

Israeli-Diaspora Relations on Israel's 50th Anniversary

Daniel J. Elazar

World Jewry marks the 50th anniversary of Israel's independence at a time when the great tasks that have united the Jewish people for the past hundred years and more are reaching their successful conclusion or transformation into new ones. The existence of those tasks of building first a Jewish national home and then a state, rescuing millions of Jews from their countries of origin where they were seriously endangered, and providing relief to many more, even in their native lands or in their lands of resettlement, together represent an outstanding chapter in the long history of the Jewish people. The pressing necessity of those tasks brought together Jews the world over to unite behind them and to set aside their differences that had developed as a result of modernity and Jewish emancipation. Jews of all stripes not only united to undertake those tasks but built the institutions and mechanisms necessary to do so successfully.

Now that the tasks themselves are being completed, at least in their non-routine forms, the Jewish unity they fostered is becoming unraveled. The new tasks that are emerging in their place are of a very different order, involving what are now termed "quality of life" issues rather than issues of survival. While quality of life issues are becoming the dominant ones throughout Western civilization, for Jews they take on a particular character, revolving around such questions as: Who is a Jew?, How can we be Jewish?, and How do we best foster Jewish civilization? On these issues there are serious divisions within the Jewish world. The greatest of those divisions actually cuts across both Israel and diaspora Jewry. It is between those Jews who wish to preserve their Jewishness and those for whom it is merely incidental one, among many other interests and loyalties.

While that division is the most critical, there are still differences within each of the two sides. It is a different matter to assimilate in the diaspora where individuals may simply fade out of the community and need not make any declarations regarding their status or interest but simply vote with their feet, and in Israel where, as a Jewish state being Jewish comes automatically in one's daily life and to assimilate one must act with others overtly and collectively to try to erase unwanted Jewishness from the state as a whole so that it will not affect those seeking to move in other directions.

Among those who seek to remain Jewish, on the other hand, there are a whole variety of differences with regard to how Jews as individuals or as a group should do so. These divisions can be grouped around two poles, one centered in Israel and the other in the American Jewish community, the largest and most powerful diaspora community by far.

These differences can be described as follows: for Israelis, being Jewish is a primary and comprehensive matter, thus being members of the Jewish nation is both primary for all Jews and involves comprehensive loyalty. The state is considered the principal instrument of the Jewish nation and is designed to express and reflect Jewish nationhood in all of its aspects. Jews living outside of the state also is seen to be Jews by nationality and are expected to place their Jewish national loyalties above all others.

Jewish religion is to be expressed for the nation as a whole matters in an equally comprehensive manner, regardless of the attitudes of individual Jews toward religions. This involves a comprehensive and binding religious tradition whose maintenance is institutionalized in a religiously authoritative establishment. Individual Jews under contemporary conditions are free to find their place within this comprehensive Jewish religion, even if they seek only a small niche, but on certain critical matters were expected to conform to the tradition (e.g. circumcision for their sons, mezuzot on their doors) and indeed, at times required to do so as in the definition of questions of personal status (marriage, divorce). It is not considered acceptable or even desirable to try to change the tradition to suit individual preferences.

Jewish civilization is equally comprehensive and it is the duty of the state and the Jewish people to consciously foster that civilization, not only to recognize its existence by virtue of the fact that the vast majority of people in Israel are Jews. Whatever other cultural interests individual Jews might have, it is expected that they would be addressed through Jewish culture and civilization in some way, even if only through the Hebrew language.

The understandings of American Jewry are radically different. To them, Jews are Jews primarily by virtue of their religion which, because of its character, is expected to engender a certain sense of Jewish peoplehood but one that only occupies a certain amount of space in an individual's national identity which is at least equally if not primarily American. Much more scope exists for Jewish identification through Judaism, but that identification has to be pursued by individuals in an individual manner. There can be no comprehensive Jewish establishment or single accepted way of being Jewish. Rather, Jewish tradition is set before potential adherents like a buffet or smorgasbord from which individuals can pick and choose and build their own combinations or use the ingredients to invent new "traditions." All of this is held together by its momentum; the sheer fact of Jewish activity acts as a centrifugal force to keep all of those partaking from the buffet together in some way.

