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ISRAEL IN THE MIND OF AMERICAN JEWS

We know a great deal about the feelings or sentiments American Jews have for Israel, and how this finds political expression. We know far less about the underlying images and perceptions American Jews have of Israel, or, in scholarly and perhaps more pretentious terms, the ideology of American Jewry. It is unlikely that the vast majority of American Jews, even those who feel strongly about Israel, have an ideology. The question is whether, in the absence of ideology, continued support for Israel can be sustained. I want to touch on this aspect of the topic as well.

The majority of American Jews — at least as is reflected in public opinion polls, feel a strong emotional attachment to Israel. When asked the unfortunate question: How would you feel if the State of Israel were to be destroyed? American Jews responded overwhelmingly — over eighty-five percent — that they would consider this to be one of the great tragedies in their lives.

American Jews not only feel emotionally attached to Israel, but also provide Israel with overwhelming political support. This has been true since Israel's creation, even when such support threatened to invite public criticism. Since, it has never been tested, we have no way of knowing whether American Jewry would be prepared to support Israel politically over an extended period of time if that support were to invoke harsh criticism from the American public and/or from the White House and Congress. American Jewry has never experienced that challenge, although there have been brief periods, such as that of the 1956 Sinai War, in which harsh criticism of Israel has been heard. Not only did American Jewry remain steadfast in its support for Israel during that time, but even “non-Zionist” American Jewish leaders refused to be co-opted in an effort that was made by then-Secretary of State

Dulles to pressure Israel to withdraw. By and large, support remained firm, and support has remained firm, in every crisis that Israel has faced since that time.

American Jewry has not hesitated to challenge the President of the United States on a number of occasions — most recently regarding arms sales to the Arab countries. Israel itself cautioned American Jewry not to take a firm stand against the President, and the American Jewish leaders decided to ignore Israel's advice. In fact, Israel followed the lead of the American Jewish leaders in this unusual instance.

Not only do American Jews feel emotionally attached to Israel, and not only have they supported Israel even in the few confrontations that have arisen with the United States government and the American public, but there is evidence that American Jews support Israel government policies even when they would not otherwise have been expected to have favored these policies. Once again, we must be very careful; social scientists, and political scientists in particular, know that groups have a tendency to reinterpret policies of which they might otherwise disapprove into more acceptable formulations. This is certainly the case vis-a-vis images of Israeli policies held by American Jews: Israel does things that one expects American Jews not to like, but American Jews interpret what Israel does in such a way that Israeli policies seem less objectionable, or American Jewry finds reasons to support these policies for reasons that are marginal to the policies themselves.

The war in Lebanon was a good example. Given all that we know about American Jewish political dispositions, one might have expected widespread criticism from American Jewry about the war in Lebanon. The fact is that there was far less criticism among American Jewry of the war in Lebanon than there was within Israel itself. Those who have studied the phenomenon are inclined to attribute this largely to the perceived anti-Semitism or vigorous anti-Israeli policy of the American press. Among American Jews this created the feeling that, despite their own disapproval of Israeli policy, and despite their dislike of Sharon and, perhaps, of Begin, they must nevertheless come to Israel's aid in the face of unfair attacks in the American media.

Surveys of American Jewry show that the American Jewish leaders tend to be somewhat more critical of Israeli political policies than the American Jewish masses. We also know that those who are politically liberal in the United States tend to be somewhat more critical of Israeli foreign policy or settlement policy in the territories since 1977, than is true of those Jews who do not define themselves as liberal. But, by and large, American Jews not

only support Israel but also tend to support Israeli policies. The very outspoken and critical voices among American Jewry represent the exception rather than the rule. There are differences in the American support of Israeli policy between liberals and non-liberals. Younger American Jews tend to be somewhat more critical than older American Jews, but the basic fact of overwhelming support remains.

The other side of the coin is the fact that even those Americans who call themselves Zionists (about thirty percent of American Jews) are not Zionists in the way most Israelis would understand that term. It is not my intention to define Zionism or to enter into the controversy of what Zionism means; I limit myself to noting that since the creation of Israel we have been witness to a particular Israeli definition which equates Zionism with *aliyah* or a commitment to *aliyah*. The "Zionism" of American Jews is incomprehensible to Israelis who, following in Ben-Gurion's wake, are likely to question the Zionism of anyone not seriously considering *aliyah*. Whether this Israeli definition of Zionism is or is not historically accurate, or desirable, cannot be entered into here. Except for the Orthodox, the vast majority (over ninety percent) of American Jews, as reported by samples of public opinion, do not and never have considered *aliyah*.

An additional point should be made here, namely, the distinction between the State of Israel and Zion in its metaphysical sense. It is important to stress — and here I rely not on public opinion polling, but rather on my own impressions — that the conception of Zion has never played a central role in American Jewish conceptions of Judaism. It has not in the past, as far as I can tell, and it certainly does not today.

In his recently published book, *Galut*, Arnold Eisen, an American scholar who taught in Israel, has discussed the role of Israel and Zion in the thinking of American Jewish philosophers. His observations are focused on the three outstanding Jewish theologians representing Orthodoxy: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik; Conservatism: the late Abraham Joshua Heschel; and Reform: Emil Fackenheim. Eisen observed that, having examined the writings of Soloveitchik, Heschel, and Fackenheim, the first point to be noted was that, quantitatively, all three of these thinkers devote very little attention to Israel and Zionism.

