

Empathy and Dignity

What Israel and Diaspora Owe Each Other

David Ben-Gurion wrongly believed that American Jews, while an asset for Israel, were incapable of truly meaningful Jewish life. Today, Israelis should show more respect for the Diaspora – and vice versa

In August 1950, the president of the American Jewish Committee, Jacob Blaustein, traveled to Israel on what he regarded as an urgent mission of clarification. Israel's UN ambassador, Abba Eban, had called for the mass aliyah of young American Jews, and Blaustein feared that American Jewry would be vulnerable to accusations of dual loyalty. Unless Israel changed its attitude toward American Jewry, Blaustein wrote to AJC members, it risked forfeiting "not only the continuance of American [Jewish] philanthropic and economic assistance, but also the general good will of American Jewry."

{ By **YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI**

For Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, maintaining good relations with the non-Zionist but pro-Israel AJC was crucial to Israel's relationship with American Jewry. And so, uncharacteristically, he conceded a key ideological principle. At a luncheon given in Blaustein's honor, Ben-Gurion implicitly endorsed the AJC's position that American Jewry was not living in exile. American Jews, he declared, "owe no political allegiance to Israel ... the State of Israel represents and speaks only on behalf of its own citizens ... We, the people of Israel, have no desire and no intention to interfere in any way with the internal affairs of Jewish communities abroad." As for aliyah, Ben-Gurion noted that Israel needed the expertise of American Jews and hoped that at least some would come – "permanently or temporarily." Hardly a ringing call for the ingathering of the exiles from New York and Boston.

The Ben-Gurion-Blaustein "exchange," as it came to be known, was a key moment in defining the relationship between Israel and American Jewry. However reluctantly, Israel accepted the distinction between exile and Diaspora: that a Jewish community enjoying conditions of equality and acceptance could not be defined as exilic. Today, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, most Diaspora Jews no longer live in exile – the condition of enforced separation from the land of Israel. In the 21st century, the Ben-Gurion-Blaustein exchange remains relevant not only to American Jewry, but to Jewish communities around the world, as they seek to define their relationship with Israel.

Beyond Utilitarianism

Ben-Gurion's concession to Blaustein reflected the anxieties and limitations of its time. It failed to adequately address the need for Israel to respect not just the American identity of American Jews, but their distinctive Jewish identity. The exchange deals with the formal

limits of the Israel-Diaspora relationship, not its creative potential. And it was motivated, on Israel's side, by pragmatic considerations – the need to ensure continued American Jewish support for the struggling state – rather than by the need to meaningfully engage American Jews as partners in the Jewish future.

In Ben-Gurion's paradigm, which for decades defined Israeli attitudes, Diaspora communities were relegated to the role of appendage, whose vibrancy was measured by the extent of their support for Israel's needs, rather than by their own intrinsic spiritual and cultural vitality, one of whose natural expressions would be support for Israel. This model, though never adequate, was at least understandable for the generation of the Holocaust and Jewish national rebirth, and it reflected Israeli self-confidence and Diaspora demoralization.

The long-term result is an increasingly dysfunctional relationship. Aside from periodically confronting crises in Israel, American Jews and Israelis have little in common. They largely view each other's Jewish lives through the stereotypes of another era – an insecure American Jewry devoid of meaningful Jewish life, and an Israeli society divided between Orthodoxy and secularism with little space for modern religious expressions.

Dealing with crises is an essential facet of a shared Jewish identity, especially in a time when Israel again faces existential threats. But that can only be an outgrowth of, not a substitute for, a healthy Israeli-Diaspora relationship. Instead of learning from and nurturing each other's cultural achievements, we rely on crisis to maintain an increasingly fragile connection. The result is a depletion of that connection and, ironically, a growing reluctance among young Diaspora Jews to support Israel even in times of crisis. Israelis and Diaspora Jews urgently require a contemporary version of the Ben-Gurion-Blaustein exchange, to address the growing drift between them and to affirm the values that need to guide their relations.

In the past, Israel has seen its responsibility to world Jews being fulfilled by its very



existence. Israel's achievements empowered Diaspora Jews with pride and invigorated their communal life. The founding of Israel immediately after the Shoah offered a compelling response to apocalypse: military prowess against defenselessness, ingathering against deportation and, for some Jews, the biblical God of battle against the hidden God

of Auschwitz. The Six-Day War inspired the rebirth of Jewish identity in the Soviet Union and the enhancement of Jewish political clout in the United States. To a large extent, the reinvigoration of the Diaspora is a direct result of Israel's success.

Practically, Israel defined its responsibilities to Jews abroad in terms of rescue and



protection. These remain Israel's ongoing commitment, whether expressed in the rescue and absorption of Ethiopian Jewry, or in the way Israeli ambassadors perceive monitoring local anti-Semitism as a natural part of their diplomatic mission.

