

Liberal Jews and the Zionist Project



Rethinking Covenant and Commitment

***Why do many non-Orthodox American Jews have a problem with Israel?
And what can be done to heal the rift? Serious study of Jewish values
offers constructive solutions***



If Israel and North American Jewry are to develop a new relationship, one more focused on shared values and less on existential crises, we must understand not only the necessity of such a shift, but also the foundations and principles that will make it sustainable and meaningful. One of the most important elements of our new self-understanding is the perception that each community has of its own achievements and self-sufficiency. Each community has become more fiercely independent in its Jewish identity and increasingly estranged from the other.

{ By **RACHEL SABATH BEIT-HALACHMI**

The success and vibrancy of Jewish life in the two, arguably equally important, centers in Israel and North America has created a Jewish world that enjoys all the benefits of “bi-centricity.” At the same time, however, the Jewish community is now plagued by constant debate and conflict about the rights and responsibilities of each community with regard to the other. Whereas once we might have described the relationship between Israel and world Jewry as covenantal – a relationship of mutual and binding commitment and responsibility – in which most Diaspora Jews felt an instinctual and even automatic commitment to the Zionist project, today that covenant is in question.

For liberal Jews, Zion is an ideal to be located in any and all spiritual locations in the world.

For a number of reasons, estrangement from Israel has been particularly acute in recent decades among liberal (non-Orthodox) Jews in North America. First of all, there is a seemingly constant conflict between liberal American values and the complex realities and actions of the State of Israel. Moreover, there is a decline in the theological and political orientation of North American liberal Jews towards Israel as the center of the collective Jewish polity or spirit. For liberal Jews, Zion is not necessarily in Israel, but is an ideal to be located in any and all spiritual locations in the world and can even be found metaphorically in the perfection of the individual soul. Indeed, the intensely autonomous and individualistic character of liberal Judaism makes any absolute commitment to the collective project of the State of Israel often even more remote. Given such a reality, the future of the commitment of a great number of North American Jews to the State of Israel is uncertain.

Covenant, Commitment and Liberal Values

To be sure, the liberal Jewish community is split internally. There are those who have embraced the foundations of Zionism, and many have religious commitments to a sovereign Jewish State. These liberal Jews are in step with most of the mainstream Jewish and Zionist organizations in articulating their constant, and generally uncritical, support of Israel in all arenas. But there is another, more complicated, often younger part of the community that is constantly questioning if not resisting those mainstream assumptions and commitments. A growing segment of liberal Jews have no à priori commitment to the State of Israel and are deeply troubled by what they see as the constant failure of the Jewish State to act according to Jewish values, especially with regard to its treatment of Arab minorities and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, as well as the failures of the state to respect the legitimacy of non-Orthodox Judaism.

All previous assumptions of absolute mutual responsibility, unconditional support, and unquestioning loyalty to the State of Israel are being questioned (if not rejected entirely) not only by the younger generation, but also by older, affiliated non-Orthodox Jews. Differing modes of commitment, ambivalence, and protest with regard to Israel are also indicative of the ways in which different segments of the community construe the meaning of *klal yisrael* – the collective body of Israel – and *am yisrael*, the People of Israel, and certainly of what being part of a covenant, a *brit*, should mean between Jews.

For some, including most non-Orthodox Jews, the covenant – whether understood to be a covenant between God and the Jewish people or a covenant that is binding among the Jewish people – necessitates strong support of the State of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people, and, perhaps no less importantly, as a Jewish and democratic state. For others,

it demands a critical stance when necessary, grounded in the age-old obligation to reprove one's fellow Jew. For still others, it can even mean denying a central role for Israel in Jewish life and identity, believing that such centrality does not ultimately serve the Jewish people and its values.

Liberal Jews constitute the largest population of North American Jews and continue to express our commitment to Jewish life and the future of the Jewish people in Israel and around the world. At the same time, we often harbor a deep ambivalence about any aspect of Jewish practice that limits the autonomy of the individual. Recently, the liberal values of human rights, pluralism, and autonomy have been challenged in Israel to such a degree that many liberal Jews are ambivalent about, or reject outright, the notion that any covenant should demand of them an unquestioning commitment to the State of Israel.

Must a rabbinical student declare a pro-Israel position?

