

A Distant Affinity: The History of Australian-Israeli Relations

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Australian-Israeli relations have been almost consistently warm and robust since before Israeli independence. Neither geopolitics, common political and economic interests, historical accidents, nor the role of Australia's Jewish community can fully explain the importance Australia and Israel have had to one another over decades. Only by including certain affinities of national personalities and values can the ongoing vigor of the relationship be fully explained.

Geopolitically, there is little reason to expect Australia and Israel to have any closer relationship than any other two states of similar size and distance from one another. One might perhaps expect the relationship to be comparable to that between Brazil and Thailand, or South Africa and Costa Rica, or any other two distant pairings of medium and smallish states. Yet the Israeli-Australian relationship has been at an entirely different level-much more intense, ongoing, and politically important.

The reasons are complex. Some involve the influence of the small but significant Australian Jewish community with its history of successful access to the national decision-makers, in part owing to the community's comparatively high historical level of coherence and focused leadership. However, countries with comparable or larger Jewish populations per capita-for instance, Britain, Canada, Uruguay, Argentina, France, or Hungary[1]-do not have as close and ongoing a relationship with Israel.

Other explanatory factors concern the larger-than-life role Israel has often played in international politics everywhere, and the happenstance of Australia and Israel, more than is usual, winding up more or less in the same place at the same time. Also at play, however, is a level of affinity between Israelis and Australians. Something in their respective cultures, national outlooks, and personalities tends to draw them together.

Australia through Israeli Eyes

Australian policy toward Israel, compared to the reverse, is more active and variable and raises more questions. Israeli policy toward Australia has been reasonably consistent over the years. Australia has almost always been seen as friendly, and Australians have almost always been regarded warmly and positively. Australia has rarely been a major focus of policy efforts in [Jerusalem](#). However, Israel has sought, often with intensity, to maintain and build the relationship and to solicit Australia's support for various foreign policy priorities, especially in terms of advocating fair play at the United Nations and international institutions, and gaining access to diplomatic and economic opportunities in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

In recent years, Israeli policymakers who are aware of it have come to regard the degree of Australian support and understanding for Israel with something akin to amazement. Nor do Israelis simply take the Australian relationship for granted. Many of Israel's recent senior leadership have visited Australia at some point including Shimon Peres, Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, Ehud Olmert, and others.

Australia and the Yishuv

Most accounts agree that the encounter between Australia and the Yishuv (the prestate Jewish community) dates back to World War I.[2] Serving at Gallipoli-the 1915 battle that in the dominant popular Australian historical narrative was the most important crucible that formed modern Australia-was the six-

hundred-strong Zion Mule Corps, made up of Jewish volunteers largely expelled from Palestine by the Ottomans.

Four Australian Light Horse brigades and a battalion of camel troops subsequently served in the conquest of Palestine in 1916-1917, taking Beersheva and later participating in the final battle for Jerusalem. According to official Australian war historian H. S. Gullet, they were welcomed by Yishuv residents and hailed as deliverers from Turkish rule and Arab depredations. Moreover, the feeling was often reciprocated: "There began an association, often marked by affection, which was broken only by the close of the war.... The [Australians of the First Light Brigade] always recalled with gratitude those pleasant Jewish settlements with their groves of large golden oranges, their supply of wine, and their warm-hearted people." [3]

Despite these early contacts, Australian governments were not notably sympathetic to the Zionist cause during 1919-1939. An indigenous Zionist movement developed in the Jewish community, led by, among others, Sir John Monash, the Australian Jewish general who commanded the Australian Army Corps in France in 1917-1918. But as British and Zionist interests in Palestine began to diverge in the face of increasing Arab hostility, Australian leaders increasingly adopted the British line, even sometimes urging Britain to go further in appeasing Arab opposition to Jewish immigration. [4] Successive Australian representatives in London urged Britain not to allow Jewish refugees from Nazism to immigrate to Palestine, as the Jews were either *agents provocateurs* or pawns in a Nazi plot to destabilize Palestine by sparking an Arab revolt. [5]

Australian soldiers returned to the Middle East in large numbers during World War II, and many again developed good relations with local Jewish communities. Two divisions, the Sixth and Seventh, arrived for training in Palestine in 1940. Their commander, Maj.-Gen. Sir Thomas Blainey, was friendly with Monash and had an affection for the Jewish people, even surprising some of his Jewish hosts with his "familiarity with Jewish rituals and symbolism." [6] Furthermore, the Zionist Federation of Australia (ZFA) arranged with the Jewish Agency and other quasi-governmental Yishuv organizations to attempt to make the Australians feel at home, providing visits to local families on Jewish holidays and helping make leave arrangements with the Australian commanders. At the request of the ZFA, the Jewish Agency's hospitality committee in Jerusalem even sent out directives to Jewish shop and café owners urging them not to overcharge the visiting Australians. [7]

Australians and Yishuv residents fought together as well. It was while serving in [Syria](#) alongside Australian forces that Gen. Moshe Dayan lost his eye. [8]

According to Yitzhak Rabin, the Australians were reportedly very well-liked in the Yishuv and contrasted positively with the local British troops. [9] Australian poems and other accounts from the period suggest the feeling was reciprocated by many of the Australians. [10]

Australia and Partition

Australia played an important, perhaps even decisive, role in securing the passage of the UN General Assembly's partition resolution of 29 November 1947. Australia did so through the agency of its foreign minister Dr. H. V. Evatt, who served as chairman of the General Assembly's Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine.

