

# Israel and World Jewry

## The Need for a New Paradigm

***For two millennia, Jewish life was framed by a narrative of exile and redemption. In the 21st century, Diaspora is not exile and Israel is not redemption. A new model of common vision can strengthen them both***

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**T**he relationship between Israel and world Jewry is at a new and critical juncture. From the moment of the founding of the state and through its zenith in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, support for Israel was a unifying force in world Jewry. For many Jews, liberal Jews not least, a relationship with Israel was often the defining feature of Jewish identity. Over the last number of years, however, we are encountering growing numbers of Jews who are questioning the place and significance of Israel in their Jewish lives.

{ By **DONNIEL HARTMAN**

According to some, this development is primarily the result of a public relations failure, wherein Israel has not educated the Jewish people as to the legitimacy of its cause. One of the by-products of the delegitimization campaign against Israel is the damage it inflicts on Jews worldwide, some of whom are won over to an anti-Israel position, while others, weary of having to defend Israel to their friends or on their campuses, become alienated or indifferent. Israel advocates frequently argue that if people would simply know the facts and were able to understand the case for Israel, then the trend could be reversed, and the alienation would be transformed into identification.

## The Jewish community around the world could derive much benefit from an Israel education.

Others contend that the source of the problem is Israel's policies, in particular on issues of war, occupation, democracy, and religious pluralism. According to this view, Israel has become an embarrassment to many liberal Jews who have come to feel that they must choose between their liberal Jewish and democratic values and loyalty to Israel. It is argued that if Israel would change its policies on these issues, and position itself more in line with the ideology of the majority of Jews worldwide, then the foundation would be in place to rebuild the relationship anew.

There is much truth in both claims. The Jewish community around the world could derive much benefit from an Israel education, and Israel must indeed rethink some of its policies. Nevertheless, I believe that the root of the current alienation lies in the fact that the relationship is based on a foundation that is no longer sufficiently compelling and that we have failed to offer a new one alongside it that can inspire contemporary Jewry. For many centuries, Judaism has learned to adapt

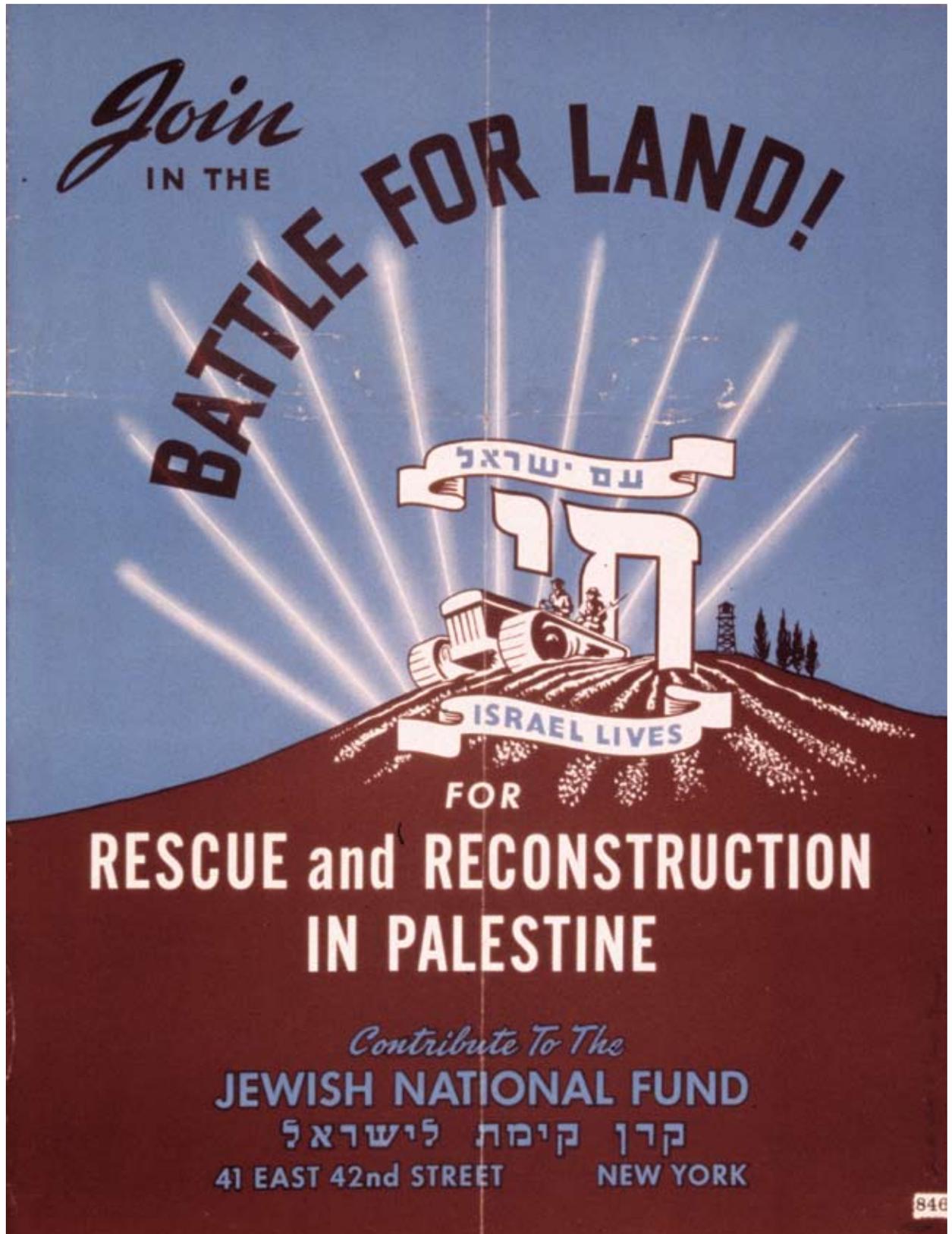
continuously, and develop new ideas to meet the sensibilities of changing times. However, that innovative spirit, which has become second nature to Judaism, has been absent when it comes to thinking about the State of Israel and its place in modern Jewish life.

