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RELIGION AND STATE IN ISRAEL THE PERSPECTIVE OF AMERICAN JEWRY

The subject of the perspective, or, more accurately, perspectives, of American Jewry as it relates to the issue of religion and state in Israel has a number of separate elements or components to it. The first entails the perspectives of American Jewry on the issue of religion and state, in general, and the second, the attitudes of American Jewry toward Israel, in general. I will begin by examining each of these to see if there is any basis for anticipating a problem of religion and state in Israel for American Jewry. I will then examine recent data which bear directly on the subject at hand and I will attempt to explain the findings. As will be seen, explanation is demanded by the fact that the data on American Jewish opinions concerning issues of religion and state in Israel reveal patterns which are almost the opposite of what might have been anticipated from an examination of the perspectives of American Jewry on religion and state elsewhere. But let me not put the cart before the horse. Let's begin with step 1.

AMERICAN JEWISH ATTITUDES TOWARD SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE IN THE UNITED STATES

Separation of church, or religion, and state has always been the hallmark of liberalism in the United States and, as Fuchs, Himmelfarb, Liebman, and Fischer,¹ among others, have consistently shown, American Jews have long

¹ Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The Political Behavior of American Jews* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956); Milton Himmelfarb, *The Jews of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 65-116; Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), pp. 135-159; Alan M. Fisher,

been very liberal. Despite the perennial rumor that they are about to defect from their tradition of political liberalism, the most recent data available, from 1984 and 1986, indicate that the rumor has no more real substance to it today than it had in decades past.² In the 1984 national election, the majority of Jews voted for Mondale over Reagan, though there were conflicting polls as to the size of the Democratic majority,³ — and more Jews voted Democrat than had done so in the 1980 presidential election. And, in the 1986 Congressional and gubernatorial elections, America's Jews remained "strongly oriented to liberal politics and the democratic party."⁴ With respect to the specific issue of religion and state, 89 percent of those polled disagreed with the statement affirming the need for prayers in public schools and only 6 percent agreed, and 89 percent stated that Mondale would do a good job of keeping church and state separate and only 8 percent stated that Reagan would. Even more revealing of the depth of American Jewish antipathy toward any church-state alliance is the fact that two-thirds of those American Jews polled in 1984 stated that they opposed tuition tax credits for parents of children in private or parochial schools and an almost equal amount indicated the same opposition when specifically asked whether parents of

"Realignment of the Jewish Vote?," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 1, Spring 1979, pp. 97–116, and "Where Is the New Jewish Conservatism?," *Society*, Vol. 16, No. 4, May/June 1979, pp. 5, 15–18. Also, see William Spinrad, "The Politics of American Jews: An Example of Ethnic Group Analysis," in Joseph B. Maier and Chaim I. Waxman (eds.), *Ethnicity, Identity, and History: Essays in Memory of Werner J. Cahnman* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1983), pp. 249–272; Stephen J. Whitfield, *Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau: Jews in American Life and Thought* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1984), pp. 97–112. It should be noted that the idea of separation of church and state has a much longer history in American political thought and that the idea of separation of religion and state as currently interpreted by American liberals is of much more recent vintage, namely, post-World War II.

2 Alan M. Fisher, "American Jewish Politics, 1986: Issues, Votes, PACs and Power," in William Frankel (ed.), *Survey of Jewish Affairs 1987* (Cranbury and London: Associated University Presses, 1987) (forthcoming); Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, "The American Jews, the 1984 Elections, and Beyond," in William Frankel (ed.), *Survey of Jewish Affairs 1985* (Cranbury and London: Associated University Presses, 1985), pp. 141–157; Martin Hochbaum, "The Jewish Vote in the 1984 Presidential Election," American Jewish Congress, 1985; David Singer, "American Jews as Voters: The 1986 Elections," American Jewish Committee, Dec. 1986.

3 Lipset and Raab, op. cit., p. 148.

4 David Singer, "American Jews as Voters: The 1986 Elections," op. cit., p. 7.

children in Jewish day-schools should receive tuition tax credit.⁵ In fact, it may be suggested that the issue of church and state and the broader issue of religion and politics were among the major reasons for growth in the percentage of Jews who voted Democrat in 1984 over 1980. Except for Hasidim and most Orthodox Jews, the vast majority of American Jewry is strongly opposed to any attempts to strengthen religion's hand in the political sphere, and strongly resists any attempts to weaken the separation between church and state in American society.