Some change in Australia's attitude toward Zionism had occurred with the ascension of an Australian Labor Party (ALP) government under John Curtin in October 1941. Publicly, in the face of pro-Zionist and Jewish representations about the 1939 British White Paper restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine, this government maintained the line that this was a matter for the British. However, Evatt made it clear that he sympathized in principle with Zionist aspirations and Curtin had to quash a pro-Zionist motion at the 1943 ALP convention. [11]

By 1947, when Britain referred the Palestine problem to the United Nations, the ALP government under Curtin's successor Ben Chifley followed a more pro-Zionist policy. Evatt, for his part, was thoroughly

sympathetic according to Michael Comay, the Jewish Agency envoy in Australia at the time, who met with both Chifley and Evatt.[12]

Australia was one of the eleven members of the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), which ultimately recommended partition by a vote of 7-3. Australia abstained from supporting either this recommendation or the alternative, a single federative state. Australia's representatives to UNSCOP, John Hood and Sam Atyeo, personally opposed partition but Evatt ordered them not to state this publicly. Australia's abstention was a function of Evatt's belief, probably incorrect, that it was UNSCOP's mandated role to engage only in fact finding, and making recommendations would compromise its neutrality.[13]

Evatt was then unanimously elected chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine, set up in September 1947, as Evatt wryly put it, as an "investigation into the investigation" already completed by UNSCOP.[14] This was arranged, in part, as a consolation prize after losing a close contest with Oswaldo Aranha of Brazil to be president of the UN General Assembly.[15] Evatt skillfully used his role as chairman to see to it that partition was passed, by a vote of 25-13 with 17 abstentions, two months later.[16]

A Polish envoy to the United Nations, Dr. Julius Katz-Suchy, himself Jewish, later confirmed Evatt's crucial role in securing partition to an Australian journalist. He reportedly said, "Ah, from Dr. Evatt's country. Now that's a great man for you.... Without him the Israelis would never have got in. He bullied, pleaded, cajoled, coaxed until he got the right numbers for them." [17] Daniel Mandel, historian of Evatt's role in Israel's creation, endorses this as a "true and proportionate epitaph" for Evatt.[18]

Because of pressure from London, Australia followed Britain in withholding diplomatic recognition from Israel until January 1949. However, despite Britain's preference to the contrary, recognition was extended de jure at this point, not de facto, as in Britain's case.[19]

Following partition, in 1948, Evatt was elected president of the General Assembly, and Australia repeatedly submitted resolutions calling for Israel to be admitted as a UN member state. One such resolution failed in 1948, but another succeeded the following year.

More controversial from an Israeli viewpoint was Australia's proposal of, and crucial role in ensuring the passage of, a General Assembly resolution demanding the full internationalization of all of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Israeli Foreign Ministry sources from the period believed that the resolution, which passed 38-14 on 9 December 1949, would not have gone through without Australia's support-both because it was unlikely that such a resolution would have been on the agenda without Australia proposing it[20] and because Australia's role was crucial in swaying the votes of some predominantly Catholic countries.

Evatt pushed hard for the resolution. There is considerable controversy over his motivation, but the best evidence suggests it was probably a desire to win Catholic votes in the Australian parliamentary election of December 1949 (which in fact saw Evatt and the ALP lose office), a motivation strengthened by clumsy Israeli efforts to lobby the stubborn and touchy Evatt in opposing such a proposal.[21]

From Independence to the Six Day War

In 1950, a new, Liberal-led government took office in Australia under Robert Menzies, who had also headed the conservative government of the late 1930s that had strongly opposed Zionism and Jewish immigration to Palestine. The new government began once again to move closer to the British on Middle Eastern issues. As an opposition, it had been strongly critical of the pro-Zionist policies of the ALP led by Evatt.[22] But in power, its predominant concerns about the Middle East were containing communist influence in the region and freedom of shipping in the Suez Canal.

Relations in the early 1950s were further hampered by the first Australian minister to Israel, O.C.W. Fuhrman, who was appointed by Evatt despite Jewish-community concerns[23] and served from late 1949 to 1953. He was a man who openly displayed anti-Semitic sentiments among his colleagues, and his reports back to Canberra had no sympathy for Israel or Israelis and displayed an insistence on seeing the hand of Moscow in many Israeli actions.[24]

The lead-up and aftermath of the 1956 Sinai Campaign saw increasing warmth toward Israel displayed by Menzies and his minister for external affairs, R. G. Casey. Israeli representatives repeatedly asked for Australian assistance in obtaining the right to transit the Suez Canal, and received some support in this regard.[25] By 1955, a major Department of External Affairs (DEA) report on the Middle East was urging some sympathy for Israel's position on borders and refugees. Indeed, on the latter point, Australia had made several public statements in the United Nations supporting Israel's position that returning them to Israel was not practical and they should be resettled in their countries of current residence.[26]

Later, Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956 was seen as a major blow to Australian interests, and this was possibly strengthened by strong anti-Egyptian feeling, tinged with racism, that then existed in the country.[27] The government supported preparations for British military action in response, and discussed Australia's participation in any such efforts. Menzies played a role in the diplomacy surrounding the crisis, traveling to Cairo to present to Nasser, unsuccessfully, a proposal by an international conference in London to have an international management board oversee the canal.

Meanwhile, Israeli diplomats and Australian Jewish representatives pressed Australia to support Israel's right to use the canal as part of its diplomatic efforts. Casey argued that raising such considerations publicly would be ill-advised but insisted it was Australia policy to demand such freedom of navigation as a principle for any settlement.[28] As sentiment against both Egypt and the Arab cause rose in both Australia and the DEA, Casey began to express stronger pro-Israeli views privately and in parliament.[29]

Following the outbreak of the 1956 war, the DEA and the Australian representative to the United Nations, Dr. Ronald Walker, were initially critical of Israel. When it became clear that Israel's attack had been coordinated with Britain, the Australian attitude at the United Nations changed. Furthermore, Menzies expressed understanding in parliament for Israel's position, favorably quoting Ben-Gurion's complaints about both Egyptian aggression and UN lack of help for Israel in the face of cross-border attacks.[30] Australia was later to join Britain, Israel, France, and New Zealand as the only nations to vote against a U.S.-sponsored General Assembly resolution calling for a Suez ceasefire and a withdrawal of forces.

