus,” and sees it, with the help of Soloveitchik's “Hark, My Beloved Knocks,” as a providential counterpoint to this century's “Egypt,” the Holocaust. “The creation of the state was a deeply human act,” Greenberg claims, yet nonetheless “an act of redemption of biblical stature. . . . The Bible insists that the human role in redemption in no way reduces the divine intentionality and responsibility for the outcome of events.”

Greenberg is also concerned to underscore the “end of *galut* (exilic) Judaism” that has occurred by virtue of Israel. The state has placed that power in Jewish hands, thereby transforming Jewish history and Judaism. Thanks to Israel's creation, Jews can now “serve God in the joy of victory,” raising the question of exactly how Yom Ha'atzmaut—unquestionably a religious holiday, in Greenberg's eyes—should be celebrated. Greenberg endorses the recitation of Hallel, and includes the marking of Yom Hazikaron, the day before Independence Day, which in Israel is devoted to remembrance of fallen soldiers.

Eugene Borowitz, in *Renewing the Covenant*, relates to Israel in a variety of contexts—perhaps the greatest single innovation in this regard. Not surprisingly, he deals with it in terms of the Holocaust, noting that Israel offers Jews a personal experience of “God's saving power.” Borowitz continues: “The State of Israel appeared a model of moral politics; it also became the shining symbol of our people's transpolitical, instinctive, life-affirming answer to Hitler's nihilism, giving it a numinosity, a sacred aura that even a secularized generation could not ignore.” Still, Borowitz stresses that the state cannot be the answer to the quest of American Jews for a “substitute absolute” capable of replacing lost faith in modernity. “Despite all that the State of Israel means to us and has done for us, there is a compelling Jewish and human distinction between its claiming our deep devotion and serving as our actional absolute.” Borowitz returns to the subject of Israel in dealing with what he calls “the sparks of chosenness,” i.e., the meaning of the covenant linking the Jewish people to God. Israel's existence, Borowitz observes, “has

²⁶Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York, 1988), pp. 373–404.

intensified the possible effects of our people being chosen," since "a culturally self-determining Jewish community provides the Jewish people corporately with the optimum situation in which to work out its God-oriented destiny." Here too Borowitz adds a qualifier, noting that Diaspora Jews normally have closer contact with Gentiles on a personal level and can thus more easily carry out this particular aspect of Jewish chosenness, once called "mission."²⁷

Israel figures in one additional context in Borowitz's book, namely in attempting to apply the classical "covenant-ideal" of living as a nation in the world of realpolitik and "within the tensions of survival/sanctification." At the same time, the challenge for Diaspora Jewry, in Borowitz's view, is to determine "what it might mean to be an enfranchised self as a believing Jew."

A survey of the prayer books in use by American Jews, conducted by historian David Ellenson, has found that there too, as in the works summarized above, "even when the territoriality of Jewish existence in the state is recalled and the presence of the Jewish people in the Land is acknowledged, the universal elements in the tradition remain highlighted." The state is "refracted specifically through the prism of a universalistic ethos." National memory in the prayers uttered by American Jews is joined to personal spiritual quest, and the "linked myth" of Holocaust and Redemption is repeatedly canonized by the liturgy. "The present-day reality of a secular Israel . . . [is] far removed from the vision of the Jewish state presented in these liturgies. Simply put, the State of Israel embodies a religious, not a secular nationalist, reality for the adherents of these American Jewish religious denominations" [Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist].²⁸

Orthodoxy presents a rather complicated picture. Although the prayers uttered in Israeli and American Orthodox synagogues are virtually identical, some differences in religious outlook remain, as expressed in a recent symposium on the subject of Israel in the Orthodox journal *Tradition*.²⁹ Wariness continues concerning the messianism evident among many Orthodox Israelis of the younger generation, and Americans are far less comfortable than their Israeli counterparts with legislation imposing Orthodox control of marriage, divorce, and conversion. Finally, opinions differ among modern Orthodox Jews in America regarding the

²⁷Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 44, 77–78, 196.

²⁸David Ellenson, "Envisioning Israel in the Liturgies of North American Liberal Judaism," in *Envisioning Israel* (see note 11), pp. 126–34, 145–47.

²⁹See "Reflections on the Six-Day War After a Quarter Century," *Tradition* 26, no. 4 (Summer 1992), pp. 8–24.

recitation of Hallel on Israeli Independence Day—a practice not only universal among modern Orthodox Jews in Israel, but a strong marker of identity that distinguishes them from traditionalist Orthodox Jews unwilling to accord the state this mark of Jewish legitimacy.

