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Misunderstanding Diaspora Jewry

The collapse of the multilateral effort of the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government to first raise and then invest millions of dollars to reinvigorate Diaspora Jewish identity through stronger connections to Israel comes as no surprise – and what remains of the project could make it both less successful and more fraught than it was even originally destined to be.

The “initiative” was an ambitious and risky form of Jewish communal vapo-ware, seeking abstract outcomes toward the betterment of Diaspora Jewry through a complicated tangle of multiple governmental and quasi-governmental bureaucracies, all in an atmosphere subject to turbulent coalition politics.

Now, absent the involvement of the Jewish Agency and its Diaspora-based Federation partners, only Naftali Bennett’s Diaspora Affairs Ministry remains at the head of the project. This leaves the responsibility for “saving” Diaspora Jewry in the hands of individuals who do not understand Diaspora Jewry, and who espouse an ideological and political agenda that’s partly to blame for the alienation from Israel of the very Diaspora Jews they hope to engage.

The first problem with this initiative has, all along, been infrastructural. The idea that Israeli governmental authorities are capable both of diagnosing the failures of

American Jewish identity and providing the prescription for their healing and recovery is absurd: It is the pernicious old ideology of the “negation of the Diaspora,” but cleaned up so it can be marketed to funders made anxious about the failures of what is known as Jewish continuity.

But the larger issue is the underlying belief that American Jewish identity is a problem that needs to be solved. This attitude grows from the conviction that the same 20th-century American Jewish assimilation that not only facilitated survival but also helped create the conditions that permitted the community to thrive in a surprisingly welcoming Diaspora is now thought of as a threat to Jewish particularism and group identity. Bennett seems to share the belief of some Diaspora Jewish leaders that massive trends of identity and meaning are readily reversible, and that Israel primarily, or even alone, is the key to reversing them.

Personally, I do not particularly relate to the belief that American Jewry is in free fall. Yes, it is more difficult to sustain a voluntary community of purpose than a coercive structure of belonging, as American Jews have discovered. We are living through a massive reorganization of a community in this transition. The quality of Jewish identity is being reclassified, and the nature of belonging is being rethought.

Yet none of these changes is the same as collapse, and none is easily reducible to failure. The insistence that Diaspora Judaism, or at least some of its forms, is completely failing even while it continues to survive and evolve is merely a masked polemic by people who ideologically oppose its core claims.

Bennett’s form of Judaism – as he weds the ideology of religious Zionism to a political party and now a government ministry – may be thriving, in contrast to how he understands the condition of American Jewry. But the fact that Bennett’s Judaism is politically successful does not mean that its ideas are vibrant or that its values are durable. The central flaw in Bennett’s strategy has been to posit that the primary strength of Israeli Judaism is its Judaism, and the primary asset of American Jewry is its assets – to conceptualize what could be a meaningful partnership as a cash-for-meaning transaction. This is all very tiresome. Israeli Jews and American Jews do have a great deal to teach each other; modern Jewry, with its twin American and Israeli success stories, has a unique opportunity to benefit from a generous relationship. I do not share the belief held by those on the American Jewish left who seek to minimize the role that Israel should play in American Jewish identity, much as I am critical of the belief that Israel has a coercive monopoly on

Jewish sincerity that it needs to foist upon the Diaspora.

The genuinely possible barter system here could be an even exchange of valuable ideas and experiences. American Jews have had success in developing ideological and practical approaches to pluralism, citizenship in a multicultural society, sustaining universal and particular loyalties, and in building Jewish institutions. Israeli Jews have created powerful templates for Jewish religious and cultural behavioral in the public square, profound experiments with language and literature that bridge ancient and modern, important ideas about the connections of land, people, text and God, and radical approaches to the relationship to Jewish history. These are the twin successes of modern Jewish history, and they address each other’s weaknesses. Why reduce this relationship to one of paternalism when partnership would be more valuable?

I hope the Jewish Agency’s principled withdrawal serves as a wake-up call. World Jewry still needs each other; or more accurately, in the correct frameworks, could need each other. An initiative that is less fear-driven, less political, and less pushy could help both Diaspora and Israeli Jewry stand up together to their respective challenges.

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