The increasingly positive Australian government sentiment toward Israel created by Suez did not fade, and relations continued to improve over the following decade. An April 1957 parliamentary debate on the Arab-Israeli conflict saw no fewer than forty-three speakers address the house, and according to the *Australian Jewish News*, "Speakers on both sides seemed to agree that Israel had suffered much from Egyptian aggression and that it should be protected in future." That same month, a speech in Melbourne by Menzies was characterized by a visiting emissary from Israel's right-wing Herut movement as "one of the finest Zionist speeches I have ever heard." [31]

Later, as the Australian Jewish community became the first in the world to begin to campaign on behalf of Soviet Jewry, Australia in 1962 raised the issue at the UN Third Committee on Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs. Menzies, for his part, called on the Soviet Union to allow its Jews to emigrate. These were the first-ever occasions where this issue was raised at an international forum or by an international political leader.[32]

Former Israeli prime minister Moshe Sharett came to Australia in May 1957 and attracted 150 parliamentarians to a meeting in Canberra. Evatt, who was leader of the opposition from 1951 to 1960, visited Israel later in 1957.[33] By the early and mid-1960s, reciprocal visits between Israeli and Australian officials had become routine. Israel's ambassador to Australia from 1963 to 1967, David Teshler, noted that during his tenure Australian visits to Israel had included the foreign minister, Paul Hasluck, the president of the House of Representatives, the speaker of the Senate, both the former and present leader of the opposition, the attorney-general, the premier of the State of Victoria, and forty-five other parliamentarians.[34]

Hasluck's visit in March 1966 was the first official visit to Israel by a serving Australian cabinet minister. He was welcomed in the press with praise for Australia's friendship for Israel, and had meetings and positive communiqués with Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and Foreign Minister Abba Eban. The next month, the deputy director-general of the Israeli Foreign Office, Arthur Lourie, came to Australia as did a Knesset delegation to the International Parliamentary Conference in Canberra.[35]

In September 1966, when criticized by a member of the Labor opposition for failing to protect Israel's right to use the Suez Canal, the new liberal prime minister, Harold Holt, defended his government's record of friendship for Israel.[36] In March 1967, Foreign Minister Eban visited Australia and praised its support for Israel in international bodies.[37] Henceforth, ministerial visits both ways became routine.

War Clouds

As the crisis that led to the 1967 war heated up, Foreign Minister Hasluck issued a statement that called for diplomacy but also hinted that Israel had a right to be protected from "aggression" and "war-like acts." He also criticized the fact that the arrangements made for the Straits of Tiran and Sinai in 1957 had been "so abruptly terminated" and asserted that Australia supported the right of all nations to passage through the straits.[38] This statement angered the Egyptians, who complained to Australia's ambassador in Cairo about Australia's partiality in this and other declarations on the crisis.[39]

Holt made Australia one of the few nations prepared to contribute to an international solution to the crisis created by Egypt's closure of the Straits of Tiran at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. Holt offered U.S. president Lyndon Johnson two Australian cruisers to be part of a mooted international force that would try to break the blockade—even though this appears to contradict a cabinet decision at the time that called on Australia not to participate in such a force. Australia also was one of only eight nations to sign an international declaration affirming the right of innocent passage through the straits.[40]

When war actually broke out, lasting from 5 to 10 June, there were differing views within the DEA as to the rights and wrongs and the correct policies to pursue. Internal documents and reports repeatedly stressed the priorities of not antagonizing the Arab states and Australia's Muslim neighbors, Indonesia and Malaysia. Presumably because of these concerns, Australia resisted Israeli requests to purchase Mirage aircrafts or spare parts or establish other military cooperation, and the DEA went to some lengths to quash rumors in the Arab world that Australia would accept large numbers of Arabs supposedly to be expelled by Israel from the territories captured.[41]

In the diplomacy following the war, Hasluck insisted that Australia's UN ambassador, Laurence McIntyre, revise a statement on Australian policy he was preparing for the United Nations in a more pro-Israeli direction. McIntyre had wanted to call for an Israeli withdrawal in exchange for a vague Arab recognition of Israel's right to exist. Instead Hasluck favored a ceasefire followed by negotiations, including on possible boundary adjustments. Cairo viewed this statement as hostile.[42]

In August, Hasluck defended Israel in parliament from claims that, because it fired the first shot in the war, it was guilty of aggression.[43] Eban in his memoirs described Australian officials of the period (with some exaggeration) as "endemically pro-Israel." [44]

Meanwhile the opposition, under Gough Whitlam who had visited Israel in 1964 and again shortly after the war, was at least as pro-Israeli as the government. Various party conferences passed statements of support for Israel's right to security and recognition.[45] In August, Whitlam criticized the government in parliament for not doing enough to improve post and air communications with Israel and accused it of having succumbed to Arab pressure. He followed this with a very warm statement to the Jewish community of appreciation and support for Israel.[46]

The public was, if anything, even more pro-Israeli. Press comment was largely sympathetic during the war, and this reflected the general attitude. In a group of nine non-Jewish young people polled by a Sydney tabloid immediately following the war, eight said Israel should be allowed to keep all the territory it had captured.[47] A later survey showed a plurality saying that Israel should be allowed to keep Jerusalem's Old City.[48]

The Gorton, McMahon, and Whitlam Years, 1967-1975

Following the drowning death of Harold Holt in late 1967, the conservative coalition governments under John Gorton (January 1968-March 1971) and William McMahon (March 1971-December 1972) largely continued the Middle East policies that prevailed under Holt and Menzies.

In many statements during this period, Australia declared itself "neutral," interested in friendship both with Israel and the Arab states, and keen on promoting peace especially through the United Nations.[49] However, these statements do not encompass the sympathy and regard exhibited by the administrations of this period toward Israel, which were apparent in international institutions. As veteran Australian journalist and former *Australian Jewish News* editor Sam Lipski put it, "while John Gorton was Prime Minister, there was no question that Australia was seen to be anything but pro-Israel." [50] Holt and McMahon also were described by historians as "very friendly to Israel." [51] In the United Nations, Australia almost never voted in favor of resolutions severely critical of Israel.

It is generally agreed that, despite a solidly pro-Israeli record up until that point, the election of an ALP government under Gough Whitlam (December 1972-November, 1975) marked a sharp departure in Australian policy toward Israel and Arab-Israeli issues. The Middle East was not a matter of controversy during the campaign and did not feature in the platform of either major party. Whitlam, speaking to Jewish gatherings during the lead-up to the campaign, emphasized his fraternal ties with the ruling Israeli Labor Party and friendship with leaders such as Golda Meir and Yigal Allon, and received a majority of Jewish support.[52]

In office, however, the Whitlam government moved farther from the United States and closer in its foreign policy to the nonaligned movement, where condemnation of Israel was the norm. Although Whitlam described this policy as "even-handedness and neutrality," [53] such neutrality was a far cry from the sort also proclaimed by his conservative predecessors.

