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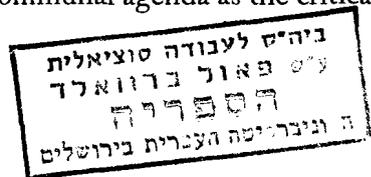
Israel-Diaspora
Relations

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The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over; combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.

The widespread assumption in both Israel and the Diaspora is that the September 13 "day of the handshake" has changed everything. In the months that have passed, there have been numerous attempts to redefine the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. The Reform movement's Al Vorspan calls for renewed emphasis upon the universalist agenda of Reform Judaism, now that the political security and military defense of Israel appear to be less pressing. On the Orthodox side, Irving Greenberg advocates redefining Israel as a learning center for Diaspora Jewry. And within Israel, Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin urges that American Jews redirect their fund-raising away from assistance to Israel—which, he underscores, is a prosperous country undertaking a peace initiative out of strength rather than weakness—and use the money instead for the perpetuation of American Jewish identity. Indeed, Prime Minister Rabin, at the most recent General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, exhorted North American Jewry to couple Jewish education with Israel experiences as the focal point of a Jewish continuity agenda undertaken jointly by Israel and the Diaspora.

What all these attempts at redefinition have in common is the assumption of a decreased need for political involvement on the part of American Jews, and the acceptance of an enhanced position for Jewish continuity on the Jewish communal agenda as the critical



element in Israel-Diaspora relations. To evaluate these efforts by American Jewish and Israeli leaders to reorient the basis of their relationship, it is necessary to look at three major changes taking place in the Jewish world.

One change is demographic. For the past 2,600 years, the majority of world Jewry has lived in the Diaspora. Within the next ten to fifteen years—if present trends are not reversed—Israel will surpass the United States as the world's largest Jewish community, and, at some point within the next generation, Israel will contain within its borders a majority of world Jewry.

This is a historic change in the map of world Jewry, underscoring that Israel is the center of Jewish peoplehood and international Jewish existence. The suggestion of a bicentric model, in which the Israeli and American communities are somehow of equivalent weight—a common assumption in the early 1980s—is undermined by the demographic transformation currently under way. If bicentralism possesses any merit as a model, it relates to questions of intellectual culture rather than demographics.

This does not mean, however, that the Diaspora is about to disappear. American Jewry is undoubtedly experiencing significant losses that will reduce its ranks to around 4 million within a generation. That community of 4 million, however, will still be the largest Diaspora Jewish community known to history. Intermarriage, a symbol as well as a cause of many weaknesses within the American Jewish community, need not necessarily continue its

steady increase. Those Jews most likely to intermarry are doing so now, and some of them will leave the community. But one must not underestimate the degree of Jewish conviction among those who do not intermarry. Many may well make the choice to lead a deeply Jewish life, as symbolized by their choice of a Jewish mate. A possible indication of such a trend may be the finding of the 1991 New York City Jewish population survey that no significant increase in mixed-religion marriage occurred over the past decade. I am not suggesting that intermarriage rates among American Jews have plateaued. What I am suggesting is that the deterministic view of history predicting that intermarriage and assimilation will inexorably increase—a view commonly favored by many Israelis—is not necessarily accurate. Like other understandings of history that are based on the assumption that future human behavior can be extrapolated from present tendencies, this scenario leaves no room for the choices and freedoms that make social trends so difficult to predict.

A SECOND AREA of transformation is political. Israel is now pursuing a peace process with the PLO and with its Arab neighbors. Only a short time ago most American Jews believed such a thing impossible, given the internal nature of the PLO and the radical tendencies of Palestinian politics. Today, while many American Jews may have fears and anxieties about these developments, they are relieved, at least, about one side effect of Israel's forthcoming negotiating posture: It is

much easier than before to make a political case for Israel. This makes the current Israeli government extremely popular with American Jews, who are, therefore, quite likely to follow its lead. The most recent survey of American Jewish opinion about the peace process suggests that as few as 5 percent of American Jews are opposed to its continuation—in striking contrast with the divided nature of Israeli public opinion.

These political changes are significant. Only a short time ago there was concern that American Jewish support for Israeli policies was eroding and that, by extension, the American government's support for those policies would also weaken. The political challenges of the 1990s, significant though they may be, certainly will not have to be addressed in the context of potential erosion of American Jewish political support for Israel.

THE THIRD AREA of change is the cultural transformation in Israel-Diaspora relations. Our language divide continues to grow: fewer and fewer American Jews feel comfortable, much less fluent, in the Hebrew language—a trend that may be detected even among American Jewish day-school graduates. Conversely, Israelis, whether or not they themselves are fluent in English, point to the Hebraic illiteracy of American Jews as a barometer of the cultural divide between us.