The non-Orthodox American Jewish thinkers surveyed above, and the rabbis who compose the prayer books in use by non-Orthodox American Jews, are in one crucial respect similar to the handful of Jewishly knowledgeable and committed writers of fiction who of late have created a spate of exceptions to Rosenfeld's generalization about non-interest in Israel.³⁰ All are subject to the need for self-justification vis à vis the existential claims that Israel makes, the need for a cogent response to Israeli challengers who argue that American Jews too will in the end succumb to the forces of assimilation and/or anti-Semitism, that authentic Jewish life and creativity are possible only in Israel, that for Jews who care deeply about being Jewish there is really only one place in the world to live. Consider the remarkable series of Israeli characters, and dialogues on Israeli and Israel-Diaspora themes, in Philip Roth's recent novels *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. Even if the rabbis, theologians, and fiction writers are not, like all of Roth's personae, avowedly secular, and even if they are not, like the Roth double in *Shylock*, avowed "diasporists," American thinkers nonetheless have to answer the difficult question that Roth's characters seem compelled time after time to answer: How can American Jews not want to live in the Jewish state?

"One can play a role in history without its having to be obvious," Nathan tells his brother Henry, newly relocated to a Gush Emunim settlement on the West Bank. "It may be that flourishing mundanely in the civility and security of South Orange, more or less forgetful from one day to the next of your Jewish origins but remaining identifiably (and voluntarily) a Jew, you were making Jewish history no less astonishing than theirs, though without quite knowing it every moment, and without having to say it."³¹ If one can flourish transcendentally in South Orange, thanks to the Jewish religious tradition; if one does remember Jewish origins in prayer, communal activity, study, and ritual; if one thereby remains not only identifiably Jewish, but substantively so—the claim to be making Jewish history, and the knowledge that one is doing so, come still more easily.

³⁰See, on this point, Andrew Furman, *Israel Through the Jewish-American Imagination: A Survey of Jewish-American Literature on Israel, 1928–1995* (Albany, 1997), pp. 3–4, 188–200. Cf. Rosenfeld, "Promised Land(s)," p. 120.

³¹Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* (New York, 1988), p. 146, cited in Rosenfeld, "Promised Land[s]," p. 125. For the diasporist argument, see Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock* (New York, 1993), especially pp. 44–47, 156–58, 200–01.

The acknowledgement of the claims of Israel and the decision not to live there underscore yet again the combination of relationship and distancing at the heart of the American Jewish response to Israel.

The Claims of the Center

Having brought the argument this far, I wish to speak in more personal terms as an American Jew who has made *aliyah*, and returned from *aliyah*, and has written books and essays about Jewish thought in which the subject of Israel is rarely in the foreground for very long.

I remember wondering more than once as a teenager, and actually asking the question aloud one Friday evening at an *oneg shabbat* at my synagogue, why all those American Jews who cared about being Jewish had not long since moved to Israel. There seemed to be so much life there, so much sheer vitality, whereas most of American Judaism seemed confined to the doldrums of synagogue and Hebrew school and the petty concerns of organizational life. When my wife and I made *aliyah*, it was, I think, the fullness of Jewish life possible in Israel that attracted us more than anything else. In Israel life was rich, with the most mundane activities bound up in the most transcendent of human projects. We did not leave the United States because of any disappointment with this country, or any experience of anti-Semitism, or any conviction that America was not as much a home as human beings can know on this earth. And we did not come back to the United States for any but personal reasons. There was no disappointment with Israel, no sense that the promised land had failed to live up to any of its promises, no exchange of Zionist commitments for "diasporism."

And yet, for all that, if one chooses to live in the United States rather than in Israel, one imagines Jewish life primarily in terms that can be put into practice here. An ethic of aspiration, even if it remains an ideal far beyond one's grasp, must nonetheless be close enough to stimulate aspiration, not so far removed as to preclude reaching for it. The Torah that holds American Jews, in all their varieties of Jewish commitment, is a Torah that can be lived where they live. What is more, that Torah, because it calls upon Jews to transform all human projects everywhere in accordance with the will of God, will almost inevitably trump Israel's centrality for Jewish existence. Judaism itself thus removes Israel from the foreground most of the time, just as "Israel" in its classic sense—the Jewish people as a whole—always encompasses, and so limits, the claims of Israel as land or state. This is so despite the fact that many of the most important Jewish realizations for the minority of American Jews who are deeply involved with the Jewish state occur in Israel and because of Israel. Let me enumerate a few of these realizations, which I