The effects of this new policy became most apparent during the 1973 Yom Kippur War when Australia failed to condemn either the Egyptian and Syrian attacks that launched it or the Soviet airlift of arms supplies to the Arab combatants. However, once the United States began to airlift arms and supplies to Israel, the Australian UN representative, on instructions from Canberra, condemned both airlifts with a particular emphasis on America's. [54] Even before this, there had been repeated one-sided condemnations by Australia in the United Nations of all Israeli reprisals for terrorist and cross-border attacks, but silence about anti-Israeli aggressions. [55]

In a meeting with predominantly ALP-affiliated Jews called to clear the air, Whitlam apparently became angered by hostile questioning. He equated Israeli responses with terrorism, said an Israeli reprisal raid on a PLO base in [Lebanon](#) had been "not only a mistake, but a crime," and cited the growing Australian Arab community becoming "more articulate" as a reason to change Australian policy. [56] Most controversially, he referred to those present as "You people"; asked about the failure to condemn the Arab attacks that had launched the war, he responded: "You people should realise that there is a large Christian Arab community in this country." [57]

Under Whitlam, Australia also voted for a resolution equating Zionism with racism at a UN women's conference in Mexico, though it voted against the equivalent resolution in the UN General Assembly. [58] Whitlam later approved the establishment of a PLO liaison office in Canberra and became embroiled in scandals involving the acceptance of Arab loans to Australia and the ALP. In the 1974 Khemlani affair, Australia sought to borrow \$4 billion from dubious Arab sources, repayable as a lump sum after twenty years. [59] Even more controversially, during the 1975 election campaign Whitlam secretly approved a scheme to obtain a substantial sum, often said to be \$500,000, from the [Iraqi](#) Baath Party to help fund ALP campaign expenses. [60] It later emerged that the man at the center of the Iraqi loans affair, ALP activist Bill Hartley, had also written to Yasser Arafat seeking PLO funds for the party. [61] Approaches for funds also were reportedly made to [Saudi Arabia](#). [62]

Following his highly controversial dismissal by the governor-general and subsequent loss of an election in 1975, Whitlam continued to maintain that his stances were justified by the existence of the growing Arab community in Australia. [63] He also criticized Australian Jewish leaders for having "blackmailed" him, and implied that Israel dominated U.S. foreign policy and that the international media was monolithically pro-Israeli. [64]

1975-1983: The Fraser Years

The election of a Liberal-National coalition under Malcolm Fraser in December 1975 saw a return to a position more sympathetic to Israel. Australia again refrained from voting for one-sided anti-Israeli UN resolutions and voted against many of the harshest annual cases, often as part of a minority of only three or four.[65]

Fraser, who came from a rural district, had very little contact with the Jewish community before becoming prime minister but apparently developed an appreciation for Israel for strategic reasons in the early 1970s. He later built strong ties with the Jewish community, as reflected in his statements and his work on behalf of Soviet Jewry. In 1980, he was awarded the Gold Medal for Humanitarian Service by International B'nai Brith.[66]

The foreign minister, Andrew Peacock, consistently said that Israel could not be expected to negotiate with the PLO until the latter abandoned its call for Israel's destruction and instead recognized Israel. The government repeatedly stressed Israel's right to "secure and recognized boundaries." [67] Fraser himself used similar language, for instance, in a speech to the State Zionist Council of Victoria in April 1982.[68]

A major Middle East development of the Fraser years was the government's October 1981 decision to contribute Australian forces to the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai, which were part of the monitoring mechanism for the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. The Australian contingent, a combined air force-helicopter squadron, was small, around one hundred soldiers and eight helicopters, but surprisingly controversial in Australia at a time when all overseas deployments were viewed suspiciously in the post-Vietnam era. The ALP opposed the deployment on the ground that it was not UN-authorized (an expected Soviet veto made that impossible) and might damage Australia's relations with Arab states; opinion polls showed only 25 percent of Australians initially approving the idea.[69]

The force was deployed in March 1982 and remained until April 1986, when the ALP government withdrew it despite Israeli and Egyptian requests to remain.[70] A smaller Australian contingent returned in 1993 and has remained since. An Australian officer, Maj.-Gen. David B. Ferguson, AM, commanded the entire MFO from 21 April 1994 to 10 April 1997.[71]

In responding to Israel's attack on Iraq's Osirak nuclear in October 1981, the Fraser government said it "regretted any action which could add to the tensions in the Middle East" but did not name or condemn Israel. The ALP caucus issued a unanimous condemnation and party leader Bill Hayden rebuked the attack as violating international law.[72]

In the early 1980s, while continuing to support Israel's refusal to deal with the PLO, Fraser, in speaking to Jewish groups, began to call for Israel to agree to the establishment of a Palestinian homeland or state.[73] During the 1982 Lebanon War, Fraser was initially understanding of Israel but as the war dragged on became more critical. He first argued that, while the violence in Lebanon was to be deplored, "we need to understand that Israel suffered provocation." [74] However, as the fighting reached Beirut, he called Israeli behavior "short-sighted and foolish" and said the Begin government's policies were making it difficult for Israel's friends to sustain their support. He also called on the United States and other powers to do something to halt Israeli attacks on West Beirut.[75] Following the Sabra and Shatila massacre by a Lebanese militia allied with Israel, Fraser declared, "Events [have occurred] which weaken or diminish Israel's right to the support of countries such as Australia because it breaks down the moral position on which it stands." [76]

The Hawke Years, 1983-1991

The man who defeated Fraser in the March 1983 election was already well known for supporting Israel and other "Jewish" causes such as Soviet Jewry. Former trade union leader Bob Hawke had developed a strong affinity for Israel during a 1971 (and subsequent 1973) visit to the country, forming good relations with officials from the Histadrut trade union movement, along with what has been called a "platonic love

affair" with Golda Meir. Both Jerusalem and a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum profoundly moved him.[77]

Following the visit Hawke became involved in pro-Israeli activity. He attacked Whitlam for his policies during the 1973 war, delivered speeches and wrote a booklet arguing Israel's case, and fought anti-Israeli segments of the ALP and union movement. He also became an internationally recognized champion of the campaign to free Soviet Jews.[78]

Although Hawke's ardor for Israel cooled somewhat after the Israeli Labor Party was defeated by the right-wing Likud in the 1977 election, he came to office with both Jewish and non-Jewish Australians well aware of his pro-Israeli history. Nevertheless, Israeli-Australian relations proved more complex and disputatious during the eight years of Hawke's prime ministership than might have been expected.

