



Israel-Diaspora Relations

**An American Jewish Partnership
for Israel-Diaspora Relations**

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"We Are One": From Slogans to Reality

Jews throughout the world who are active in Jewish communal and public affairs like to proclaim that "we are one" and that the mystic bonds of Jewish unity hold us all together. In fact, the task of working with a people scattered throughout the globe with organized Jewish communities in over one hundred countries and with major concentrations of Jewish population living in Israel, North America, Europe, and Latin America -- four very different culture areas -- the practical tasks of working together as one people but "multiculturally," as it were, are enormous. For American Jews they are compounded by that dimension of American culture which American Jews have come to share with other Americans which holds that the American way is the best and everyone, everywhere, should conduct their activities like Americans because, underneath it all, all humans are really alike.

This is even more appealing to American Jews when dealing with Jews elsewhere because of their sense of common kinship, but it is no more true than in other cases and remains an American conceit rather than a description of human reality. It has seriously affected the way much of the American Jewish leadership has looked at the Jewish Agency (JAFI), a multicultural body, as distinct from the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) which is an American Jewish organization, especially in its governance. This outlook faces the Israeli view that, because Israel is the Jewish state, its ways should be normative for Jewish people wherever they are, a conceit equally impossible to sustain in the real world.

Reality suggests that we need to find modest but effective ways to deal with these problems within the institutions we need to translate

Jewish unity from a slogan into an operational reality, something that grandiose efforts with equally grandiose expectations cannot do. The reconstituted Jewish Agency was a modest but brilliant effort to provide an institutional form for Jewish interaction and to resolve the problem of how a politically sovereign state can work in partnership with voluntary Jewish communities whose leaders and members are all citizens of their respective countries of residence -- in the most important cases, proud ones at that. This was done by identifying the major institutions in each country or community and bringing their major leaders into the governance of JAFI and, through JAFI, most of the emerging world Jewish polity. This meant, of course, the federated system in the United States and it also meant the Zionist parties represented in the Knesset in Israel. The consequences were that the different political cultures within the Jewish world would be represented in the joint institutions since the leading actors in each community quite naturally had to be rooted in their local cultures to be leaders. This led to clashes resulting from different expectations and ways of doing things, equally naturally, and, for many Americans, provoked a sharp reaction of "why can't they be like us" and "let's find partners who can be." Of course, if they had been like American Jews, they would not have been influential in Israel.

Squaring Circles and Its Frustrations

In essence, the reconstituted Jewish Agency was designed to square a circle. Many American Jewish activists were frustrated by the realities of that effort from the very first, and even though they made substantial inroads in the structure and functioning of the Agency over the years, their frustrations did not abate.

Most of the American Jewish criticisms of the Jewish Agency stem from those frustrations and the unwillingness, conscious or otherwise, to recognize that Israelis do things differently and believe in the way they do them. Many of these critics insist upon treating the Jewish Agency as if it were the local Jewish Family and Children Service, i.e., just another constituent or beneficiary agency of a strong local federation, rather than a partnership (a good, even if overused, word) uniting Jews from various ideological, religious, and cultural backgrounds in a common effort. Many of them would prefer to go it alone, i.e., to continue to help Israel, but to do so independently and in their own way without having to accommodate a different culture with its own pride. But this cannot be done without paying the price of losing the institutional framework for the Jewish unity that everyone professes to want and which is needed if that unity is to be more than a slogan. What kind of partnership would it be if the Israeli partners were impotent when

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it came to making decisions in Israel's name? It would be like the situation in the United States when the Israeli political leadership relied on the American Zionist organizations to work with American Jewry.

Two points should be clear: One, American Jewish communities going it alone will find partners in Israel, but only because they offer funding not otherwise available to those potential partners. Because most of those beneficiaries are local governmental or voluntary bodies, they are more at the mercy of donors and will accommodate themselves accordingly. Still, few of the American donors will have the wherewithal and requisite knowledge of Israel within their hands to judge the effectiveness of what they are trying to do.