## Beyond the Crisis Narrative

After the founding of the State, the foundation for the relationship between world Jewry and Israel was in large measure a narrative of crisis, based on the precariousness of Jewish survival. For a great many Jews, it was the struggle of the brave young State of Israel, its ongoing battle for survival, and the safety for its citizens that inspired attention and support. It was this spirit of urgency that galvanized world Jewry to declare: "*Hinneni*," "I am here."

Conversely, in a post-Holocaust world, Jews outside of Israel did not feel confident. They often viewed their very existence as tenuous, and felt the need to protect themselves if and when the next catastrophe occurred. One of the lessons learned from the Holocaust was the danger of being a people without a home, a place that would have to take you in if you were in need. The role of Israel was to serve as that home, the sanctuary of last resort for any Jew in danger. Here, Jews had an army and could protect themselves. Following the absorption of Holocaust survivors from Europe, the immigration to Israel of millions of Jews from Arab countries, the former Soviet Union, and Ethiopia served as powerful examples and reminders of Israel's vital significance. In the narrative of crisis, support for Israel was a self-evident response by Jews worldwide – an investment in the preservation and future of the Jewish people.

Today, we face a challenge: the crisis model may still have its place, but it is not as compelling or comprehensive as it used to be and does not adequately reflect the new realities of Jewish life. The ongoing successes of



Israel and world Jewry, and the arrival of new generations for whom the Holocaust is not a defining existential experience, put significant pressure on the crisis-centered narrative. Most Jews – especially those in North America – do not see themselves as being in imminent danger, and a narrative of support for Israel that is based on such anxiety is antiquated and at best secondary.

For many Jews, even those well aware of the physical dangers that Israel still faces on a daily basis, the military power and economic prowess of the Jewish state serve to complicate the traditional narrative of crisis-driven support. And when Israel seems relatively secure, controversies that are eclipsed in times of great crisis return to center stage among world Jewry. When the old narrative recedes, Israel's policies on issues of war, settlements, religious pluralism, and the treatment of liberal Jews and non-Jewish minorities receive more attention and criticism. When Israel is successful, the call to rally around the flag is inadequate to stifle or contain sentiments of discomfort.