Hawke formulated an original plan for peace in the late 1970s whereby Israel would withdraw to the 1967 boundaries but would have the right, if attacked from the vacated territories, to counterattack and permanently retain any land it recaptured.[79] Throughout his political career Hawke aspired to play a mediating or peacemaking role in the Middle East.

The Middle East policy of Hawke's government, at least until about 1988, largely mirrored that of the Fraser years though with perhaps some more receptivity to Palestinian and Arab approaches, especially regarding the role of the PLO. During the election campaign, Hawke reiterated what had essentially been the Fraser government's policy in the early 1980s: support for Israel's right to "secure and recognized boundaries" but also for the "right of the Palestinians to their independence and the possibility of their own independent state." [80]

In September 1983, shortly after taking office, the Hawke government announced changes in Australian policy including support for the establishment of an Arab League office in Australia and allowing Australian ambassadors to meet PLO representatives "in their range of political contacts." However, when Jewish leaders met Hawke to express concern, they were reassured that the Arab League would not be allowed to use any office to engage in activity relating to a boycott of Israel or firms trading with Israel; that there was no change in Australia's policy of not recognizing the PLO as long as it denied Israel's right to exist; and that Australia would continue to avoid supporting one-sided UN resolutions proposed by "those countries seeking to delegitimize Israel." [81]

In December 1983, Hawke had a confrontation over Israel with Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi during a British Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in New Delhi. He successfully insisted on changes to a clause in the final communiqué calling for the withdrawal solely of Israeli forces from Lebanon, demanding that it call for all foreign forces to leave, especially Syria's.[82]

The Hawke years also saw the first visit by a serving Israeli president to Australia and, reciprocally, the first visit by a serving Australian prime minister to Israel. President Chaim Herzog's visit took place in November 1986; Hawke made a three-day trip to Israel in January 1987. Herzog's visit was ceremonial but successful. "Australia," he said, "has stood by our side on many occasions in the difficult years preceding the establishment of the State of Israel and since its establishment." [83] Welcoming him, Hawke said that the "friendship between our countries goes back to the foundation of the modern state of Israel." [84]

Hawke also had a positive visit, and was welcomed by Israeli newspapers recalling the role of Australian soldiers in Palestine during both world wars. He clearly continued to feel a connection and again was emotional after visiting Yad Vashem. Israeli leaders asked for Australian help in reaching out to Asian and Pacific nations, and for progress in establishing direct air connections to Australia.[85] At his final press conference, Hawke reiterated Australian policy on the need to resolve the Palestinian problem and expressed hope that mutual Israeli-PLO recognition might soon be achievable.[86]

Australia's UN voting during the Hawke government was somewhat less pro-Israeli than during the Fraser years. Australia preferred more to vote with the majority of Western nations on Middle Eastern issues, whereas the Fraser government had been more willing sometimes to be in the minority.[87]

One major achievement at the United Nations in this period was the Hawke government's role in the successful campaign to rescind the 1975 "Zionism is racism" resolution. Australia began intense involvement in this effort in October 1986 when Hawke introduced a motion to the Australian parliament deploring the resolution and calling for its annulment. With bipartisan support, this passed almost unanimously. The U.S. Congress followed suit shortly afterward. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Australia made it a priority in its routine relations with neighboring Pacific and Southeast Asian nations to solicit their support for repealing the resolution, finally achieved in December 1991.[88]

However, the late 1980s also saw increasing Australian-government criticism of Israel, especially concerning its handling of the First Intifada and its refusal to countenance talks with the PLO after its 1988 declaration, which Australia (and the United States) accepted as constituting recognition of Israel. On the former point, Foreign Minister Hayden, visiting Israel in February 1988, said Israel's "sometimes arbitrary and violent" handling of the crisis caused "profound distress" and added, "I must be honest: Australia cannot agree with this." Hawke in parliament proposed passing a bipartisan resolution expressing concern about Israeli policies in the territories.[89]

In April 1989, Australia's UN ambassador, Dr. Peter Wilenski (who was Jewish) delivered a very one-sided condemnation of Israeli policies in the territories and even apologized to the Saudi ambassador for Israel's alleged mistreatment of people seeking to pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.[90] In March 1990, the Hawke government issued a Middle East policy statement that for the first time insisted that East Jerusalem was part of the West Bank, something that had always been ambiguous in Australian statements previously.[91]

Matters changed somewhat following the outbreak of the Gulf crisis prompted by Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Hawke quickly backed U.S. and UN action to reverse the invasion and committed three Australian naval vessels to the military coalition. Contacts with the PLO were also frozen in the wake of Arafat's backing of Saddam Hussein. Hawke also firmly opposed linkage, the argument advanced by Iraq and some commentators that Israel should withdraw from the West Bank and [Gaza](#) as part of a deal for Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.