Two, changes can be made in the JAFI system where it is presently constituted, as many have already been made, but in the last analysis, to be real changes and effective ones at that, there will have to be a meeting of minds and cultures. That is an effort but one that is well worth it to maintain Jewish unity in operational ways. For American Jewry, the United Israel Appeal (UIA) has been a principal bridging institution in this respect for many decades. If we do not make that effort, the present drift apart noted by so many will continue since it is a natural one and, left unchecked, it will pursue its natural course. In the last analysis, Jewish unity can only be maintained operationally through the exercise of will. It will not happen naturally as a result of drift. *The Federalist*, the great American contribution to political theory, states that humans may organize themselves either by force, by accident, or through reflection and choice. There is no way that the Jewish people are likely to be forced to remain together in today's world. Nor will we remain together if we rely upon accident. If we want to remain together, we must do so through reflection and choice. If our reflections are sensible and our choices good ones, we can then move on to good action.

Beyond Philanthropy or Imperialism

In essence, this is a call for a relationship with Israel that goes beyond philanthropy and beyond imperialism. It suggests a role that UIA is uniquely qualified to fill because it is so closely intertwined with both communities and is a partner with Keren Hayesod which brings in the rest of world Jewry on a similar footing. The American Jewish community federations are already directly tied in with UIA, which also includes representatives of American Zionist organizations and the WZO (because of UIA's origins in Keren Hayesod itself). The leadership attracted to UIA are those people

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who see the Jewish world beyond their local communities or even the American Jewish community as a whole, who have a world perspective. They have consistently demonstrated their ability to see the larger picture.

The experience that the UIA leadership has developed in acquiring understanding of that larger picture and in developing relationships with Israeli and European counterparts that bridge their cultural differences and draw upon those that unite them is too important to relinquish at precisely the moment when these talents are needed to make the wrenching transition to a new agenda for the coming century. At the same time, while aliya from the former Soviet Union is diminishing, it does continue in significant numbers and American Jewry must pull its weight in helping the new olim integrate into Israel society and now, more than ever, into the Jewish people as well, since these olim come with the barest minimum of Jewish connection (many are not exactly Jewish) because of the circumstances of life in the old country.

JAFI, too, remains important, if only because there is no other arena within which Israeli and diaspora leadership come together at the highest levels to deal with the most practical matters of worldwide Jewish concern. JAFI cannot be dispensed with for the tasks of aliya and klita without considerable loss since those issues are central ones for the Jewish Agency and some thirty years of experience has shown us that the Ministry of Absorption is the lowest ranked ministry on the Israeli governmental totem pole and will inevitably continue to be because of the other pressing problems confronting Israel and Israelis.

Viewed both from the broader perspective and more narrowly, either the UIA will continue to play its role or it will have to be replaced by a body that will do so under another name and without being able to fully draw upon the valuable experience that UIA has acquired in nearly eighty years of operation.

Undramatic Answers to Dramatic Questions

Granted, there is little dramatic about continuing the present system, at least as it is generally portrayed. It suggests that we will continue to do world Jewish business through a group of what are known in government circles as functional authorities, each undertaking one or more different tasks or working together with others in one or another perspective to fill needs. The functional authority is a relatively humble mechanism and lacks the glamour that a parliament of the Jewish people may have for many. Unfortunately, the same reasons that the idea of such a parliament was rejected

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implicitly or explicitly in the past hold today as well as others that we have since identified. Central to those reasons is the difficulty of bringing together representatives of a politically sovereign state with citizens of other countries where Jewish activities are voluntary.

That problem has only been overcome indirectly as was done in the reconstituted Jewish Agency. It has not yet been directly overcome. Perhaps it will be as globalization progresses and peoples are recognized as embracing entities larger than territorial states, on one hand, and multiple citizenships are better accepted by existing states, on the other. These changes may take place, but the tenaciousness of the present state system should not be underestimated. Nor should the utility and efficiency of the functional approach. Look at Europe. For all the years that some Europeans sought a United States of Europe, there was no serious movement toward European unity on a democratic basis. It was only when enough of the Europeans and their leadership came to recognize the utility of a functional approach that the European Common Market emerged to become in due course the European Community, now the European Union, without seeking expression through grandiose, all-embracing institutions but continuing to rely on functional authorities to build the necessary interstate and intercommunity bridges.