believe are widespread among committed American Jews of this generation.³²

Consider the experience of Jewish peoplehood that comes, for example, when riding an Egged bus. The physiognomies of those on board are many and various, and yet we know immediately that they belong to the same "family." We recognize that all have come from far away to be in this place, the only place on earth where we could meet them all, and meet them on what is for all home turf. The sense of shared peoplehood is increased when we reflect on the gratitude felt for the soldiers riding on the bus. Their guns protect us from people who consider us enemies simply because of who and what we are. "Us" and "them" come clearly into view. A similar realization may stem from turning the dial on the radio late at night and hearing only Arabic, except for the Voice of America, the BBC, and the station of the Israeli Defense Forces. These lessons of "us" and "them" are difficult for young American Jews, heirs to Vietnam-era antipathy toward military force and skeptical of cold-war rhetoric about the enemy. One often does not want to know that history is inescapable. The realization alters politics and confirms identity.

Like many other American Jews, I became convinced of the centrality of Israel in contemporary Jewish life not from paying attention to the interminable debates on the subject but by sitting in Jerusalem—specifically, in my case, at the Cinemateque during a showing of *Because of That War*, a film about and starring two young Israeli rock musicians, both the children of Holocaust survivors. When the lights went up after the film that day, disputes on the issue of centrality suddenly seemed academic. It was clear that Israel represents the principal continuation of Jewish history in this century and into the future. For all that American Jews too have the potential to write a major chapter in the history of the Jewish people, Israel is the place where the fate of the Jews stands most exposed to view and is most on the line. One is grateful to know Hebrew at such moments, because it makes possible the direct absorption of lessons such as this one without the need for subtitles, and enables one to discuss it in the language which, like the Jewish people, is alive again, thanks to Israel. This is a source of much pleasure, as is physical contact with the land of Israel: the natural features such as wadis and hills, and the layers upon layers of history still visible on the surface of the land or recently excavated from beneath it.

One also learns important things about God and Torah in Israel. Pil-

³²For more on these matters, see my book *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America* (Bloomington, 1997).

grimage becomes vivid on a Shavuot morning in Jerusalem when, after participating in an all-night study session, we join the throngs streaming from every direction toward the common center, the Western Wall. There and elsewhere in Israel the appeal of sacred space becomes compelling, as the spell of sacred time is sensed in the stillness of the streets on Yom Kippur. One learns what it means to testify with one's feet and to live by a calendar that moves to Jewish rather than Gentile rhythms.

Prophecy too can come into fuller view, and not only because a scroll of Isaiah discovered at Qumran is on permanent exhibit at the Shrine of the Book. Sitting near the Wall or on the Temple Mount, looking out at the same expanse of desert that filled Isaiah's vision, it becomes easier to understand the prophet's conviction that human beings are all caught between the sky above and the rock beneath, dazzled and overwhelmed by the light. We reside in a place where everything matters, subject to a responsibility from which there is no escape. Indeed, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory."

In Israel everything does seem to matter, all the time, to the point that one wishes for some levity, and is all the more disappointed when it comes from debates in the Knesset. History matters and is of ultimate importance. Perspective, for better and for worse, seems to vanish at times, as foreign and domestic policy issues of the moment are debated in terms of a tradition that is centuries old.

Nor is Torah any longer confined to the prophetic critique of power delivered from the sidelines. Judaism in Israel must now engage power, because Israelis wield power, the situation mandating an interplay of state and religion that is unnerving to American Jews, whose ability to be Jews rests on a constitutional separation between state and religion. The political disputes recounted in the biblical books of Numbers or Kings take on new significance as one observes the analogous struggles of contemporary Israelis to fuse the age-old claims of covenant with the pressing demands of political reality. It is no wonder that the Israeli civil religion seeks to confer the sanctity of divine covenant upon political decisions that now, as in the Bible, are the subject of great controversy.³³ Nor is it a surprise when God and Torah are invoked by religious Israelis to justify beliefs or behavior that other Israelis find reprehensible, likewise because of God and Torah.

All of this proves perplexing to American Jews upon first encounter, and for many it remains troubling no matter how well they come to know Israel. Yet, power is not inimical to virtue, a point that Emil Fackenheim,

³³Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel* (Berkeley, 1983).