However, probably Australia's greatest contribution to the war effort was through use of the Nurrungar and Northwest Cape communication bases, run jointly with the Americans. These provided real-time data on Iraqi missile launches, and crucial satellite communication links.[92] After the war it was confirmed that Australia had provided Israel with top-secret information from Nurrungar warning of the Iraqi Scud launches against Israel, based on satellite infrared detections. Attacked for this after the war by left-wing groups opposed to the bases, Australian defense minister Senator Robert Ray said, "Essentially the [antibases] coalition accuses me of allowing the Australian-American facilities at Nurrungar to be used to give early warning time to citizens of Israel that missiles are coming. If I am guilty of that...that is my proudest moment in politics." [93] The parliament also passed a resolution deploring the Iraqi missile attacks on Israel. [94]

The Keating Years, 1991-1996

In May 1991, Hawke was presented with the Shield of Jerusalem award on behalf of Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek and the World Zionist Organization. However, his press office discouraged media coverage of the ceremony, possibly because Hawke was increasingly under threat within his own party where some crucial supporters disapproved of his long-term ties to Israel and the Jewish people.[95]

In December 1991, Hawke was deposed in a party room ballot by his treasurer Paul Keating. In contrast to Hawke, Keating had no record of emotional attachment to Israel. He had little history of contact with the Australian Jewish community before becoming treasurer.[96] When he had spoken to Jewish-community groups he had sometimes raised ire, as in 1990 when he insisted that Australia opposed any Israeli settling in East Jerusalem as well as the territories.[97] His personal focus in foreign policy was mainly on the Asia-Pacific region.

In May 1992, Keating reiterated Australian policy of supporting a two-state solution and a secure Israel. He also explained a decision a few days previously to resume contact with the PLO. This was announced by Foreign Minister Gareth Evans just before he left on a twelve-day visit to six Middle Eastern countries including Israel. The visit, which included repeated apparent efforts to promote the PLO's role in the peace process, and criticism of Israeli settlements, dismayed many Australian Jewish leaders. In subsequent meetings with the community, Evans said the government's policy had not changed but conceded that his language had sometimes been too one-sided and promised some improvements in UN voting.[98]

Keating welcomed the Oslo accords but, despite being in Washington at the time, did not attend the White House lawn signing ceremony, citing other commitments. However, after the signing Foreign Minister Evans assisted Israeli efforts to establish relations with Asian Muslim countries at the request of the Israeli embassy in Canberra. In 1994, the Israeli national airline El Al was unable to proceed with plans to begin service to Australia because the federal government refused to allow the airline to use its own security personnel in Australia.[99]

As part of the Oslo process Australia hosted, in April 1995, a multilateral experts' meeting dealing with water issues, including Israeli, Palestinian, and other Arab scientists and policy authorities. The same month, Australian defense minister Ray visited Israel and announced it was being considered as a source of military technology for Australia. Asked if this would not be controversial for Australia's Arab trading partners, he replied, "It might be just as controversial to be buying and trading in those particular countries." [100]

In September 1995, Evans chastised Israel for "extreme inflexibility" on Jerusalem.

In November that year, Keating made his first and only trip to Israel for the funeral of assassinated prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.[101]

Australia helped supervise the Palestinian election of January 1996, and an Australian jurist, Justice Marcus Einfeld, spearheaded an organization of Australian lawyers, Australian International Legal Resources, to help build a legal system for the [Palestinian Authority](#). [102]

New Heights: The Howard Government, 1996-2007

In March 1996, a government was elected that brought the Australian-Israeli relationship to new heights. Throughout the thirteen ALP years, the opposition under a series of leaders had generally been supportive of government policy on Israel, and occasionally critical that the government was not being understanding enough of Israel.[103] However, the election of John Howard as prime minister, and his appointment of Alexander Downer as foreign minister, made Australia one of Israel's closest and most consistent friends in the world. Moreover, throughout their eleven years in office, the ALP opposition has largely also been led by pro-Israeli individuals-Kim Beazley from March 1996 to November 2001 plus January 2005 to December 2006; Simon Crean from November 2001 to December 2003; and since December 2006, Kevin Rudd. (One opposition leader, Mark Latham, from December 2003 to January 2005, was more in the Keating mold with less special warmth for Israel but still reasonably supportive.)

John Howard's personal sympathy and regard for Israel, which he first visited privately as a young man in 1964, is something he declares regularly and is reflected in his government's policy. As opposition leader he expressed "on behalf of the Opposition, to the people of Israel and to those of Jewish persuasion within Australia...our respect and admiration for their contribution to the cause of peace around the world." [104] Shortly after taking office, he declared himself a "long-standing friend of Israel." [105] In 2000 he declared, "The personal affection I have for the state of Israel, the personal regard I have for the Jewish people of the world, will never be diminished. It is something I hold dearly, something I value as part of my being and as part of what I have tried to do with my life." [106] In 2002, he called himself an "unapologetic and long-standing friend of Israel." [107] In 2007, he spoke of the "personal commitment I have to the relationship between Australia and the State of Israel" and the "precious bilateral relationship between Australia and Israel." [108]

Howard also has consistently articulated an understanding of Israel's security dilemmas. For instance, during the 2006 war with [Hizballah](#) in Lebanon, Howard went on Australian television to defend Israel's response, saying:

once you are attacked...and if that attack is in the context of a 50-year rejection of your right to exist, which is the situation in relation to [Iran](#)-and bear in mind the link between Iran and Hezbollah; bear in mind the exhortations from the Iranian President that Israel should be destroyed and wiped off the map-you can understand the tenacity with which the Israelis have responded.[109]

Later in 2006, he stated, "There must be unconditional acceptance throughout the entire Arab world, without exception, of Israel's right to exist in peace and security behind recognized borders. The entire Arab world-including Syria, Hezbollah and [Hamas](#) and in addition Iran-must give up forever the idea that the Israelis can be driven into the sea."[110]

In the course of the Iraq-war debate in 2003, Israeli policies were criticized but Howard insisted: "It remains a great tragedy that the courageous efforts of Ehud Barak, the former prime minister of Israel, who offered Palestinians the great bulk of their demands, were ultimately repudiated by the Palestinian chairman, Yasir Arafat."[111] Howard has made similar comments on a number of occasions.[112]

For his friendship with Israel and the Jewish people, Howard was awarded an honorary doctorate by Bar-Ilan University in 2000, the American Jewish Committee Distinguished Public Service Award in 2002, the American Jewish Committee American Liberties Medallion in 2004, the B'nai Brith International Presidential Gold Medal in 2006, and the Zionist Federation of Australia's Jerusalem Prize in 2007. The Jewish National Fund announced the establishment of the "John Howard Negev Forest" in Israel in 2007. Under the Howard government, Australia's UN voting record has been the most pro-Israeli in the world excepting only the United States and three small Pacific Island countries.