Beyond that, if Jews from various parts of the world are having trouble working with those from other parts within the present framework because of their cultural differences, why should we expect that it will be easier to do so in a framework that is more encompassing and hence more demanding. Just as students of organizational arrangements have learned over the past thirty years to reject single pyramid hierarchies because, contrary to the conventional wisdom, at the end of the day they are far more inefficient than what seems like the waste of overlapping entities whose "duplication" provides alternative channels for getting things done even if some channels are blocked, and fail-safe mechanisms that, even if slower, prevent paralysis, so, too, students of federalism have come to understand that federation, i.e., complete federal integration, is much harder to achieve among diverse groups than confederation. We Jews would do well to learn those lessons and, instead of pursuing will-o-the-wisps based on ideas not fully thought through, continue on our slower and less dramatic course of institution-building that has already achieved so much.

Completing a Century-Long Agenda and Its Consequences

To compound matters, as the twentieth century draws to a close,

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organized Jewry is in the process of concluding the great mobilizing tasks that have confronted the Jewish people for the past century and for which it organized itself into its present structure. Those great tasks are being completed with extraordinary success. They revolved around a popular *rebellion* against the Jewish situation of homelessness, persecution, and impoverishment in the diaspora; *relief* from the conditions of poverty and oppression which were the lot of most of world Jewry then and throughout much of this century; *rescue* of Jews from countries of distress and danger to Israel and New World diasporas where the Jewish people could survive and flourish; and *reconstruction* of Jewish life under new conditions of freedom and equality.

Those have been great tasks, greatly undertaken and well done. With all of our mistakes, we have much to be proud of as we draw up a balance sheet at the century's end. Indeed, this century should stand out for its achievements as well as its tragedies, even in the long history of the Jewish people.

However, the completion of those tasks leaves a vacuum for organized Jewish life. Jews will continue to pursue their individual goals as they will, but to function as a collectivity they must be moved by important collective tasks. Hence we are at the moment in a hiatus as we turn to identify the tasks of the next century.

Many Jews, previously loyal to and active in the varied institutions that the Jewish people developed to confront these great tasks, are now abandoning those institutions on the grounds that, the tasks well nigh completed, the institutions are no longer needed; that individual Jewish activists will have to find their own attractive concerns and support them directly. They have concluded that federated giving and the raising and allocation of funds it stands for are now unnecessary -- even counterproductive -- and the compromises federated systems entail through their institutions interposing themselves between the donors and the recipients are mere impediments and expensive, bureaucratic ones at that.

On the other hand, the federated instruments themselves, fearing the pinch of diminished resources and even more the disappointment of being abandoned by so many of their dynamic erstwhile supporters, are following instincts long supported by conventional wisdom that the only way to respond is through consolidation of existing institutions so as to presumably reduce the dissipation of effort and to save money. This is now a driving force of organizational activity in the American Jewish federated world. It is paralleled by a continuing demand in Israel for consolidating the Jewish Agency with the government of Israel based on the statist notions that have dominated Israel for years, which hold that preservation of the present structure is duplication and often wasteful and corrupt duplication at that.

Choosing the Right Path

Both sets of conventional wisdom are open to serious question on the part of those who have had experience in public sector activities outside of the Jewish world from two directions. 1) The old notion that bigger pyramids are better has crumbled along with many of the pyramids themselves in the cybernetic age, where redundancy often ceases to be duplication and instead becomes the maintenance of fail-safe mechanisms so that no matter what goes wrong, the message gets through and the intended activities continue. 2) Those whose experience has been that of working with volunteers understand how, unless the organizational culture is friendly to the interests and aspirations of the volunteers, they will vote with their feet and walk away, which indeed is what is happening, often for the wrong reasons, in connection with American Jewish support for Israel today.

