

# What the "Goyim" Say



***Should Israel pay closer attention to criticism from foreigners? Or can we truly trust no one but ourselves? Jewish sovereignty requires a rethinking of traditional modes of interaction with the wider world***



**W**hen Israel comes under assault from external critics, the challenge of how to respond and engage this criticism is not merely tactical, it is moral as well. Condemnations of Israeli action from foreign leaders, UN bodies, or in documents such as the Goldstone Report, raise important policy challenges for Israel and its supporters. But they also raise a broader conceptual question about how a Jewish state should aspire to interact with foreign voices and relate to their criticism. They raise an age-old question about the nature of the Jewish conversation with the non-Jewish world.

{ By **TAL BECKER**

Throughout our history, Jewish responses to engagement with the outside world have oscillated somewhere between two extremes. For a significant part of that history, most Jews asked only one question about the non-Jewish world: Is it a threat? For Diaspora Jews clinging to their identity during the long years of exile, this world was largely a parallel universe – a potential danger (physically and spiritually), but otherwise uninteresting. Its songs, its heroes, its culture and its values were, for many Jews, foreign and irrelevant, if not corrupting.

What the "goyim" said mattered to these Jews only if it foretold an impending peril to the Jewish way of life. Who one knew from that world was important for instrumental purposes, if there was a danger to be averted or a livelihood to be earned. But the outside world was rarely seen by these Jews as a repository of valuable knowledge and experience, a source of inspiration, or an equal interlocutor in conversation.

At the other extreme, of course, were Jews for whom the non-Jewish world and its culture were mesmerizing. In the last two hundred years in particular, the Jewish encounter with modernity produced in many Jewish communities a radically different response. In post-enlightenment Western Europe, for example, many Jews were eager to leave the cloistered confines of traditional Jewish life, to engage with the outside world and make their mark upon it. Many of them were also willing to pay the price it regularly demanded of them in Jewish terms – reinventing, marginalizing, privatizing or even erasing their Jewish identity as the price of entry.

For these Jews, what the "goyim" said mattered a great deal. It was not only that there was so much for these Jews to learn from, and contribute to, the broader society in which they lived. It was that the validation and embrace of the non-Jewish world was a highly coveted prize. For many, it was an escape from the narrow, parochial and precarious existence of the ghetto Jew, from "Talmudic darkness" as Solomon Maimon – Polish Talmudic scholar

turned German philosopher – famously wrote in his autobiography of 1793.

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This is, of course, a very crude representation of the tension Jews have felt throughout history between engagement with, and acceptance by, the outside world on the one hand, and insulation from it, on the other. Historians, sociologists and philosophers, would no doubt object to this "bright line" categorization. And, in truth, Jewish communities and individuals have, at different times and places, positioned themselves at almost every point along the spectrum between integration into the non-Jewish world and separation from it. Halakhic and spiritual authorities have constantly grappled with the philosophical and theological dimensions of this tension too – Maimonides, Spinoza, the Satmar Rebbe, Franz Rosenzweig and Joseph Soloveitchik – are among the many throughout Jewish history who have offered wildly disparate responses.

In some ways, the questions surrounding Jewish engagement with the outside world have never really changed. For the children of Yaakov in Goshen of Egypt, for the tribes of Israel in the Holy Land surrounded by idol worshippers, for the Jews of Spain, France, England, Russia and the Arab world through centuries of *Galut*, and for the Jewish communities of modern day North America, this tension between integration and isolation has always been present. The response to this challenge has sometimes been dictated by circumstance, as when the anti-Semitism and hostility of the surrounding environment offered little option but isolation. At other times, when outside society was more welcoming, and as identity became more a matter of choice than of blood,

the Jew has been challenged to determine his own “rules of engagement” with the world around him.

Since the rebirth of Israel, the Jewish people have had to ask this question not only at the personal or communal level, but at the national one as well. What is the nature of the Jewish state’s relationship with the nations of the world? Do we want to be integrated and assimilated as a state like all other states or are we required (or, perhaps, destined), as the Bible tells us, to be “a nation that dwells alone”? Do we seek the world’s genuine acceptance and approval? Or do we pursue a purely instrumental relationship – requiring that we engage with others solely to the extent necessary for our survival, prosperity and narrow national interest? Does what the “goyim” say really matter? Should it?