The Jewish community has been living exclusively off the crisis narrative for too long. It has failed to develop an additional language and justification for the significance and meaning of Israel for the new, complex, and nuanced Jewish consciousness. Why have we Jews, famed for our intelligence, failed to redefine the nature of the relationship in new terms that are commensurate with the contemporary reality?

It is my contention that the perseverance of the crisis narrative is not grounded primarily in its unique ability to provide an insight into Jewish reality or in its capacity to galvanize attention and support. Rather, we are imprisoned within this narrative because it is grounded on a two-thousand-year-old paradigm of Jewish existence, which, over the years, has come to unconsciously define Jewish self-understanding. This paradigm must be understood if we are to free ourselves from its exclusive hold on us. Changing an

ancient paradigm is not a simple endeavor and requires a concentrated educational, cultural, and institutional effort that has heretofore been lacking in the Jewish community both in Israel and around the world.

## Next Year in Jerusalem

For many centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish national life was divided into two distinct modalities: *galut* and *geulah*, exile and redemption. Exile depicted the current, actual mode of Jewish existence, while redemption meant aspirations for the future. Exile referred to life outside of Israel, in the “Diaspora,” while redemption was located in the Land of Israel, and would be manifested, among other ways, by *kibbutz galuyot*, the ingathering of the exiles. Exile begins when redemption comes to an end, and redemption signifies the end of the exile. The two do not coexist.

*Galut* and *geulah* were also typified by their own distinct characteristics. *Galut* was a mode of existence in which the Jews were the outsiders, sojourners in societies that at best allowed them a measure of peace. Before emancipation, Jews in *galut* were neither citizens nor equals, and even afterward, they continued to be social, religious and cultural outsiders. We were strangers in cultures not ours, spectators in other people's national life. This status was fraught with danger and persecution, which came to define diaspora Jewish life. As a result, Jews prayed and yearned that *galut* be temporary, to be replaced by *geulah*, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

*Geulah*, on the other hand, was aspirational in its very essence. Its primary characteristic was to depict a period when there would be no gap between reality and our dreams. Whatever we yearned for would be fulfilled. To achieve this, *geulah* signified the return of God to history, and the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel – a reconstituted Garden of Eden, where nothing would be lacking.



Jewish National Fund poster, pre-State period. Collection of Yeshiva University Museum, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig Jesselson.

For close to two thousand years, Jews viewed reality through one of these two categories. They were the only possible modalities for life. For Jews living in countries around the world, existence was self-perceived as one of “Diaspora,” in contrast to a future messianic era when our collective life would be relocated to the Land of Israel. With the rebirth of the modern State of Israel, and its absorption of a significant portion of the Jewish people, the language of redemption began to shift from the future to the present. Even if the redemption was not yet complete, then at the very least we were at the first stage of redemption, *at’halta de’geulah*. Religious Jews (except the ultra-Orthodox) and secular Jews, each within their own interpretive orientation, viewed the rebirth of Israel as ushering in the end of exile and the heralding of the era of an ideal Jewish life.

## Changing an ancient paradigm is not a simple endeavor.

After the formation of the state, the two categories of *galut* and *geulah* continued to deeply influence the way the Diaspora and Israeli Jewish communities viewed themselves and each other. From the perspective of Israelis, the modern Diaspora remained the quintessence of *galut*, inferior to their own experience of *geulah*. In Zionist thought, this was formally known as *shelilat hagolah*, a principled denial of the value of Diaspora Jewish life; over the years, it was gradually replaced by an indifference, less ideological in nature, to the essence and variety of Jewish life abroad. For Israelis, Jews outside of Israel entered their consciousness either as Jews in danger, in need of Israel’s help, or as potential immigrants, or else as financial and political assets to the state. They were not viewed as equals, or as a viable and respectable alternative community. When respect was given, it was given begrudgingly, primary as a result of Diaspora Jews’ financial success, an enviable prosperity from which Israelis

wanted to benefit, even as they belittled it as self-indulgent. In Hebrew, the rest of the world is referred to as “outside the Land,” *hutz la’aretz*. All existence is seen through the prism of and in relation to the center – the Land and State of Israel.