What constitutes useful consolidation and what constitutes dangerous abandonment of proven channels of activity is a matter of debate and to some extent even conjecture until it is tried. What is important is that in the process of trying, abandonment of critical interests must be avoided. Of those in the federated American Jewish community, the American Jewish-Israel connection is one of the very most important. That connection is not merely a matter of sentiment, however important the role of sentiment plays as one of its bases. It must be expressed through common activity and interaction. This activity and interaction must have the following goals:

1. To foster useful contact between American Jews and Israelis.
2. To enable Israel and American Jewry to work together on those projects of shared interest, especially those of common interest to the Jewish people.
3. To explain the two communities to one another across the cultural and situational gap that separates them.
4. From the American side, to oversee the proper utilization of scarce American Jewish and other American resources sent to Israel.

While these tasks can be undertaken in part by individuals and more narrowly based organizations, there is a need for a comprehensive organized American presence to undertake them in a systematic way, whatever new organizational form will emerge out of the advancing partnership.

Identifying New Tasks

But it is not enough to continue in the old, established ways. The American Jewish-Israel relationship that we knew during the first fifty years of the state is rapidly changing. It has already changed in many ways. Whatever organized arrangements emerge to deal with it must respond to those changes. First of all, what remains of the old tasks must continue to be handled effectively. Second, the virtual completion of the great tasks must bring about identification of new tasks, many of which are best dealt with on a more individualistic basis, either through individual donors or on a community to community basis. Third, the once binary relationship now has to expand to include European Jewry, several million strong, as a more active and more equal partner. Fourth, new and appropriate leadership must be developed for new tasks which will require different talents, at least to some extent, than the old ones.

In a word, the new tasks facing the Jewish people have more to do with the quality of life of Jews qua Jews now that the battle for the maintenance of Jews' lives has more or less been won. This means that after a century in which the civil tasks of the Jewish people dominated the Jewish agenda, we have been witnessing a shift or return to the more spiritual tasks of Judaism, sometimes in familiar ways and sometimes in new and even strange ways, but all directed toward matters of the spirit. The result is that the civil institutions which the Jewish people have built are almost all in difficulties at this moment. While those civil institutions may not provide the vision that will motivate Jewish activity in the immediate future, they must share that vision if they are to remain the strong and vital institutions we need them to be.

Some Basic Principles

What are the basic principles of such a vision? We can identify three eternal ones: *maintaining and strengthening the solidarity of the Jewish people, maintaining and developing Jewish civilization in all of its dimensions including the spiritual, and the maintenance and strengthening of Jewish norms.*

Any program for the Jewish people based on those foundations must rest upon four basic principles: *am yisrael* (Jewish peoplehood), identification with the Jewish people as a whole, not just Judaism as a religion, in a great chain of Jewish tradition that stretches across the generations, binding Jews across time and space; *clal yisrael* (the community of Israel), Jewish unity despite our differences and with mutual respect regarding those differences; *brit* (covenant), the idea that Jews see themselves as bound to one

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another and to God through a covenant that distinguishes us from members of other peoples or faiths, a covenant that serves to differentiate Jews from non-Jews and to assure in certain critical ways, that the Jews remain a people apart, even as we have our covenants with those nations who share many of our covenantal principles and are bound to all of humanity through the Noahide covenant; *Torah*, a shared commitment to Jewish learning and the commanding obligations that being Jewish entails.

In the new globalized world, we must add another principle, that of *kiruv* (outreach), the commitment of those who affirm these principles to reach out as appropriate to other Jews, to non-Jews who seek to share the fate of the Jewish people, and to humanity in general, each in the appropriate measure, to touch them while strengthening Jewish life at its core.

The advancement of these principles must be based on what seem like two contradictory thrusts: one, recognition of more diversity in Jewish life than ever before, simultaneously with a rejection of those forms of diversity which run counter to basic Jewish norms. Moreover, in the recognition and acceptance of greater diversity, Jews will have to be careful to recognize that different Jewish communities have different understandings of what that means and not try to impose their community's understanding on others, although they certainly may wish to try to convince others of the validity of their particular approach to pluralism.