He went on to analyze what they do have to say regarding Jewish tradition and the possibility of a rich and vital Jewish life in the Diaspora. They do so without wrestling with the problem of whether Jews should live in Israel. The Land of Israel, Zion, and Zionism are not conceptions central to their Jewish theology or concepts with which they must come to terms philosophically. There is certainly no implication in their writings that the

Jewish people require some sort of political autonomy in order to survive.

My own impressions of American Jewry confirm Eisen's analysis of Jewish theologians. Israel plays a relatively small role in the underlying images and ideology of American Jews. How, then, do we account for the deep emotional and political ties and commitments that American Jews have towards Israel on the one hand, and the relatively trivial role Israel plays in their conceptions of Judaism on the other?

I can only offer some hypotheses. First, it has been suggested that the existence of Israel, and its continued survival, is in fact an important demonstration of American Jewish loyalty to the United States. That is to say, if there were no Israel, American Jewish loyalty to the United States might be questioned because Jews have nowhere else to go. A strong, vibrant Israel demonstrates that American Jews are American not by *force majeure*. I have some reservations about this hypothesis, though it does merit consideration.

If this hypothesis were true, then the hope that an economically stronger Israel, or a more attractive Israeli life-style, would become a magnet for Diaspora Jewry, is false. It makes no difference what Israeli society is really like, whether it is religious or non-religious, rich or poor, more secure or less secure — it is not, and never will be, a magnet to the bulk of American Jews. I am inclined to think this is true.

A second reason which may account for the discrepancy amongst most American Jews between the lack of an ideological role for Israel and strong emotional and political commitment to Israel — rests on the politicization of American Jewry, which we have been experiencing with great intensity in the last twenty years. This phenomenon may be seen in the context of the politicization of ethnic groups in the United States in general — among Italians, Irish, and, certainly, Blacks and Puerto Ricans. The same process has occurred among American Jews. Jews today must be politically alert — not only to support Israel's interests, but also to support their own internal interests. Having become politicized, Israel becomes a major item on the communal agenda, both because of the media pressure which places Israel at the center of attention, and also because Israel has become a symbol to enemies of the Jews through which Jews can be attacked. Jews are conscious of the fact that neither Jesse Jackson nor Louis Farrakhan care very deeply about Israel. When these two men or others like them attack Israel and support the PLO, they are not so much attacking Israel as they are attacking American Jewry. And this awakens a counter-reaction among American Jews.

I mention finally, as a third factor, the Holocaust memory which operates

among American Jews, a kind of guilt feeling they have about their own lack of activity during the Holocaust, which leads them to feel that they must maintain a constant vigil with regard to Israel.

If I am correct that Israel does not play a central role in American Jewish ideology, what *does* provide its substance and content? What ideas or images are central to the American Jewish conception of Judaism? An answer to that question leads me beyond the boundaries of the topic, but I think it nevertheless important to observe that some American Jewish scholars challenge the very relevance of the question. And that *is* important to our topic. A group labeled the Revisionist Jewish Sociologists argue the interesting case that Judaism in the United States is irrelevant to the survival or even to the vitality of the American Jewish community. Jewish ideology, images, and values don't count. Rather, they claim, whatever American Jews *do* is, by definition, Judaism or at least Jewishness. In much the same way, A.B. Yehoshua argues that whatever Israelis do is not only "Israeliness" but also "Jewishness."

I think this argument has unfortunate consequences for Jewish life in Israel and even more unfortunate ones for Jewish life in the United States. But it is a point of view with which traditionalists must contend. According to this point of view, Jewishness is defined by whatever it is to which American Jews are committed, whether it be political liberalism, the separation of religion and state, helping Soviet Jewry, or even helping Israel. There is no measure, no quantity, no image of Judaism against which any behavioral activity can be measured.

I suggest that this conception of Jewishness is most dangerous, because it inevitably leads to a greater and greater distance between Israeli and American Jews, or between Jews in one country and another. There is no question that American Jews will develop their own conceptions of Judaism just as Israelis are developing their own conceptions of Judaism. Among Israeli Jews, for example, territory has become a central component of Judaism. "Eretz Yisrael," not in a metaphysical sense but in a concrete material sense, has a particular meaning which it does not have for American Jews.

Regardless of my own opinion in the matter, I think it not unnatural for Israelis to develop such a concept. It is equally natural for American Jews to develop more universalist conceptions of Judaism, just as it is natural for other diasporas to develop their own particular conceptions under the influence of the culture and social structure in which they live. The danger lies in the argument that these various conceptions are not only legitimate in their own right, but needn't contend among themselves. The danger is that

this benign and tolerant view of Jewish pluralism will destroy images of a universal Judaism against which particular images are to be measured and judged. This is what is to be feared, and what anyone concerned about world Jewry, whether living in Israel or the Diaspora, must guard against. Because, if such a notion becomes popularized, it undercuts the basis for a universal Jewish people and the sense of cross-national obligation and responsibility.