We are also growing further apart in our attitudes toward intermarriage. American Jews are increasingly accepting intermarriage, especially as they experience it in their own families. Israelis, in contrast, who rarely

experience intermarriage within their immediate families, view it as a primary symbol of North American Jewry's weakness and ultimate lack of staying power. These different perceptions also influence attitudes toward an outgrowth of intermarriage, the question of patrilineal descent. The American Reform movement decided in 1983 to define as Jews children of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother when both parents commit themselves to raise children within the Jewish faith. That position—which has both defenders and detractors among American Jews—is opposed virtually unanimously by Israelis, who see it as a threat to the unity of the Jewish people.

Another example of the cultural divide concerns religious pluralism. For the great majority of American Jews, plurality of religious expression is an axiomatic aspect of contemporary Jewish identity. Israelis, however, who implicitly recognize Orthodoxy as the legitimate form of Judaism even if they themselves do not practice it, have little interest in religious pluralism for its own sake. At most, they may see recognition of non-Orthodox forms as a human-rights issue, or a step toward a more liberal Israeli society. Indeed, Israeli indifference to the concept of religious pluralism is often cited by American Jews as an important reason for their personal unhappiness and disappointment with Israel.

GIVEN THESE DEMOGRAPHIC, political, and cultural transformations, what is the future of Israel-Diaspora relations?

One possibility is the conclusion that the divide is so great that we should agree to part

company. Although there are few who would go so far as to advocate a renewed Israeli Canaanism—a literary movement of the 1950s that sought to redefine Israel as totally unconnected with Diaspora Jewish history and experience—similar sentiments are occasionally found in the dismissal of the Diaspora's significance by some Israeli leaders, or the expressed conviction of some American Jews that the problems of Jewish identity in the Diaspora require solutions to which Israel is by no means central.

In pronounced contrast to those who suggest a parting of the ways, others still advocate the status quo agenda of Israel-Diaspora relations: political support, fund-raising, and the promotion of *aliya*. Although, as I will show, this set of priorities still retains its old relevance, it fails to reflect the revolutionary changes of the last decade.

There is a third school of thought that is developing a new agenda for Israel and the Diaspora in the hope of refocusing energies upon the new problems of Jewish continuity in the Diaspora. For many Israelis, even talk of such a new agenda is threatening, since it presupposes a continued existence for Diaspora Jewry. This is, the Israelis feel, a violation of classic Zionist doctrine, and a possible encouragement of *yerida*.

What are we to make of this three-way debate?

To begin, I am baffled by the notion that the traditional Israel-Diaspora agenda is obsolete. If nothing else, the inevitable ups and downs of the peace process will require ongoing American Jewish political support for

Israel on questions such as Jerusalem, the settlements, continued economic aid, Palestinian statehood, and refugees. In addition, quite aside from the evolution of the peace process, Israel, over the long term, will have to meet the threats of Islamic fundamentalism and nuclear proliferation—threats that endanger not only Israel but Western culture and civilization as a whole. Events since the famous handshake ought to caution American Jews that the euphoria surrounding that event underestimated the real risks to Israelis brought on by the reduced responsibilities of Israeli security forces in the area. We cannot forget that the only Palestinian state known to history materialized in Lebanon a little over a decade ago. The prospect of a Lebanon-type experience in Gaza or the West Bank should be most sobering to those who look forward to a new era of Arab-Jewish coexistence. It is quite possible that the Israeli government may choose a cautious line on the peace process, and American Jewry will need to step up its political support for Israel—perhaps even in defiance of the American administration.

Similarly, American Jewish fund-raising for Israel is by no means obsolete. The \$300 million raised by American Jews via the United Jewish Appeal stands as a strong statement of American Jewish involvement with, and support for, Israel and a perpetual reminder to the American government that American Jews still strongly back American political and military assistance for the Jewish state. Perhaps we should consider the suggestion made by Professor Avi Ravitzky of the Hebrew University that American Jewish

fund-raising for Israel should be redirected to aiding Jewish education within Israel—to strengthen the Jewishness of Israelis and to enrich educational opportunities for American Jews. Were we, however, to reduce our fund-raising for Israel, we would not only weaken ourselves as a people, but also communicate the wrong message to American society and its political leaders.

We must surely acknowledge that *aliya* is not a realistic option for most American Jews. Yet Israelis need not feel any embarrassment for speaking about it. Indeed, American Jewry may well witness a larger proportion of its most committed members undertaking *aliya* in the years ahead. This is already happening among the children of American Orthodox Jews.

WHILE ALL OF THESE traditional issues remain important, we must also explore the implications of the Israel-Diaspora bond for Jewish continuity. So far, this new agenda has not got beyond the stage of rhetoric. We need to determine exactly what, in practical terms, a joint dedication to enhancing Jewish continuity means for Israeli and Diaspora Jews.