These are weighty questions, and they merit serious reflection on multiple levels. But I want to focus on one particular aspect of them: The nature of Israel’s response to criticism from the non-Jewish world. I want to argue that in Israeli society’s response to the comments about it from other states, one often witnesses the same tension between the isolationist and integrationist tendencies that have accompanied the Jewish relationship with the outside world throughout the exile. And I want to suggest that the challenge and opportunity of Jewish sovereignty offers, and perhaps requires, a revised response to that tension.

## “A Nation that Dwells Alone” - A Blessing?

Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, famously quipped that “it does not matter what the goyim say, but what the Jews do.” He may not have entirely believed that the views of the non-Jewish world were irrelevant. After all, the return of the Jewish people to the status of equal and engaged participants in the community of nations was always for him a part



of the Zionist enterprise. And, in practice, the establishment of the Jewish state depended, at least to some extent, on the good will and support of foreign powers. But Ben-Gurion was expressing, and cultivating, a core Zionist conviction that the Jewish people’s future was primarily in its own hands. With the rebirth of Israel, he sought to entrench the idea that



the decisions of the rest of the world about the Jews would finally play a secondary role to the decisions of the Jews about themselves.

In some form or another, this sentiment has remained a central part of the Zionist ethos for much of Israeli society and, in a way, it is an integral and natural feature of any sovereign nation. When applied to outside criticism, this view suggests that outside voices do not

really have a place in Israel's deliberations and decisions. External comments or censure may need, for purely tactical reasons, to be responded to, repelled or contained, but they need not be seriously considered. Zionism, in this sense, helped make the Jewish people's future a strictly internal, in-house conversation and relegated most foreign views to the sidelines.

Within Israeli society, secular Jews who



Presidential candidate Obama on visit to Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2008. Photo by Avi Hayun, GPO.

## Zionism helped make the Jewish people's future an in-house conversation.

adopt this more dismissive response to what the “goyim” say are aligned with those religious Jews for whom this position acquires theological significance. For some, if Israel's mission is understood in religious or ideological terms, then outside criticism is essentially irrelevant, or, as one leading thinker on the religious right once told me, “the best sign that we are doing the right thing.” The Jewish people, in their ancient homeland, are seen as having a unique God-given mission, which, for many Orthodox Jews, is self-contained and must be insulated from foreign involvement. For them, the *Jewishness* of the state is in part measured by the absence of foreign influence. The very fact that our actions and decisions attract criticism is evidence that we are acting out God's will, and not seeking to satisfy the will of others.

Under this approach, being overly sensitive and engaged with world opinion is often seen in Israel as a sign of weakness or insufficient patriotism. Many an Israeli politician who has deviated from this line of thinking has been accused of not being completely committed to Israel's interests but rather of currying favor with world powers. As with political cultures elsewhere, someone who addresses the concerns of others, or takes genuine account of their positions, is open to the charge that he or she is more interested in doing what is popular with the world than what is right for the country.

At the heart of this approach is both a simple distrust of foreign motives – a sentiment for which too much of Jewish history provides more than ample justification – and a basic belief that the outside world cannot really understand the unique predicament of the Jewish state and has little to contribute to the discussion about it. The result is a popular tendency to dismiss foreign comments directed against Israel,

such as those that often emanate from UN forums, as hypocritical and disproportionate (which they often are), or as revealing a bias located somewhere on the spectrum between pure political self-interest and outright anti-Semitism. Sometimes the criticism will be treated with formal deference, but summoning the views of foreigners to bolster one's position is rarely a winning strategy in Israeli debate.

In some ways, the Israeli public relations notion of “hasbara” (literally, “explanation”) gives expression to the essence of this tactical and limited approach to external criticism. Israel, like most sovereign nations, engages in public relations in order to clear the way for its policies, not to engage in debate about them. The purpose is to minimize or marginalize detractors, and strengthen supporters, not to initiate conversation. When countries condemn Israeli policy on settlements or counter-terrorism, for example, few Israelis will consider the intervention welcome even if they agree with its substance. The right to criticize is considered a privilege of membership, and the legitimacy of the critic's credentials carries more weight than the legitimacy of the criticism itself. We thus tend more to ask by what right Turkey, or China, or France take liberty to question Israel's conduct than we ask whether their views actually have merit.