Insofar as Jewish culture and civilization are concerned, the predominant culture for American Jews is American or an American version of Western culture, with Jewish culture as an American sub-culture occupying a larger or smaller niche in their lives. In all but a very few cases, no more than American Jewish popular culture even exists. During the past fifty years, the other diaspora communities, which began by adhering more closely to the Israeli model, have been influenced by the American model in varying degrees as well as by the environments in which they are located, to move more in that direction. For most of the period, there was really no contest. The Israeli model won hands down, at least in its idea if not in its practice. More recently, it has begun to be

a contest between the two models. This is reflected in the rise in intensity of the "Who is a Jew?" question in both Israel and the diaspora and the question of who has the right to interpret Judaism in either or both.

This, indeed, is the question that has generated the shift. At first, it was only the American diaspora that generated situations in which people were of dubious Jewishness on the basis of the accepted halakhic definition but who still wanted to be recognized as Jews, to affiliate with and even be active in the Jewish community.

In the rest of the world outside of Israel, developing a halakhically equivocal status was almost inevitably a prelude to assimilation in the non-Jewish world and indeed was meant to be by people on both sides of the line. Only in the past thirty years or so has a group grown up in those other diasporas whose halakhic status is equivocal at best but whose personal desires are to be identified as Jews and even participate in the Jewish community. This is a particularly prominent phenomenon in the former Soviet bloc where intermarriage was rampant among Jews who were not aware of what it meant to be Jewish other than in the negative sense as a social and civic disability, but who became conscious and even excited by their Judaism as the regimes in which they lived crumbled. Thus Michael Chlenov, the first and only head of the Vaad of the Jews of the USSR, in the last years of the existence of the Soviet Union, when asked who is a Jew in that empire, gave a three-fold definition; namely, that Jews are either: those identified on their internal passports as Jews; those who have managed not to be so identified but whom everyone knows are Jewish; and those who link their fate with the Jewish people. There is no halakhic element in any part of Chlenov's definition. The mass aliya of Jews from the former Soviet empire to Israel in the past decade has introduced an estimated 100,000 families in which these problems of definition prevail, even in Israel, as we have witnessed in particularly ugly ways when it comes to burying young Israeli soldiers of halakhically dubious ancestry who have been killed in action.

These are very divisive questions indeed and the gap between the answers proposed is great indeed. Not only that but the problematics of the questions are understood very differently in different communities. In the United States, the variety of approaches to Judaism has been concretized through different religious movements, principally Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, but including others that emerge when enough people want them without any necessity to obtain a "by your leave" from any established authority, Jewish or non-Jewish. In the United States it is considered every individual's inherent human right to make his or her own choices in this matter.

In Israel, on the other hand, even those who are seeking a Judaism or Jewish connection that does not follow the comprehensive patterns of traditional or Orthodox Judaism, does not seek or expect to do so by forming some new but equally recognized religious movement outside of the establishment. Rather the person seeks to find an appropriate niche within the established framework and most have difficulty understanding any other approach, seeing it as a matter of hutzpah rather than of right.

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, whole different definitions of Jewishness are being developed, based upon Chlenov's three categories. Traditional issues of Jewish religion and culture are hardly ever recognized, much less understood, as part of ones self-definition. It should be clear that these increasingly fundamental differences in understanding who is Jewish, how one can and should be Jewish, and whether or not one is connected to Jewish culture and civilization, coupled on the other side with a growing indifference to being Jewish among large segments of world Jewry, is forcing Israel-diaspora relations to be reconstituted on a basis very new and probably very different from that of the days of a shared understanding of the problems of relief, rescue, and reconstruction.

It is now incumbent upon those committed to Jewish continuity to find the ways and means to do so. One thing seems certain, that our present institutions, a structure developed functionally to respond to the problems of the past one hundred years, will have to undergo serious redesign and adaptation to the new situation.