Irving Greenberg, and other Jewish religious thinkers in North America have emphasized against the background of Israel's existence.³⁴ Indeed, power makes many good deeds possible and prevents some bad deeds that stem from the desperation of powerlessness. The many fine uses of Jewish power in Israel these past five decades prove this. But it is also true—as Isaiah Leibowitz, David Hartman, and other Israeli thinkers have stressed—that power puts ethical and religious ideals to the test, and that Jews, like others, do not always pass, whether in their relations to the Palestinians or to one another.³⁵ Hence the recent critiques of Zionism ventured in the name of Jewish or Zionist ideals.³⁶ That seems an inevitable consequence of the Zionist dream and the achievement of “normalization,” at times on view far more than either Israelis or American Jews would wish. Jewish living in Israel is unshielded by the minority status and relative powerlessness of Diaspora Jewish life, where the moral refuge of standing on the sidelines is always available and often made use of.

These are some of the palpable meanings that Israel carries for those privileged not only to be alive at a time when the state exists, but also to know its reality close up. And this is to say nothing of the mythic aspects of Israel, which remain as potent as ever. One cannot walk the streets of Israeli cities, see the faces of Ethiopian immigrants, hear Russian all around, and not marvel at the “ingathering of the exiles,” an exhilarating example of a prayer that has actually come true. Moreover, the Zionist account of modern Jewish history—particularly as amended in recent years to take account of Diaspora achievement on the one hand and Zionist or Israeli failings on the other—is far more persuasive than Diaspora versions that minimize the extent of anti-Semitism or the threat of assimilation.

American Jews, for all that they benefit from living with what is distinctive to the 20th-century United States, do seem subject to the same “rules” that have governed all of modern Jewish history. We too negotiate loyalties, depend on shifting coalitions of interests, know the fragility of our success. The Israelis are right to insist on this, even as we are right

³⁴See Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (New York, 1982), and *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Detroit, 1987). See also Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, chap. 11.

³⁵See Isaiah Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge, 1992), and David Hartman, *Conflicting Visions: Spiritual Possibilities of Modern Israel* (New York, 1990).

³⁶See the summary by Amos Elon, “Israel and the End of Zionism,” in *New York Review of Books* 43, no. 20 (Dec. 19, 1996), pp. 27–28; and Menachem Brinker, “The End of Zionism?” in *Dissent* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1985).

to remind them that a tiny state located where Israel is located is not exactly in the best position to claim that it has secured the future of the Jewish people. Nor are Israelis, for all the advantages of public Jewish time and space and immediate access to Hebrew, entitled to the prideful boast that they, unlike us, have secured the future of Judaism.

The Jewries of the United States and Israel, then, however one stands on the contested issue of the true Jewish center(s), and for all the differences between the two communities that I have enumerated, seem in this sense at least to be on parallel tracks. Israel represents one of the two options for Jewish survival and Jewish thriving that have proven viable in the modern world—life inside a sovereign state protected by its army. The United States represents the most promising case yet of the other option—minority existence in a Diaspora democracy, in which Jews take the risk that they can maintain the economic and political clout necessary to guarantee their rights and can secure the resources needed to maintain and transmit the Jewish way of life. Both Jewries seek, in language that we have used repeatedly in this essay, to marry normalcy and covenant—to meet the needs of survival, the demands of the everyday, as well as the demands of the highest values that Jews know: God and Torah.

These basic facts of the modern Jewish situation are unlikely to change in the next half-century, even as Israel quickly overtakes the United States in its Jewish population and eventually contains the majority of the world's Jews. Shared Jewish interests, then, regardless of principles that may or may not be shared, would seem to require that Jews in Israel and the United States be open to the lessons that each bears for the other, as well as the challenges that each poses to the other. These fall into two categories.

It has long since become a commonplace that Israel and Diaspora require each other for their physical survival, and that the Jewish people, for its survival, requires both. Israelis are obviously dependent on U.S. governmental assistance, and this in turn depends in part on the support of a united American Jewry. However, American Jews likewise benefit in a host of ways from Israel, albeit intangibly. Dignity and self-respect—and so achievement—are bound up, to a degree we cannot and should not wish to test, in the existence of a sovereign and successful Jewish state. This dependence is implicitly acknowledged, I believe, in the anxiety that Israel always live up to the highest moral ideals and never get far out of sync with the policies of the U.S. government. American Jews naturally want Israel to help them feel good about being Jews. Interests and principles, normalcy and covenant, work together in this respect.

The interdependence of the two Jewries in the cultural and religious spheres is less widely acknowledged, but is, in my view, no less serious.