This dynamic is often on display whenever a U.S. President touches on an issue concerning Israel. Jewish antennae are on heightened alert, but many seem to be listening less to the words uttered or the actual argument made, but more to whether the speech is accurately aligned with the positions of the Israeli government of the day. For many Jews, the question is not whether a good case is made for a certain policy option, but whether the statement passes what one could call “the kishkes test.” Presidential speeches tend not to be seen as an invitation to a serious conversation but rather as a litmus test of whether the President “gets us,” viscerally, in the gut. Does he understand how vulnerable we are? Is he with us or against us? Is he an asset or a liability?

To take one, more recent, example, what seemed to concern so many about President Obama’s May 19<sup>th</sup> reference to the 1967 lines (plus swaps) as the basis for an Israeli-Palestinian negotiated border, was not the policy position he took. The argument did not really seem to focus on the wisdom of this position, and would hardly have been controversial had it reflected the view of the present Israeli government. Rather, it was the potential daylight he exposed between the United States and the present Israeli coalition government on this issue that was disconcerting to many.

At one level, this response is entirely reasonable. What the U.S. President thinks and does can either strengthen or weaken Israel’s position in the negotiating room or on the battlefield. Disagreement (especially if public) with the Israeli government currently in office is not just a source of potential anxiety for American Jews, it is also a potential source of danger for Israel and of empowerment for its enemies. But this way of listening is also telling in that it reveals an attitude among many Jews in which outside voices are seen less as interlocutors and more in strictly instrumental terms. These voices are either to be endorsed or diminished, they need not be examined.

## “A Nation that Dwells Alone” – A Curse?

At the other end of the spectrum, though far more prominent today among Jews outside of Israel than within it, are those for whom the response of outside actors to Israel’s policy is of prime importance. Unlike the “isolationist” tendency discussed above, those who worry deeply about international opinion and the approval of foreign powers seem connected to the historical Jewish longing to be integrated and accepted by the broader world. If, for the isolationist, the Biblical notion that we are a nation that dwells alone is considered a blessing, for these Jews it is regarded as a curse.

For this approach, outside criticism has

more than tactical significance. It is a test of the success of the Zionist enterprise to create a state that is an equal member of the family of nations. What the world says matters, not only because the world community can restrict Israel’s capacity to advance its policies, but because one of Israel’s core objectives is to be an accepted part of that community.

For more religious Jews, this approach too has theological underpinnings. For those who conceive Israel’s role as being “a light unto the nations,” the disapproval of the nations is more than a public relations problem; it is a failure to live up to a divine mission. If Israel’s policies and actions do not act as a tool for glorifying God’s name and values on the international stage, then it may be Israel rather than its foreign critics that needs to look in the mirror.

For those aligned with this view, the need to be attentive to non-Jewish criticism can also have other, less conceptual or theological, rationale as well. Non-Jews are their fellow citizens, their friends, and sometimes members of their own family and the fact that Israel is portrayed in a negative light can raise personal difficulties not just ideological ones.

Paradoxically, those that are attuned to outside criticism in this way share something with their more isolationist counterparts. In both cases, it is not the substance of the criticism that seems to be decisive but the fact that it is being made. Neither appears all that interested in engaging the critic in a real two-way conversation or considering the actual merits of the criticism. For one side, the mere fact of criticism by a U.S. President, for example, is evidence of a flaw in the President; for the other it is evidence of a flaw in Israel’s policy but for neither, it often seems, does the substance much matter. One side may see an answer in better Israeli public relations and “hasbara,” the other in more palatable and accommodating Israeli policy choices, but for both the critic is objectified and the actual content of the criticism is often treated as marginal.

We see this approach in the Israeli discourse when the best argument that is mustered by some



Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and German Chancellor Angela Merkel studying a map of Israel, 2008. Photo by Avi Ohayon, GPO.

Israelis against a given position is that foreign powers will object to it. In real world politics, these kinds of considerations are unavoidable, but to treat them as definitive harms the integrity of the argument itself. If those who object to the settlement enterprise, for example, defend their position primarily on the basis of foreign attitudes, rather than in terms of Israeli interests and Jewish values, they weaken their own standing in the Israeli debate.

## A Jewish and Sovereign Approach to Criticism

These two extremes of Israeli responses to outside criticism – the isolationist and the integrationist – do not do justice to the

deeper transformational meaning of Jewish sovereignty. Both emerge from a Diaspora mindset that either instinctively repels outside voices as a threat or instinctively cares about them as an indicator of worth. They are more the traits of a fearful and vigilant Diaspora Jew, than of a proud and confident sovereign one.

