

# In My Opinion

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## *World Jewish Security and the "Who Is A Jew" Issue*

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**I**n this century, Israel and the United States have emerged as the two great centers of world Jewry. The emergence of both centers has taken place approximately at the same time and, significantly, by virtue of each other. The result is that Israel and American Jewry are now the super-powers of world Jewry. Both produce their own leadership in the political and religious realms, both possess the physical and spiritual resources to export culture to other Jewries, and both maintain the political wherewithal to intervene throughout the world on behalf of world Jewry. No other Jewry meets all three criteria of native leadership, cultural export, and the capacity and will to intervene on a worldwide basis.

This geopolitical reality must be underscored. The capacity of American Jewry to serve world Jewish interests in general and Israeli interests in particular is due not only to its numbers and wealth but also to its location in the United States and its multiple links with the American powers-that-be. A similar number of Jews in, say, England or Brazil would not have the same impact. Thus, any factor that attenuates the American Jewish link to the seats of power weakens American Jewish efforts on the behalf of both world Jewry and Israel.

Similarly, it must be underscored that the linchpin of the Jewish people is the link between Israel and American Jewry. Anything that seriously disrupts this relationship threatens the security and well-being of Jews everywhere.

It is in the light of the American Jewry-Israel relationship as a whole that the "Who Is a Jew" question has to be viewed. No issue in recent years has been more divisive and fractious. As occurs with all issues when they become politicized, the result is polarization, rigid positions, discovery of newly hardened principles, and a winner-take-all mentality.

The first victim of this polarization, as always, is the truth. Both sides grab the positive words to describe their partisan perspective, leaving the negative scraps for their opponent. When any side can claim a monopoly on the concern with unity, that is tell-tale evidence of the term being skewed in one direction.

What then is the test for the proper use of the term "unity"? Whenever people use the slogan "Jewish unity" to push a particular position, we should ask them how are they ready to think, feel, and do differently for the cause of Jewish unity, as well as what risks they are willing to incur for the cause of Jewish unity. If they sloganeer on the issue of Jewish unity, but are unwilling to have their program tailored accordingly, then we have a right to be suspicious whether unity is a real concern. The most basic question should be, "If you were not for Jewish unity, would your present position change?" A negative answer here is most telling.

When Orthodox religious parties insist that the only way to Jewish unity is by subscribing to their tenets and by submit-

ting to their rabbis only, one has to ask whether unity is their concern or rather is it a monopoly on Jewish religious life. When the Reform rabbinate demands that their conversions should be accepted in Israel even though there are no uniform Reform standards for conversion, one has to ask whether the issue is Reform integrity or the rejection of accountability. After all, where else do foreign nationals (read: Diaspora rabbis) perform rites that allow other foreign nationals (read: converts) to become candidates for citizenship in a foreign state (read: Israel)? Thus, for the sake of Jewish unity and security, both sides should be challenged to accept the objective procedures of conversion, such as circumcision, where relevant, and immersion, as determined by the Israeli government, regardless of the ideology of the personnel overseeing the conversion (Kimelman, 1990).

In addition to unity, the three other buzz words in the conflict are democracy, pluralism and Zionism. No side can rightfully claim a monopoly on any of them. In regard to "democracy," every political scientist knows that it entails a commitment to means, not only to goals; otherwise, why have a multiparty system? Democracy remains one of the most successful political techniques for resolving conflict without resorting to violence. As long as a party participates in the democratic process of Israeli elections and does not resort to physical violence to coerce the population, it can rightfully lay claim to the title "democratic." To malign a party with a different political or religious agenda as undemocratic is abusing the term for partisan purposes. The argument that a minority is foisting its agenda on the majority is politically disingenuous. Most democratic majorities, whether in Israel, the United States, or elsewhere, are coalitions of minorities. Indeed, almost all political majorities result from an alliance of minority concerns. Contemporary political agendas are just too complex for majorities to

emerge on their own unless the issue directly and blatantly affects national security.

The most popular buzz word in this conflict is "pluralism." Any term that both sides can monopolize with equal ease may be suspected of having been stretched beyond recognition. Pluralism in Jewish life does not mean just supporting other Jews with whom one agrees. Like-mindedness is not a synonym for pluralism. Pluralism in Jewish life assumes that the Jewish political, communal, and religious agenda is too diverse for any single ideology to manage the whole Jewish agenda and maintain its internal coherence (Kimelman, 1989). Ideological pluralism is a way of responding to the plurality of objectives in Jewish life. In the name of pluralism, one cannot cut off funds to either Reform, Orthodox, or Zionist institutions. On the contrary, pluralism mandates the support of all of them.