Jewish thought here and there, for all its differences, is nourished by the same sources, classical and modern, and developments in both countries sooner or later have an impact on the other. Experiences in Israel such as those I pointed to play a crucial role in the Jewish journeys of many of the most committed American Jews. The myth of Israel continues to help secure the identification of those less committed. Jewish artists and scholars in the two societies are utterly interdependent; American synagogues, their liturgies barely altered by Israel's existence, have been greatly enlivened through music imported from Israel, as American homes and ritual observances have been beautified by imported art objects. Israelis for their part have not only been significantly affected by American popular culture that in turn bears the imprint of American Jewish experiences, but are increasingly feeling the impact of developments, whether feminist or Orthodox or "new age" or Conservative or Reform, that first took place and took root in the United States. This cross-fertilization too is likely to continue, regardless of population shifts, and will likely grow among the minority in each country that cares deeply about Jewish peoplehood and tradition.

It seems pointless to me to argue any longer, as Jews have often argued over the past five decades, over whether Israel deserves to be considered the political center of the Jewish people, or whether it has earned the right, culturally or morally, to be considered the spiritual center. Nor, I think, should Jews here or there any longer insist on the word "Zionist" to describe activities better and more simply designated as Israeli or Jewish, whether these be organizational, economic, or educational. Complete fulfillment of the tasks set for political Zionism by Herzl and other founders—the ingathering of all the world's Jews to Palestine, with a resultant end to anti-Semitism—must await the coming of the messiah, just as Ahad Ha'am said a century ago. Complete fulfillment of the tasks set by Ahad Ha'am and other spiritual Zionists—the renaissance of Jewish culture throughout the world—must likewise await the messiah. In the meantime, Israel need not be the "light unto the nations" to be worthy of American Jewish interest, but only what it is: a thriving Jewish society where various visions of Jewish life jostle with each other and compete for the allegiance of Israelis, in ways that are directly relevant to Jews in the Diaspora. Israel's pursuit of normalcy should concern American Jews as much as its pursuit of covenant. I assume that efforts to reach a settlement with the Palestinians will remain a source of concern on both counts—and should constitute added reason for involvement in Israel by American Jews, rather than for disengagement from it.

For reasons that should by now be apparent, I do not expect the two communities as a whole to turn toward one another in the next 50 years of Israel's existence. Most American Jews will continue to rely on myth,

while keeping the reality of Israel at a safe distance. The Israeli government will often assist them by its actions, as will proponents of one or another form of Judaism not shaped by the very different conditions of America and so not receptive to the reigning American pluralism. What is written about Israel and Zionism, here or there, will have a lot less effect on how American Jews perceive and relate to Israel than the facts of what Israelis make of their country in coming years. Efforts toward peace, just treatment of Israel's minorities, and acceptance of differing forms of Judaism will yield positive outcomes.

That is not to say, however, that organized Jewry could not do more to bridge the gap between the two Jewish populations. On the contrary, it could with not much effort expand the set of joint projects already under way, for which I would henceforth reserve the term "Zionism." *Aliyah*, and the knowledge of Israel that is the prerequisite to *aliyah*, will of course remain a part of this continuing Zionism, though emigration to Israel from the Western Diaspora will probably remain at low levels. The emphasis, however, will likely fall on projects through which thousands of American Jews can get to know Israel and Israelis more intimately, and vice versa. Money has already begun to flow through investments and hands-on involvement rather than merely via philanthropy. Information and ideas are flowing not only through books but through television and the Internet.

Visits to Israel, and not only by young people, are more and more devoted to meeting ordinary Israelis and getting to know Israeli society in all its complexity, rather than taking the form of "missions" focused on meetings with government officials and confronting only the Israel packaged so as to maximize excitement and donations. Hebrew literacy, currently possessed by very few American Jews, would certainly increase access to Israeli reality as well as to the classical sources of Jewish tradition. Most important of all, perhaps, are projects such as "Partnership 2000," an initiative sponsored by the Jewish Agency, which joins local Jewish communities in the United States with specific cities and towns in Israel and puts the Jews of those communities to work, in partnership, on tasks of education and development both in Israel and in the Diaspora. The program has recently been expanded to include study groups that link American Jews and Israelis in the common exploration of Jewish history and tradition. All of these activities make each of the parallel tracks more vivid to the other and are likely to have an impact on the pursuit of both normalcy and covenant.

Heschel, then, was not wrong: Israel is a place of "great sacred deeds" in which American Jews can join, even if, as a living Jewish state, it is also a place of much profane reality. Nor was Kaplan wrong: Israel has helped to assure a "place for diaspora Judaism" in America, a Diaspora which,

for all its failings, represents an achievement undreamed-of when Israel was born half a century ago. One shudders to think what American Jewish life would be like in the absence of Israel. Grateful for the immensity of what has been and what is, one looks forward to the next 50 years with enormous expectancy—and no small measure of hope.