Tremendous tensions about Israel can be felt in the newspapers, liturgy, study halls, and homes of liberal Jews. The spectrum of opinion and behavior with regard to Israel has now become extraordinarily wide within the liberal Jewish world. Within the same community, and even within the same family, we may find active Zionists, who are in the process of making aliyah and serving in the IDF, alongside those engaged in severe critique of the policies of Israel, or who even argue against the necessity of its existence. Such liberal Jews may protest a particular set of policies or, through boycotts, put economic, academic, or cultural pressure on those who support those policies. These Jews are often dismissed as anti-Zionist, but in fact many act as they do so precisely as an

expression of covenantal responsibility and the desire to reprove and correct behavior which is, in their view, not worthy of a Jewish state. But for those who believe that loving Israel means agreeing with its policies – or at least not disagreeing with them publicly or too loudly – this mode of relationship is beyond the pale: it is perceived as a breach of loyalty that aids Israel's enemies, cripples Israel in the international community, and ultimately threatens Israel's survival.

Must a rabbinical student declare a pro-Israel position? Must a potential convert commit to supporting the Jewish State? What kind of critical stances toward Israel are acceptable? Which are not? Such questions are not only tearing the fabric of liberal Jewish institutions, but in fact they are indicative of a deeper debate about the contours of covenant for liberal Jews today. The conflicts between these interpretations of covenantal responsibility and behavior have created a deep rupture in Jewish life. This rupture puts all previously held assumptions in question and, for many, challenges the covenant altogether.

Conflicts between interpretations of covenantal responsibility have created a deep rupture in Jewish life.

Given the depth of the debate about what constitutes covenantal commitment, we must urgently redefine a relationship to the State of Israel for liberal Jews that can include a wide array of views. Some communities, however, are afraid of too wide a range, worrying that truthful confrontation between the extreme points of view could lead to the kind of rupture that would ultimately tear the community apart. In general, however, attempts to impose consensus are a futile exercise. By silencing many voices, they only worsen the rupture.

From Debate to Discourse

The challenge, then, is to rehabilitate a shared covenantal commitment to the project of Israel, one that many more liberal Jews would be able to embrace. One promising approach would be to shift the conversation from political debates over policies or actions of the government of Israel to something more productive: learning and living the Jewish values that underlie the issues at hand. We should also, I believe, distinguish between a covenantal commitment to the needs of the Jewish people everywhere, including those in Israel, and support of Israel's current leadership. Such shifts of focus in the discourse and practice of liberal Jews will lead to a healthier and more constructive kind of conversation. They can serve to deepen the covenantal commitment among Jews without demanding that one compromise one's political or ethical values.

The Jewish State only gains the respect and support of Jews around the world when it ensures the protection of Jewish and human values.

This kind of shift is still possible because most liberal Jews do share a deep sense of commitment to Jewish peoplehood. For the most part, liberal Jews still maintain a covenantal attitude toward the Jewish people in the State of Israel, and a sense of the spiritual centrality of Zion, if not necessarily an unconditional commitment to the State itself. Just as the Bible contains both conditional and unconditional expressions of covenant, so too must Jewish life allow for a commitment to Israel that is not unconditional.

Liberal Jews, who are not committed absolutely to any single definition of Jewish law, are also averse to expressions of Jewish nationalism that subvert important Jewish ethical values of human rights and religious pluralism. The Jewish State only gains the broad respect and support of Jews around the world when it supports and ensures the protection of Jewish and human values. Israel can only demand and maintain the allegiance of liberal Jews to the extent that its official bodies demand and engage in internal critique and call to task those who fail to uphold Jewish ethical standards.

While liberal Jews may deeply value the ideals and nationalist claims of the State of Israel, there is, in the words of the Reform theologian Eugene Borowitz, "a compelling Jewish and human distinction between its claiming our deep devotion and serving as our actional absolute." As he writes in *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew* (1991):

As a matter of Jewish principle no political entity deserves being so exalted, not the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in biblical times; not the United States of America... nor, either, the State of Israel... Simply because it is a nation with Jewish sovereignty, the State of Israel cannot serve as our ultimate Jewish source of value or standard of judgment.

The Jewish state, like all political projects, is the work of human hands and hearts, and thus likely to fail at times to uphold its highest ideals, especially in difficult circumstances. Its successes, no matter how inspiring, do not justify setting it up as an absolute value. Since the State of Israel is, in and of itself, not compelling enough to inspire the absolute commitment of liberal Jews, we must then refocus on the values of the Jewish people, in Israel and around the world, as a source of mutual commitment and the renewal of a shared covenant. The study and practice of shared

values should involve not only the full spectrum of Jews within the liberal communities, but also other types of Jews. Beyond our many religious, ideological, and political differences, I believe, is a large set of values and practices that have been at the core of a shared sense of mission and fate throughout our history as *klal yisrael*. A renewed commitment to these shared values and behaviors can then serve as an anchor for a new covenantal commitment and thus a new relationship.