Israel's commitment to rescuing endangered Jewish communities was expanded, in the

case of Soviet Jewry, to include a commitment to nurture Jewish identity. Beginning in the 1950s, Israeli emissaries engaged in a clandestine campaign, coordinated from the prime minister's office, to resist the Soviet Union's policy of enforced Jewish assimilation by disseminating Jewish books and ritual items. The immediate goal was to restore a



"The Last Supper"
Photograph by Adi Nes,
1999. Courtesy of the artist.

basic Jewish identity to Soviet Jews; the long-term goal was to stimulate aliyah.

Israeli emissaries in the West have long tried to nurture Zionist sentiment among young Jews. In recent years, those efforts have taken the form of a partnership with Diaspora groups, especially Birthright. Along with strengthening attachment to Israel, Birthright aims to strengthen Diaspora life – a goal that Israel endorses. *Shlilat hagolah*, the negation of Exile, has been replaced with an ethos of what can be called *hizuk ha-tfutsot*, strengthening the Diaspora.

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That shift needs to become ideologically explicit. Strengthening Jewish life abroad should not be seen solely in Zionist utilitarian terms – as a means to enhance support for Israel – but as an inherent necessity for the Jewish people. That means embracing the Diaspora as a Jewish good. The Diaspora doesn't only need to be strengthened for Israel's sake, but for its own. Not only is the Diaspora responsible for helping maintain Israel's well-being; Israel is responsible for helping maintain the well-being of the Diaspora.

Israel owes Diaspora Jews an affirmation of the worthiness of their Jewish lives. As the state founded by Zionism, whose goal was to restore the dignity of the Jewish people, Israel must be mindful of the dignity of Jews worldwide. That includes, for example, affirming the rebirth of Jewish life in Germany and Poland – despite the understandable ambivalence of many Jews after the Shoah toward resurrecting Jewish life there.

It also must include the Israelis who leave the Jewish state and settle abroad. While public attitudes have evolved from the days when émigrés were regarded as at best failures and

at worst virtual traitors, a certain dismissal persists, exemplified by the term “*yored*,” a “descender” from the land. A new relationship between Israel and the Diaspora requires a change in the ideological language of contempt. By contrast, the term “*oleh*,” an “ascender” to the land, remains appropriate. “*Yored*” demeans; “*oleh*” affirms.

Israelis have much to learn from Diaspora creativity. Jewish feminism, trans-denominational community schools, the synthesis of mysticism and ecology created by the Jewish renewal movement – all offer models of the sort of expansiveness often lacking in Israeli Judaism. American Jewry in particular is engaged in the most remarkable experiment in the history of the Diaspora. Jews are helping shape the public space of the most powerful country in the world, which welcomes their ideas and values and political input. American Jewry influences and is in turn influenced by the general culture and politics. No Jewish minority – and perhaps no minority in any society – has ever enjoyed a more influential stage.

Still, celebrating the vitality of Diaspora life doesn't mean accepting the notion, advocated by various Jewish thinkers in Israel and abroad, of the existence of two equal centers – Israel and Diaspora – in Jewish life. Indeed, some now reject the very term “Diaspora” and prefer the phrase “world Jewry,” which implicitly reduces Israel to one Jewish community among many. But even as we reject the term “exile” to define the condition of Jews outside the land, the term “Diaspora” remains valid, upholding the centrality of Israel in Jewish life.

The Land of Israel is central to Jewish thought, prayer, and aspirations. And the State of Israel – where Jewish life and public space are interchangeable and where a majority of the world's Jews may soon live – is the practical expression of that centrality. In fulfilling the dream of return that helped sustain the Jews in exile, the State of Israel has assumed the responsibility of validating Jewish longing. What happens in Israel will help determine

whether Jewish faith and persistence were justified. No other Jewish community carries such risks and opportunities.

But while Israel remains the center of Jewish life, the Diaspora is central to Jewish life. And what is happening in the Diaspora, especially in America, is historically compelling. American Jews can test the power of Judaism in a competitive market of identities and create Jewish alternatives free of coercive fears for survival. At the same time, the persistence of those fears in Israeli life remains an ongoing challenge to the success of the Zionist vision.

Israeli Policies and Diaspora Identity

The concerns that led to the Ben-Gurion-Blaustein exchange – especially the fear of the accusation of dual loyalty – have been replaced by new Diaspora anxieties regarding Israel. Growing numbers of Diaspora Jews feel their Jewish identity being compromised by Israeli policies.