One of the most abused terms in this debate has been "Zionist." Herzl or Pinsker—or for that matter Ben-Gurion—would be aghast if they heard Americans who refuse to go on *aliyah* calling thousands of Jews—who live in Israel, participate in its politics, pay its taxes, and face the problems of ever-present terrorist attacks—nonZionists. It is true that there are some religious parties who do not attribute to the founding of Israel a transcendent religious significance, but neither do most of the nonreligious parties. Are those so-called secular parties to be maligned as anti-Zionists for not seeing Israel in religious or messianic terms? Fairness in all these matters demands some symmetry of demands and charges.

The "Who Is A Jew" issue, which properly should have been dubbed the "Who Is A Convert" issue, has precipitated unprecedented levels of intervention between American Jewry and Israel. Since the issue affects so few Israelis, actually or potentially, it is clear that the primary target of the proposed legislation was Diaspora Jews in general and American Jews in particular. Once Israel made the move to determine which Diaspora converts would be accept-

able for Israeli citizenship, it was only natural that American Jewry would reciprocate with its own brand of interventionism in the Israeli political scene. The result is that some American Jewish organizations are verging on becoming lobbies of the Knesset. Once the precedent has been set, it will likely increase. If so, the future augurs for increasing intervention in each other's affairs. This has its plusses and minuses. Both need to be understood.

On the plus side is the fact that reciprocal intervention will strengthen the sense of mutual dependence, thereby reinforcing the belief in a common destiny. On the minus side is the fact that the greater the interventionism the greater the chance of rebuff and consequent withdrawal or vindictive action. One adverse effect is that Jews who feel disaffected will not only reduce their giving but disengage from the pro-Israel American Jewish political lobbying, an act that could be disastrous to American-Israeli military, political, and economic arrangements. Even worse are those Jews who take it upon themselves to ask American political officials, even cabinet members, to intervene in internal Israeli political matters to push their partisan agenda.

Let us not forget that 2100 years ago during the rebellion against the Jewish king, Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BCE), Jews sought the intervention of the king of the Seleucid Empire. Ironies of ironies, Jews summon the great-great-great-nephew of the despicable Antiochus Epiphanes, the antagonist of the Hasmoneans, to aid them against the great-nephew of Judah the Maccabee. Ultimately, this opened the way for Roman intervention and the end of the Second Jewish Commonwealth.

Care here is in order lest this example of the price of interventionism be used to preclude any intervention in the affairs of Israel. In order to steer a course between the Scylla of rampant interventionism and the Charybdis of indifference, there is a

need to sketch the parameters of legitimate interventionism.

Two guidelines for avoiding excessive intervention by Diaspora Jewry in Israeli affairs should prove helpful. The first is never to use outside political officials to intervene in internal Jewish-Israeli issues. The second is that the organized Jewish community as a whole not intervene officially or blatantly in the Israeli political process unless the interests of Diaspora Jewry in general are at stake. In the United States, the organized community as a whole refers to the umbrella structures, such as the Council of Jewish Federations or the Council of Major Presidents of Jewish Organizations. In Canada, it refers to the Canadian Jewish Congress or United Israel Appeal. Individuals or denominations may always put forth their case as they see fit since their involvement is not seen as representative of the whole Jewish community and therefore need not be constrained by the political considerations to which the overall community is subject.

The second guideline is based on the realization that Israel carries the overwhelming burden for the physical protection of the Jewish people along with the overwhelming weight of risk. The argument that weight of opinion ought to be balanced by the weight of risk cannot be overlooked. Nonetheless, Israel is not entitled to exercise a veto in nonsecurity issues. Here the NATO security pact can serve as an illuminating model. Since the United States' responsibility for NATO's security is greater than that of any other country, its status outweighs that of any other NATO member. All the other members of NATO together, however, can counterbalance America's weight. In the same manner, we can say that although no Diaspora Jewry on its own has the moral weight of Israel, they do together. This analogy illustrates how the scales of Jewry are weighted toward Israel with regard to any single Diaspora, but not so with regard to the whole Dias-

pora, which is on par with Israel. It follows that if Israel adopted a course of action deleterious to the rest of Jewry, they would then be fully entitled to intervene in Israel's internal affairs.

The assumption is that Israel is the centerpiece of *Klal Yisrael*, but not the be-all and end-all of *Klal Yisrael*. As the Jewish people is in service to Israel, so Israel is in

service to the Jewish people, especially with regard to world Jewish security.

#### REFERENCES

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