Refocusing our discussion on values will naturally lead to a deeper understanding of the Jewish people in all its ideological diversity and complexity. Liberal Jews should be engaging in this kind of intensive study of values not only with those who hold different political views about Israel within our own community, but especially with Jews of other communities. In particular, it is vital to engage in such discourse with those Israeli Jews, living both within and outside the '67 borders, whose political views we do not share. Indeed, though some liberal Jews may be horrified at times by the official actions of the sovereign State of Israel, they remain inspired by the challenge of striving to help the state and its citizens live up to Jewish ethical values.

Four Principles for a New Relationship

What values and practices should we focus on in order to heal the rupture that has developed in the fabric of covenant between the Jewish people in North America and Israel? First, we must study and practice the value of Jewish peoplehood, celebrating our particularism while not diminishing our universal commitments to *tikkun olam*. In addition to studying different notions of Jewish peoplehood and practicing mutual responsibility – *kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh* (“all Jews are responsible for one another”) – we should study old and new definitions and practices of Jewish identity, of *klal yisrael* and *am yisrael*. A focus on shared mission and shared



destiny – *brit ye'ud* and *brit goral*, in the classic formulation of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik – will serve to clarify and expand the ways in which concern for the Jewish people might express itself. Concern for the Jewish people is a critical aspect of covenantal responsibility.

Second, we should renew our study of the idea of Jewish pluralism, its source texts, its interpretations, and also its limitations. Liberal Jews should attempt to be as critical of our own practice of religious pluralism as some



of us have been of the practice of Zionism by others. We should engage in intra-faith dialogue within the Jewish community about the teachings of Zionism's different thinkers, striving to understand, rather than debate, our differing opinions on the role and central values of Israel. If this can be accomplished, it will gradually help increase our collective tolerance for the wide spectrum of religious and political opinions likely to continue to characterize our collective existence.

Third, we must find a way to better understand both the problematic aspects and the necessity of respectful critique. Constructive criticism is the antithesis of disloyalty. When clearly based on mutual commitment, concern, and an acknowledgement of the values we share, criticism will be recognized as constructive and not be assumed to have intended or unintended destructive consequences. When Jews of different communities gain intimate knowledge and understanding of one another's



Ahavat Hesed synagogue, Florentin neighborhood, Tel Aviv. Photo by Mati Milstein.



Women of the Wall,
Jerusalem. Photo by
Ariel Jerozolimski.



ideals and struggles, it is more likely that their mutual criticism will fulfill the biblical and rabbinic ideal of reproof, designed to prevent sin and promote the fulfillment of our individual

and collective potential. By contrast, in the context of a covenantal commitment, attempts to influence Israel through political pressure and public reprimand are not conducive to a



healthy relationship.

Similarly, North American Jews would benefit from listening to, and taking seriously, Israeli criticism of their politics and ways of life.

This would reflect a mutuality of concern and responsibility, through which both partners in the covenant can test their values. When criticism is leveled at the liberal Jewish community, we must try to understand its intention and its potential to help us correct ourselves, and thus be less afraid of it and resistant to its goals. Ultimately, we must strive to engage in the kind of ongoing and positive communication that is likely to decrease the destructive uses of the practices of criticism between North American Jews and Israel.

Finally, we must initiate and expand dramatically partnerships in which Israel and world Jewry engage in projects that further the sense of collective Jewish commitment and covenantal responsibility. We must share resources and work together in projects that nourish democracy and pluralism as a set of values and practices crucial to Israel's survival and the welfare of Jews anywhere in the world. Such expressions of these values would include activities that protect the basic human rights and dignity of all of Israel's citizens, as an expression of the values of *tzelem elohim* and *k'vod habriyot* – the dignity of all who are created in the image of God and for the sake of *tikkun olam*, perfecting the world.

Shifting the focus of discussion around Israel from debate over politics and facts to these four areas – Jewish peoplehood, Jewish pluralism, the value of constructive critique, and ethical partnership projects – will not merely help reorient the relationship of liberal Jews toward Israel. It will also serve to repair the rupture in the fabric of Jewish communal life – not by enforcing consensus, but by strengthening the capacity to engage with each other as individual human beings, and as members of the Jewish people, concerned about the future of the State of Israel, even as we retain our different views. In fact, such a shift in our thinking and practice also has the capacity to generate intellectual and communal passion, to re-energize our commitment to the redemptive role of Judaism and the Jewish people in the world.



Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi is Vice President, Shalom Hartman Institute of North America and Director of Rabbinic Leadership Programs. Ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, Rachel holds a doctorate in Jewish philosophy from the Jewish Theological Seminary. She teaches at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem and has written numerous essays on Jewish life and thought.