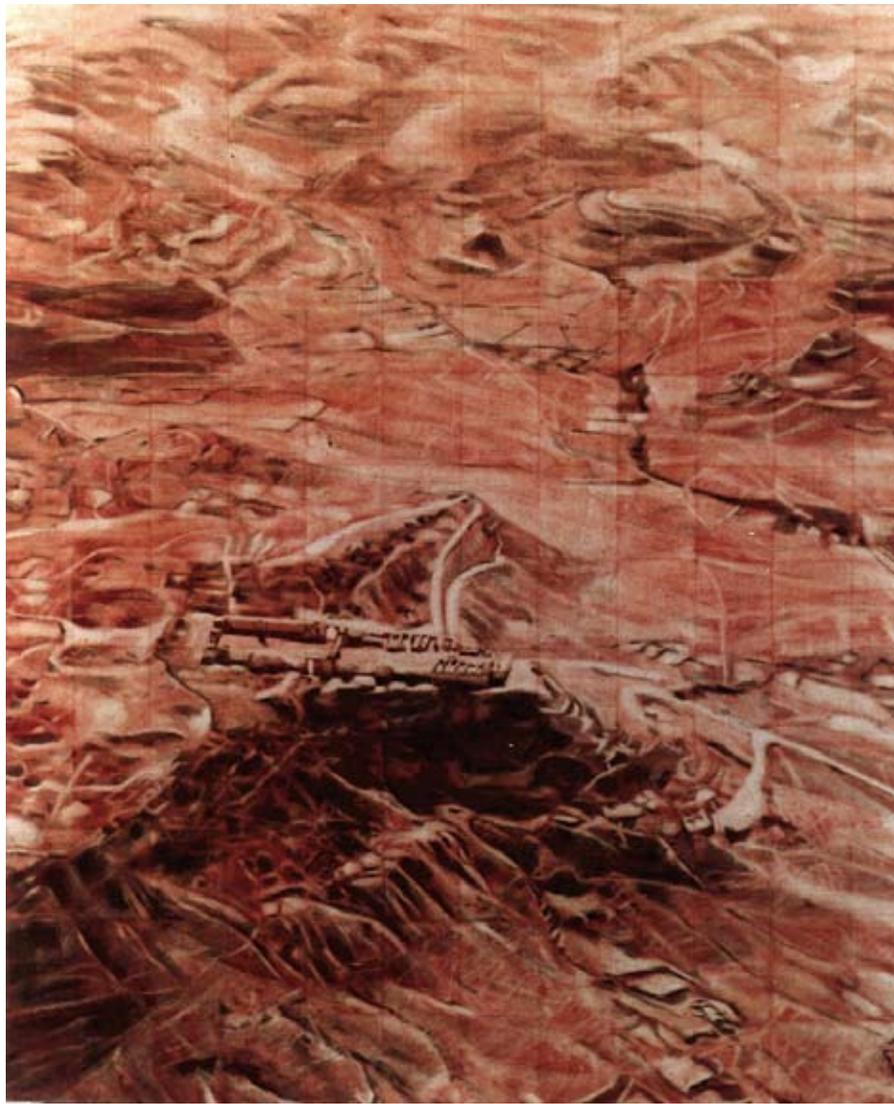
At the same time, many Jews around the world remained imprisoned within the categories of exile and redemption. Diaspora as *galut* was an appropriate perspective in a post-Holocaust world, and the crisis narrative framed the relationship to Israel. If diaspora is *galut*, fraught with potential or imminent danger, then Israel is its *geulah*, a haven where all Jews could go in times of need. As such, Israel was worthy of one’s support, both for its role in saving Jews at risk in the present and as one’s own insurance policy for the future.

Conversely, Israel as redemption, or the beginning of the redemption, was viewed as the place where everything was, or had to be, perfect. As befitting *geulah*, it had to be the place where the gap between reality and dreams was minimal. Through the prism of this category, many saw or chose to focus on Israel primarily as a miraculous phenomenon. The narrative of Israel concentrated on the story of Israel as David in the midst of multiple Goliaths, a courageous underdog who somehow found a way to survive and prevail. This extraordinary little country, against the odds, overcame impossible security dangers, accomplished the ingathering and settlement of millions of Jews from disparate backgrounds, forged a modern democratic society, built a thriving, robust, and just economy, and developed world-class intellectual, cultural, medical, and technological institutions. While Israel was not perfect, within this narrative it was still achieving the impossible. For Diaspora Jews, one’s role was to facilitate in any way possible the unfolding of this modern wonder, and in so doing, to become a partner in the actualizing of the miracle. The opportunity for such an involvement was the foundation of the care and loyalty.