Shortly after taking office, Foreign Minister Downer publicly pledged to fight for Israel's admittance to the WEOG (Western European and Other) regional grouping at the United Nations to correct the situation where Israel was the only country in the world belonging to no such grouping.[113] This was achieved, with considerable Australian assistance, in 2000.

Initially, Australia's UN voting patterns shifted to greater abstention on resolutions one-sidedly critical of Israel, but by 2003 Australia had begun to vote against more of these resolutions, especially including the maintenance of the United Nations' one-sided Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. In 2004, Australia also began to vote to defund the Division of Palestinian Rights in the Office of the Secretary-General.[114] Downer also actively raised with Asian and Pacific counterparts the need to defund the permanent pro-Palestinian bureaucracy within the United Nations.[115]

With respect to Israel's West Bank barrier intended to block suicide terrorism, Australia voted against a UN special session on the subject following an International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory on the issue. Downer explained that the decision risked politicizing the ICJ, and "we believe Israel has the right to defend itself against terrorist attack," and "the security barrier has been demonstrably successful." [116] Australia also boycotted a December 2001 Geneva meeting of the contracting parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention convened solely to condemn Israel.[117]

Australia played a significant role in the UN Durban Conference against Racism in August-September 2000, infamous for its anti-Semitic atmosphere and resolutions condemning Zionism. After the Israeli and American delegations walked out in protest, Australian UN ambassador John Dauth took the lead as the most vehement critic of the conference's poisonous character.[118]

To the 2003 Iraq war Australia primarily contributed elite Special Air Service (SAS) troops whose main role, successfully executed, was to penetrate behind Iraqi lines and prevent the launch of Scud missiles against Israel.[119]

In late 2003, controversy erupted in Australia when the Sydney Peace Foundation, a body associated with Sydney University, awarded its annual Sydney Peace Prize to Palestinian activist Hanan Ashrawi. New South Wales state premier Bob Carr presented the prize, but both Howard and Downer criticized Ashrawi's appropriateness as a recipient.[120]

In November 2005, Howard held talks with Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf and reportedly urged him to consider enlarging his nation's dialogue with Israel. Pakistan did in fact later institute ministerial-level meetings and accept earthquake relief from Israel.[121]

Australia has been sharply critical of the extreme anti-Israeli and Holocaust-denying statements of Iranian president [Ahmadinejad](#) in recent years along with Iran's support for terrorism. In 1999, Australia joined other Western countries in urging Iran to release thirteen Iranian Jews charged with spying for Israel.[122]

Downer made valuable visits to Israel in mid-1998 and again in January 2005. Howard made an official visit to Israel in May 2000. He also held meetings with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in New York in September 2005, and told him, "I think you are very very courageous and you deserve the respect of the world" for the disengagement from Gaza.[123] Other government and opposition frontbenchers and groups of backbenchers have visited Israel virtually every year.

From the Israeli side, major recent visits include President Moshe Katzav in February-March 2005, former prime minister Barak in March 2003, Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin in November 2005, Transport Minister and former defense minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer in April 2007, and former prime minister Netanyahu in August 2001.

An Official Summation

Before the 2004 election, the ruling coalition issued this statement on Australia's policy toward Israel:

Under the Coalition Government, the relationship between Australia and Israel has never been stronger. This is reflected in the quality and depth of relations at the ministerial and senior official level, extensive community and business links, expanding trade and economic ties, and the substantial cooperation between the two countries, including in the fight against international terrorism. As a staunch friend of Israel and as a country with strong interests in a peaceful and stable Middle East region, Australia continues to provide high-level political support to facilitate a comprehensive, negotiated peace settlement. We have been active in using Australia's voice and vote in multilateral forums, especially the United Nations, to support initiatives that contribute to the peace process, and where necessary, oppose decisions and declarations that are unbalanced and unproductive.[124]

This remains an accurate description of the ties between the two countries, reflecting a long and close history, but also the fact that the relationship has reached new heights over the past decade.

Australian-Israeli Trade

For most of Israel's history, trade with Australia has been small, a very minor proportion of total international trade for both countries. It has always been dwarfed by Australia's extensive trade, primarily in wheat, sheep, meat, and minerals, with various Arab states.

However, in recent years the relationship has grown strongly, and total Australian-Israeli trade now approaches \$500 million a year, almost 85 percent of it comprising Australian imports from Israel. This consists primarily of IT and telecommunications equipment, precious stones and metals, chemical products, and plastics. The majority of Australian exports to Israel were mineral products.[125] There is also believed to be substantial military cooperation and trade in equipment and knowledge not included in those figures.

Australia and Israel have regularly signed various agreements related to trade and joint R&D and science. There has also been discussion of further cooperation in the areas of communications, agricultural technology and water management, biotechnology, and defense.[126]

However, despite the recent trade growth and the potential for additional cooperation, it would be difficult to argue that economic incentives have played a major role in the relationship. Indeed, Australia has much larger trade with the Arab states, and the Australian Trade Commission notes that Israel is

Australia's "seventh most important export destination in the Middle East and our 35th most important trading partner overall." [127] Seemingly this would impel Australia to distance itself from Israel.

Conclusion

In 2000, the president of Bar-Ilan University, Prof. Moshe Kaveh, welcomed Prime Minister Howard and stated, "Australian-Israeli political ties go beyond the political. They are culturally deep, spiritually intimate." [128] In 2005, Foreign Minister Downer, visiting Israel, said, "Australia and Israel may lie on opposite sides of the globe, but our relationship is far closer. We share your hopes and aspirations and your anguish at the loss of loved ones at the hands of terrorists. Above all, we admire the strength and courage of Israelis for these are traits Australians see in themselves." [129]

Such statements may seem to be the clichés of diplomacy. However, the history of the relationship, from the Australian forces in Palestine during both world wars, through Australia's crucial role in partition and diplomatic support during 1956 and 1967, up to the current extraordinarily friendly relations, show that they indeed reflect something real.

It is difficult to explain the Australian-Israeli relationship in terms of common political and economic concerns. Distant countries with seemingly few overlapping interests, they have nonetheless been much more intertwined than one would otherwise expect, despite some rough patches such as during the Whitlam era. The explanation appears to involve an affinity of the kind suggested by Downer and Kaveh in their remarks.