A Jewish state intent on nurturing Jewish peoplehood must consider the consequences of its policies in the Diaspora. That is not to say that Israel should sacrifice essential security needs to assuage the uneasy conscience of Diaspora critics. But Israel's impact on the Diaspora needs to be part of government deliberations and of the public debate over government policies. Assessments of the consequences, say, of expanding settlements need to include the impact not only on the American government but on American Jews.

Israel's powerful influence – sometimes positive, sometimes negative – on the willingness of Jews in an open society to identify with the Jewish people provides a new dimension to the traditional concepts of *kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of God's name) and *hillul Hashem* (desecration of God's name). When Israeli actions strengthen Diaspora pride, that is an expression of *kiddush Hashem*; when

Israeli actions undermine Diaspora pride, that is an expression of *hillul Hashem*.

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An Israeli government committed to empowering the Diaspora would embrace liberal forms of Judaism that are strengthening Jewish identity among those Jews who are most integrated into the general culture. When official Israel excludes and demeans non-Orthodox forms of Judaism, it weakens the Jewish people – surely undermining Diaspora attachment to Israel and ultimately to Jewish identity.

The Diaspora owes Israel what Israel owes the Diaspora: unconditional commitment to its survival and well-being. Diaspora Jews are partners in the ongoing creation of a Jewish state. Like Israelis, they disagree about what defines Israel's well-being. And so commitment to Israel cannot mean uncritical support. Critiquing the wisdom and ethics of Israel's policies isn't just the right of Diaspora Jews but their responsibility.

A Distance that Divides

For Israelis, on the frontline of a seemingly endless war, the danger exists of a kind of moral exhaustion. The distance of Diaspora can provide a clear-eyed look at Israel's dilemmas, which is much needed. But distance can also distort: Diaspora critics who fear for Israel's soul need to show no less concern for Israel's body. One example: when the 2009 Gaza War began, the American Jewish group J Street immediately condemned Israel's invasion. By contrast, the left-wing Israeli party, Meretz, which is ideologically close to J Street, supported the invasion, at least initially. Meretz was



Illustration for Havruta
by Moran Barak.

mindful of Israel's responsibility to protect its civilians from terror attack and of Israel's relative restraint in the face of eight years of rocket attacks from Gaza. In its instinctive criticism of Israel's right to self-defense, J Street placed itself outside the Israeli mainstream not just politically but emotionally.

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To be taken seriously as partners in Israel's debates, Diaspora Jews need to appreciate the agonizing complexity and uniqueness of Israel's dilemmas. Israel is not an ordinary conqueror: it fears that territorial withdrawal won't merely diminish but destroy it. Israel is also the only country that is expected to exchange tangible assets for recognition of its right to exist and the mere promise of peace. And the IDF faces terrorist enemies who fire against Israel's civilian population from within their own civilian populations.

Finally, Diaspora Jews need to accept that the final decisions on matters of war and peace belong to Israelis. That places limits on the ability of Diaspora Jews to influence the outcome of Israel's debates. Any attempt by Diaspora Jews to apply external pressure on the democratically elected government of Israel – say, by lobbying Congress to withhold funds or joining in international efforts to isolate the Jewish state – will rightly be regarded by Israelis as a violation of trust. In that case, Diaspora critics would remove themselves from the privileged position of participants in a family debate, whose concerns require special consideration by Israel.

When criticism becomes the predominant expression of a Diaspora Jew's connection to Israel, that is merely a variation of the distorted, crisis-driven relationship.

Genuine engagement requires exposure to contemporary Hebrew culture. Diaspora

Judaism is enriched by encountering the self-confidence of a sovereign Jewish public space in which Jewish identity is the starting point and Jewish creativity an inevitable result. One example is the Jewish spiritual music being created by Israel's leading musicians – a phenomenon so natural that it merges with the general Israeli rock culture.

Were a similar phenomenon to occur in the Diaspora, Jews there would be hailing a cultural renaissance; in Israel it is taken for granted.

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Finally, Judaism insists on being applied to daily life, and Israel offers the opportunity to test Jewish values and aspirations under the most intense conditions. With its often excruciating dilemmas – between security and morality, competing national claims, a secular state and a holy land – Israel is a testing ground worthy of an ancient people and a practical faith.

For all the inevitable tensions between Israel and the Diaspora, the opportunities for Jewish renewal that both options offer are unprecedented. Each in its way is a laboratory for Jewish responses to modernity. Previous generations of Jews could hardly have imagined a Diaspora community as successful as American Jewry or a sovereign Jewish state as successful as Israel – let alone both emerging more or less simultaneously. Realizing the potential of Israel and the Diaspora depends in large measure on the quality of their relationship.

David Ben-Gurion and Jacob Blaustein took that relationship as far as either man was able within his ideological constraints. Israeli and Diaspora Jews today can surely take the next step toward creating a mature and mutually affirming conversation.



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