There are at least five Jewish-identity problems which the two communities can work in common to solve:

1. All Jews—Israeli and Diaspora—struggle with the question of what it means to be a Jew in an open society. This is the fundamental dilemma created by the clash of Judaism and modern culture. What relationship do we—Israeli and Diaspora Jews—have to Jewish tradition in a world that speaks of personal

autonomy, freedom of choice, and cultural diversity? Does Jewish tradition speak to us in sufficiently powerful terms that the choices we make will be Jewish choices? For Israelis, the question is national identity—how does Judaism remain salient in a Jewish state. For Diaspora Jews, the problem is personal and communal—what defines us as contemporary Jews.

2. We must begin to define Jewishness within a context of Jewish power and influence rather than Jewish weakness. Despite the existence of a Jewish state and prosperous Diaspora communities, we still prefer to see ourselves as victims endangered by external threats. Our challenge is to assert a Jewishness that is not rooted in the perception of terrible things happening to Jews, but rather in a vision of Jewish life sufficiently inspiring and compelling that we should want to lead it with passion and verve.

3. What is the role of religious practice and belief in our continuity? Diaspora Jews have understood for a long time that Jewish religion is crucial in providing a Jewish identity that lasts over generations. We used to think that Israelis don't need religion because they have a Jewish state. Yet the report issued recently by the Guttman Institute in Israel suggests that Israelis are far more traditionalist than commonly believed. Both Israeli and Diaspora Jews, then, face the task of maintaining and enhancing the religious content of Jewish identity.

4. All Jews share in common a sense of international Jewish peoplehood: what happens to Jews in one corner of the world will

affect Jews everywhere. Diaspora Jews tend to feel this especially when they come in contact with other communities, as recently occurred when the American Jewish Committee hosted an international conference of young Jewish leaders. Over the course of the three-day conference, the common theme was the sense of Jewish bonding across boundaries. More generally, we share a common challenge of assisting endangered Jewish communities.

5. All Jews share in common an interest in defining the Jewish qualities of a Jewish state. Most Israeli and Diaspora Jews would agree that a Jewish state must be liberal and democratic, but that it must also assert a special role for Judaism and the Jewish people. Attempting to define the precise parameters of that privileged role while at the same time preserving liberal democratic values is a challenge we all face.

DESPITE ALL THESE points of commonality, there remain significant obstacles to developing a new joint agenda based on Jewish continuity. Many Israelis simply do not perceive continuity as their issue—in their eyes, it is a problem for Diaspora Jewry only. The only relevance they see for Israel is the ominous fact that less Jewish identification in the Diaspora means less Jewish support for Israel.

Also, too much confidence is being placed in the Israel experience as the centerpiece of the Jewish continuity agenda. Indeed, I suspect that we tend to focus upon Israel precisely because the other burning issues on the Jewish continuity agenda are too divisive

for American Jewry to confront—the ravages of intermarriage and religious polarization. We have to recognize that Israel can never serve as a quick fix for Diaspora Jewish continuity. The focus on Israel as a panacea may delude us into thinking that we have solved the problem of Jewish continuity.

Furthermore, in the process of developing a common agenda of Jewish continuity in Israel-Diaspora relations, we must come to grips with the question of whether American Jewry will in fact sustain the same degree of passion for an agenda built around continuity that it has heretofore had for an agenda built on politics. While it is true that the National Jewish Population Survey raised the consciousness of American Jews as to their real dangers, it is hard to know whether that concern can be transferred from the realm of rhetoric to the world of action—let alone action sustained over many years.

We must also acknowledge that Israeli and Diaspora Jews face very different challenges in securing Jewish continuity. Diaspora Jews will have to work hard to secure Jewish continuity for their grandchildren. Such continuity comes only at a price—the price we pay for the commitment entailed in leading a Jewish life. Discussions of Diaspora continuity are often so frustrating precisely because of our unwillingness to consider the price we are prepared to pay. In Israel, however, a Jewish society, the sacrifice necessary to lead a Jewish life is considerably less.

Despite these obstacles, we must continue the work. Clearly, a parting of the ways between Israel and the Diaspora is not accept-

able, but unless we pursue a joint agenda we risk just such a cleavage. The forces that seek to dissolve the ties between Israel and the Diaspora are quite strong. They must be combated.

Israeli president Ezer Weizman expressed the need eloquently when laying the groundwork for his recent international conference on Israel-Diaspora relations. In a letter to AJC executive director David Harris, President Weizman wrote: "I share your view that Israel and the American Jewish community, the two largest Jewish communities, as well as other communities in the world, are inextricably linked and must remain so, for the well-being of Jews in Israel and throughout the world and for the fulfillment of the Zionist ideal. . . . We must make every effort to strengthen the oneness and togetherness of the Jewish people."