On the one hand, a sovereign Jewish nation should aspire to be morally self-sufficient, even while seeking to engage in a values conversation with other actors on the world stage. By this I mean that, ultimately, the merit of Israel's policies needs to be judged according to our own standards, not the standards of others. We need to have enough confidence in our own capacity to adopt policies that reflect Jewish values and experience and universal principles, without having them contingent on the validation and acceptance of foreign powers. Our policy choices cannot be a favor to a foreign government, or an attempt to enter into anyone's good graces. In the end, they can only be derived from our own best judgment of Israel's core interests and values, both Jewish and universal. In this sense, the general principle that external criticism should not be allowed to shake our resolve is a valid one and is integral to sovereignty and to the Zionist aspiration to shape our own people's future, even if in practice more tactical considerations will sometimes intervene.

On the other hand, this approach goes awry when external criticism is rejected and delegitimized outright merely because of its source. As a sovereign nation we have returned to history, returned to the international stage. What the "goyim" say matters, not because we are dependent on their approval, but because we need to appreciate that we are not just part of a particular Jewish conversation but also a universal one. As a sovereign state that also aspires to be a moral state we cannot conduct our conversation in a Jewish echo chamber. Part of our claim to a moral discourse and policy requires sensitivity and engagement with the morality of others. We should learn from, and contribute to, this values interaction, not just fear or exploit it.

This is more than a matter of tactical necessity or public relations. It is part of our commitment to truly live up to the Jewish aspiration that our state be a source of global inspiration and moral example. When we cling to our exceptionalism with such intensity as to reject any outside voices we not only limit our moral impact, we demonstrate deep vulnerability rather than inner confidence. If we wish to live up to that other part of the Zionist dream, of sovereign Israel as a vibrant member of the community of nations, then we should be able to listen to outside views, learn from them, engage them in conversation and accept, reject or argue with them based more on their merits than their origins.

In practical terms, this approach means greater humility and nuance in responding to outside voices. When we are convinced in the rightness of our cause, we need the courage to withstand criticism, no matter from what quarter. At the same time, the presumption of their own perfection that many states – Israel included – often adopt in their public rhetoric is, to my mind, a greater sign of weakness than the occasional admission of failure. If we concede, even to the outside critic, that we need to improve our treatment of minorities or our mechanism for investigating alleged wrongdoing by our soldiers, we need not conceive of this as giving succor to our enemies. If we are willing to engage the outside world in real conversation about our choices, without giving them the right of veto, we show that we are neither afraid of, nor subject to, their judgment, but are open to interacting with them as equals. It is a sign of the vitality of Israeli society, and of its confidence and moral resilience, if we can do more than fend off every outside critique or buckle under its pressure.

I suspect that some may regard this attitude toward foreign criticism as hopelessly naïve. After all, what other sovereign state responds to criticism in this way? Can we even aspire to this kind of principled engagement with others, when so few international actors

seem interested in a genuine, reciprocal moral conversation? Can we take this engagement seriously when so much of the criticism of Israel is malevolent and hypocritical? Indeed, the most common refrain in the Israeli and Jewish press when Israel is criticized, is that the best – or only – response is to attack and silence the critic, to remind him of his own grave failings and of Israel’s astonishing achievements in the face of excruciating dilemmas. In a realpolitik world, of cold interests and brutal enemies, many would argue, we need a hard shell and can afford to give nothing away.

But a hard shell can also be a brittle one. And Israel may actually broadcast more strength and self-respect, to friend and enemy alike, when it demonstrates its capacity for genuine reflection and debate with others. No doubt, tactical and policy considerations often require treating criticism from friends differently than criticism from enemies. Sometimes engagement can be unwise. But a knee-jerk, defensive and self-righteous response to criticism is unwise as well. And we should aspire to a Zionism that is not just about the spirited defense of Israel at all costs; it is also about a genuine willingness to expose our model of Jewish sovereignty to scrutiny and to the test of the larger modern experience of nations.

Our capacity to strike this balance of engaging with the world, without being held in its thrall or losing our own moral compass, need not depend on whether other states are able to reciprocate in kind. It is about who we want to be as a society, not who they are. It is about the particular blend of particularism and universalism that Jewish sovereignty (and, one could argue, Judaism) requires. It is about taking seriously a rich and multifaceted Jewish tradition and set of values that see both the benefits and the risks, the imperative and the danger, of interaction with the non-Jewish world. And it is about beginning to grapple more seriously with the full import of the incredible idea that Jewish sovereignty means that the time has come for the people who have defied world history to return to it.



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