**For some, an Israel that struggled with moral and political realities and complexities, and that was not a perennial paragon of moral virtue, democracy, and religious pluralism, was a disappointment, a burden they did not need.**

Over the last few decades – in particular after the first war in Lebanon in 1982 and the first and second intifadas of the 90’s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century – we are witnessing an interesting but troubling backlash to this approach. Because Jews were still confined to the two modalities, many Jews around the world were still using the prism of redemption through which to view the State of Israel. Now, however, instead of seeing the miracles of Israel, they became increasingly aware of its difficulties and failures, or at least the failure of Israel to achieve redemption, to create a society that bridged the gap between reality and aspiration. The Israel they wanted was the Israel of *geulah*, and if it could not fulfill this expectation, it had no special significance or claim on their loyalty. For some, this gave rise to feelings of deep alienation. An Israel that struggled with moral and political realities and complexities, and that was not a perennial paragon of moral virtue, democracy, and religious pluralism, was a disappointment, a burden they did not need.

For others, especially in the leadership and mainstream of Jewish institutional life, this perception of Israel’s shortcomings, instead of engendering disaffection, led to a shuffling of paradigms in which Israel, having forfeited the aura of pure *geulah*, began to be recast as a new form of *galut*. As such, it would still lay claim to Jews’ care, loyalty, and support. As



a special case of *galut*, Israel was viewed and portrayed as the largest Jewish community at risk, the place where the greatest number of Jews were in danger. In Israel, Jewish citizens may be the vast majority, but the Jews are nevertheless outsiders in the region, a small minority in a sea of Arab countries, which, in varying degrees, deny Israel’s right to exist and wish to see it destroyed. When Israel is thus perceived as *galut*, its military and political dangers and challenges, rather than its previous victories and economic achievements, dominate the discourse. For a Jew who lives outside of Israel, the focus is on Israel’s physical security as a Jewish state, and less on the character, values and meaning of that Jewish state. By expending their political capital and economic resources, Jews answer the call of collective responsibility to help Israel win its never-ending battle for survival. What kind of Israel will survive? This is the larger question.



“Avdat”, painting of Nabatean ruins in Negev desert. Oil on linen by Gilad Efrat, 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

## Shifting the Paradigm

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the relationship between Israel and world Jewry is stuck in the paradigm of *galut* and *geulah*, which can no longer function as an accurate representation of contemporary Jewish life. The Jewish community is facing a new reality, for which it does not have a language. As a result, it finds itself conceptually handicapped, unable to comprehend, let alone act upon, the real challenges facing all Jews.

What would a paradigm shift entail? First, it would require the understanding that it is no longer correct to refer to world Jewry as “Diaspora” in the sense of *galut*, an exilic dispersion, which they hope and pray will soon come to an end. Today, in many countries, and especially in North America, millions of Jews have found a true home, and view their existence as neither temporary nor in need of transformation and redemption. These Jews no longer see themselves, nor are they seen by others, as outsiders, but rather as significant players, politically, economically, and culturally. Increasingly, Jews around the world are identifying themselves as a part of the Jewish people, but not necessarily as members of the Jewish nation whose homeland is Israel. When a relationship with Israel is premised on world Jewry being in *galut*, it is crowning Israel as the “redeemer” of people who have no interest in such redemption. When Israelis classify world Jewry as living in *hutz la’aretz*, it shows that they have not internalized the transformation that has occurred. They cannot yet see world Jewry as an equal – and this undermines the possibility of a future relationship between the two communities.

At the same time, American Jews and others need to realize that Israel is neither *galut* nor *geulah*, but a small country with complicated problems. Over-idealization is often the profoundest form of neglect, and to view the Jewish state through the lens of *geulah* is to fail to engage the living reality of Israel. In addition, despite its challenges and shortcomings, Israel in 2011 is simply

too powerful and successful to be perceived as another *galut*. It cannot be a “start-up nation” and the strongest power in the Middle East and *galut* simultaneously. Today, the looming menace of Iran notwithstanding, the image and “branding” of an Israel in crisis fits neither the day-to-day reality nor the self-perception of Israelis. If Israel needs to be in constant crisis in order to maintain its place at the center of Jewish life, then its hold on that place will be precarious and short-lived.