* * *

Notes

[1]. For statistics on Jewish population per thousand inhabitants in various countries, see Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population 2006," in *American Jewish Yearbook 2006* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006), 559-601.

[2]. For a good example, see Howard Nathan, "Bonded by History: The ANZACs and Israel Share Many Chapters" *The Review*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (2000): 24-25.

[3]. H. S. Gullet, *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine 1914-1918 (Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Vol. 7)*, 7th ed. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1939), 478-79, cited in Chanan Reich, *Australia and Israel: An Ambiguous Relationship* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 2-3.

[4]. Reich, *ibid.*, 8-11.

[5]. Daniel Mandel, *H. V. Evatt and the Establishment of Israel: The Undercover Zionist* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 54-55.

[6]. Reich, *Australia and Israel*, 3.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 4-5, 7.

[8]. Nathan, "Bonded by History," 24.

[9]. Remarks to then Australian defense minister Senator Robert Ray, as reported in Robert Ray, "Mutual Admiration," *The Review*, Vol. 27, No. 8 (2002): 22.

[10]. Reich, 4-6.

[11]. *Ibid.*, 20.

[12]. *Ibid.*, 21.

- [13]. Mandel, *H. V. Evatt*, 92-94, 101, 108.
- [14]. Cited in Reich, *Australia and Israel*, 22-23.
- [15]. Mandel, *H. V. Evatt*, 117-18.
- [16]. The most complete account off Evatt's efforts is in *ibid.*, 125-47.
- [17]. Reported by journalist A. W. Sheppard and cited in *ibid.*, 285-86.
- [18]. *Ibid.*
- [19]. Reich, *Australia and Israel*, 26-28.
- [20]. *Ibid.*, 78.
- [21]. Mandel, *H. V. Evatt*, 234-71, gives a detailed account of Evatt's efforts and the Israeli and Jewish efforts to lobby against this resolution and change Australia's position.
- [22]. For an account of the concerns expressed by the opposition Liberal and Country parties, see John Knight, "Australia and the Middle East: A Note on the Historical Background, 1947-72," in John Knight and Gunther Patz, eds., *Australia and the Middle East: Papers and Documents* (Canberra: Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1976), 5.
- [23]. Reich, *Australia and Israel*, 30.
- [24]. See Mandel, *H. V. Evatt*, 252, 281; Reich, *ibid.*, 1, 30, 52, 60, 66, 69.
- [25]. Reich, *ibid.*, 72-76.
- [26]. *Ibid.*, 88-89.
- [27]. *Ibid.*, 94.
- [28]. *Ibid.*, 96.
- [29]. *Ibid.*, 97-98.
- [30]. *Ibid.*, 100-02.
- [31]. W. D. Rubinstein, *The Jews in Australia: A Thematic History-Vol. 2, 1945 to the Present* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1991), 531.
- [32]. *Ibid.*, 438.
- [33]. Mandel, *H. V. Evatt*, 285; Rubinstein, *Jews in Australia*, 531.
- [34]. Reich, *Australia and Israel*, 122.
- [35]. *Ibid.*, 120-21.
- [36]. *Ibid.*
- [37]. *Ibid.*, 122.
- [38]. Paul Hasluck, "Statement by the Minister for External Affairs Mr. Paul Hasluck on the Developing Crisis in the Middle East on 25 May 1967," in Knight and Patz, *Australia and the Middle East*, 97.
- [39]. Reich, *Australia and Israel*, 105, 108.
- [40]. *Ibid.*, 106-07, 123.
- [41]. *Ibid.*, 110-11.

- [42]. Ibid., 114.
- [43]. Ibid., 126.
- [44]. Ibid., 114.
- [45]. Ibid., 125-26.
- [46]. Ibid., 127-28.
- [47]. Rubinstein, *Jews in Australia*, 533-34.
- [48]. Reich, *Australia and Israel*, 126.
- [49]. A good example comes from Knight, "Australia and the Middle East," 11-13.
- [50]. Sam Lipski, "Australian Jews and the Middle East," in Knight and Patz, *Australia and the Middle East*, 20.
- [51]. Rubinstein, *Jews in Australia*, 541.
- [52]. Lipski, "Australian Jews," 19-20; see also Knight, "Australia and the Middle East," 12-13.
- [53]. Peter Samuel, "Jewish Leaders Attack Whitlam," *The Bulletin*, 3 November 1973, 15.
- [54]. Lipski, "Australian Jews," 21.
- [55]. Samuel, "Jewish Leaders," 15; see also Lipski, *ibid.*
- [56]. Rubinstein, *Jews in Australia*, 541-42.
- [57]. Alana Rosenbaum, "Political Paradox," *Australian Jewish News*, 4 March 2005.
- [58]. Sam Lipski, "Australia," in *American Jewish Yearbook 1982* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1982), 271.
- [59]. Rubinstein, *Jews in Australia*, 542.
- [60]. Gerard Henderson, "I Gough: The Pitfalls of Martyrdom," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1990, 11. See also Rubinstein, *ibid.*
- [61]. "Former Whitlam Minister Reveals More on 1975 Iraqi Bribe," *Australia/Israel Review*, Vol. 15, No. 13 (1990): 6.
- [62]. "Gough Whitlam: Historical Revisionist," *Australia/Israel Review*, Vol. 10, No. 20 (1985): 6.
- [63]. Rubinstein, *Jews in Australia*, 543. See also Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government, 1972-1975* (Ringwood, Australia: Viking, 1985), 124.
- [64]. "Leaders Contest Whitlam Charge," *Australian Jewish News*, 29 November 1985; Rubinstein, *ibid.*, 543; Whitlam, *ibid.*, 124-26.
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[94]. Ibid., 314.

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[100]. Ibid., 342.

[101]. Colin Rubenstein, "Australia," in *American Jewish Yearbook 1997* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1997), 402-03.

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[114]. Colin Rubenstein, "Australia" in *American Jewish Yearbook 2005* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2005), 518.

[115]. Colin Rubenstein, "Australia," in *American Jewish Yearbook 2006* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006), 534-35.

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