Rebuilding the Bridge Around the New Tasks

This is one of the functions that the organized bridge between the American Jewish community and Israel must be prepared to assume. Misunderstandings between the two communities are not new. In the past they have revolved around definitions of the centrality of Israel and of the meaning of Zionism. More recently, they have to do with the nature of Judaism as a religion. Stated in this manner, those issues appear to take on an intellectual and even academic caste. In fact, however, they are matters that influence and are expressed through everyday communication as Israelis and American Jews talk past one another, misperceiving the meanings and vital concerns of the other.

It is possible to overcome or at least mitigate these misperceptions and misunderstandings, at least for those Jews who see themselves as involved in Jewish life, because at the same time that we are witnessing all the aforementioned shifts in Israel-diaspora relations, we are witnessing another kind of shift as well. While Jews were under physical siege, they rallied around the standard, regardless of

how they understood what being Jewish involved. Now, however, we have the luxury to either treat our Jewishness seriously or as incidental to our lives. Moreover, significant numbers of Jews are choosing both courses and many, perhaps even most, are ambivalent about which course to choose.

Consequently, the new division emerging within the Jewish people and the one that will prove to be most important for the foreseeable future is between those Jews who take their Jewishness and Judaism seriously, however they define both, and those who do not. This is a line of division that cuts across both Israel and the diaspora. In the diaspora we have known that division implicitly since the Emancipation made it possible for Jews to leave Judaism without embracing another religion. In Israel this choice is a new one and experiencing it is a new experience. Initially, Israel did so much to help diaspora Jews make a positively pro-Jewish choice. Now it may become the turn of diaspora Jews to help Israelis make positive Jewish choices by contributing their Jewish survival skills, honed over the past three centuries. On the other hand, skills which have served diaspora Jewry so well may not be appropriate for the Israeli situation and Israelis will have to develop their own as they are presently doing in ways which the diaspora has not yet demonstrated the capacity for understanding. Both need to work together in new kinds of partnerships in both Israel and the diaspora. Working together will lead to a new common agenda sooner or later, but requires effort, patience, and understanding.

One item that will be on that common agenda is coping with the new situation in which the old clear-cut definitions of who is a Jew are no longer fully adequate. Because the world has changed, being Jewish is more a matter of voluntary choice. Globalization exposes all Jews to greater opportunities to leave the Jewish path than ever before or even more than they may seek, and at the same time non-Jews are more open to close association with Jews and with Jewish ideas. These problems will need to be grappled with on many levels, but ultimately the organized community will have to make organized decisions or non-decisions about them.

To date, responses to this great question have been local and, more than that, segmented among the various branches of Judaism. They have also been inadequate. During the past year issues have surfaced as national and collective ones in the sense of requiring agreement among the entire Jewish people (nation). Now that they have become world issues there is no turning back, which means that American Jewry must have the appropriate instrumentalities to deal with those issues and to moderate the ways in which they are confronted. Perhaps our present institutions can adapt themselves to undertaking that task as they have to date. Perhaps new ones will be needed. Certainly there will be great economies if the institutions we have fostered and honed to a high degree of efficiency in

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meeting Jewish issues will be able to adapt themselves to this rather than our having to go through the trial and error of inventing a whole new set.

Those institutions presently offering alternative versions of Jewish religious and spiritual life will be advocates of one version or another and may have a hard time playing that role. Hence it is one that the civil institutions of Jewry will have to assume for themselves as they have done, albeit not necessarily in a deliberate fashion, for the past half century at least. To do so they will have to play a critical role in the renaissance of a norm-based Jewish vision.

The unspoken premise accompanying all of these is a need for Jewish organization -- local, countrywide, regional, and global -- to provide the framework through which to mobilize the resources and to focus collective Jewish efforts on those tasks. Without such organization there is no Jewish people. With proper organization the Jews have a community and a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In our time, this is especially important since we will continue to see a crumbling along the edges of the Jewish people through assimilation and we will need the care to maintain a "whole" that can counterbalance that assimilation into the new global world society. For a Jewish renaissance we need not only Jewish individuals and families but Jewish communities and a Jewish polity.

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