## Today, the “branding” of an Israel in crisis fits neither the day-to-day reality nor the self-perception of Israelis.

We are living in a reality unprecedented in Jewish history, with two vital and powerful Jewish communities living side by side – one in Israel, and the other dispersed around the world, with its center in North America. A Jewish life built in isolation from either one will be impoverished. In Israel, a new Judaism is unfolding within the context of Jewish majority and sovereignty, in a land where Jewish values are being challenged to define the nature of a Jewish public space. Around the world, and in particular in North America, pluralistic Judaism is being cultivated by an established and successful minority group in the midst of a new and open dialogue with the larger world.

We each have much to contribute to and learn from each other. When we recognize this, we can construct our relationship around the future we can build, not only around existential crises. The world is still a dangerous place for Israel and for too many Jews elsewhere. Still, the purpose of our collective life is not limited to our efforts to overcome these dangers. We also strive for the opportunity to fulfill our purpose as a people – to live a life of value, meaning, and service. To do so, we need to cease to lean

exclusively on the narrative of crisis and add to our vocabulary a narrative of values, whereby we work together as partners, Israel and world Jewry, to determine the moral principles that must govern our national and collective lives and bring about their implementation. This is the meaning and purpose of our collective life. This work, together, must be the essence of the new paradigm for the relationship between Israel and world Jewry.

## Redefining Loyalty

The shift of paradigms is not easy. It requires pulling away from the crisis narrative and relinquishing the dichotomized worldview of *galut* versus *geulah*. It means abandoning old behavior patterns and constructing a new set of rules by which to govern the relationship between Israel and world Jewry.

The first rule is that in this relationship, no one can claim seniority. In a crisis narrative, one side always has a greater voice, either because it is the one doing the saving, or because its life is on the line. In a relationship built on shared values, we must learn to see each other as equals, as partners with much to contribute to one another. We must be willing to share our realities and open up our space to the other's voice, opinions, and even criticisms, as each partner brings its best assets and unique qualities to the table, and each complements the other.

Second, we will need to redefine our notion of loyalty. In a crisis narrative, loyalty means standing together against the enemy and advocating steadfastly for one's side. Criticism, in this context, is an act of treason. In a values narrative, where we work together to fulfill our mission as a people and a nation, loyalty may also express itself in disagreement and in healthy criticism that helps the other partner fulfill its potential. Far from being an act of betrayal, criticism aimed at helping the other is the ultimate act of love and respect.

Third, in a crisis narrative, differences are set aside for the sake of the ultimate concern, namely, survival. But in a values narrative,

differences about values, and the ways to implement them, is a permanent feature. No single worldview or political position can be allowed to define the values and aspirations that shape the relationship, or define what it means to be a lover of Israel. The same pluralism that has become self-evident when it comes to the practice of Judaism must also apply to Israel and its policies. Only under these conditions will we be creating a wide enough tent under which all Jews can enter into the relationship.

## In a values narrative, we must see each other for what we can become.

Finally, in a crisis narrative, we must see each other as we are, in order to meet the real dangers that we face. In a values narrative, we must see each other for what we can become. The conversation is not about embracing and accepting what is, but rather about building a common vision of what ought to be. In a relationship built on shared values, we will invariably face disappointments, as we confront realities that are not commensurate with our aspirations. These disappointments, however, cannot be allowed to lead to disillusionment and disengagement. Indeed, it is at moments of failure that true commitment is expressed, as one partner reminds the other of who they can be, resolving to work together to fulfill their greatest potential.

There will inevitably be difficulties, as in any relationship. As we face new realities, we will need to be patient as we learn to engage and discover each other anew. While we will always support each other in times of crisis, we must cease to require a crisis to ensure that we be there for one another. Through our shared efforts, we have met many challenges in times of crisis. By bringing our values and aspirations to the relationship, we will move beyond crisis, and build a new foundation for our shared life as one people.



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