AMERICAN JEWISH ATTITUDES TOWARD ISRAEL

Eytan Gilboa has extensively analyzed almost every study of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel, beginning with the 1945 public opinion poll conducted by Elmo Roper through the 1983 National Survey of American Jews conducted by Steven M. Cohen for the American Jewish Committee, and he finds the data revealing, continuing strong support for attachment of American Jewry to Israel. American Jews overwhelmingly supported the establishment of Israel and have had highly favorable feelings towards her.⁶ Indeed, so strong is this attachment that it is able to weather such severe challenges as the Israeli war in Lebanon and the outright Israeli rejection of President Reagan's proposals for peace between Israel and the neighboring Arab states. Nor are there indications that there is likely to be any decrease in the intensity of the American Jewish attachment to Israel in the foreseeable future. As Gilboa concludes, the long-term trends reveal deep-seated feelings that have transcended dramatic and controversial events such as the 1982 Israeli war in Lebanon. These trends are likely to continue as long as Israel is perceived as an important vehicle through which American Jews can express their Jewishness, or as a means of protecting their ethnic survival.⁷

In a more recent and detailed analysis, Steven M. Cohen's 1986 study of the American Jewish attachment to Israel⁸ found that approximately 85 percent of American Jews consider themselves supporters of Israel. Cohen

5 Steven M. Cohen, "The 1984 National Survey of American Jews," American Jewish Committee, October 1984, mimeographed, pp. 1 and 3, questions no. 3 and 41.

6 Eytan Gilboa, "Israel in the Mind of American Jews: Public Opinion Trends and Analysis," Research Report, No. 4, Institute of Jewish Affairs, London, March 1986, p. 17.

7 Ibid., p. 18.

8 Steven M. Cohen, "American Jews and Israel: Ties and Tensions," *The 1986 National Survey of American Jews*, American Jewish Committee, Institute on American Jewish-Israel Relations, 1987, manuscript.

suggests that American Jewry can be divided into three different groups: the most intensely involved with or attached to Israel, comprising about a quarter to one-third of the American Jewish population; about one-third which cares deeply about Israel but does not have strong personal ties with either Israel or Israelis; and another third or more, of which most are probably pro-Israel but who do not express the kinds of deep concerns those in the other two groups do.

Cohen's projections, however, are not as optimistic as those of Gilboa. One reason for Cohen's diminished optimism is his finding of a lower level of attachment to Israel among the young which does not correlate with differences in religious belief and practice along age lines. Specifically, those who are aged 65 or older had the highest percentage of high scores on the attachment index, while those who were between the ages 30-39 had the lowest. Interestingly, the 30-39 year age-group had a lower percentage of those who scored high on the attachment index than did the below 30 age-group. While no explanation is given for this finding, Cohen does imply that it may indicate an actual decline in the attachment of American Jews to Israel.

One other significant finding of Cohen's, to which we shall again have occasion to refer in the next section, is that of a very significant relationship between denominational affiliation and level of attachment to Israel. Specifically, the extent of Orthodox Jews' attachment to Israel — however measured — significantly exceeds that of those from the other denominations. At the same time, Conservative Jews consistently score higher than Reform or non-denominational Jews. Moreover, differences between Orthodox and non-Orthodox are sharpest with respect to the most demanding measures of Israeli involvement, be it receptivity to *aliya* (settling in Israel) rather than pro-Israel feelings, or familiarity with several Israelis rather than just a few, or fluency in Hebrew rather than just a rudimentary knowledge of Israel's language.⁹

Moreover, when compared with his earlier 1983 study, Cohen found that the Orthodox had become more intensely attached between 1983 and 1986. There was virtually no change in the percentage of Conservative Jews who were highly attached, but there was an increase in the percentage of those with low levels of attachment, and among Reform Jews there was a decline in the percentage of those who were highly attached and a sharp rise in the percentage of those with only low levels of attachment. While Orthodox attachments, which were intense initially, intensified even more during those

9 Ibid., p. 19.

years, the attachments of the Reform and some of the Conservative Jews weakened significantly, and the latter are a much larger group than are the former.¹⁰

AMERICAN JEWISH ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGION AND STATE IN ISRAEL

Given the persistence of the American Jewish commitment to liberalism and, especially, the strong American Jewish opposition to any weakening of the separation between church and state in the United States, it would seem reasonable to expect similar American Jewish attitudes with respect to the issue of religion and state in Israel. That is, it might be surmised that American Jews would, ideologically, be strongly opposed to all manifestations of ties between religion and state in Israel. Such, however, is not the case. Until very recently, all that could be inferred from the studies of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel was that since, as was seen in the previous section, the vast majority of American Jews hold positive attitudes toward Israel, whatever attitudes they have toward religion and state apparently have little or no impact on their overall attitudes toward Israel.

Cohen's 1986 study, however, provides much more specific data on issues within the realm of religion and state, which indicate that most American Jews are not disturbed by nor are they particularly concerned about the whole issue of religion and state in Israel. For example, almost three-fourths of American Jewry are unconcerned with denominational issues in Israel and almost three-fourths do not perceive mistreatment of the non-Orthodox. Almost the same number, 69.6%–69.8%, is moderately to highly sympathetic to Israeli Orthodoxy.¹¹ This is rather remarkable since the Orthodox comprise a relatively small minority of American Jewry, and both the rabbinic and synagogue organizations of Reform and Conservative Judaism in the United States have frequently protested the Orthodox monopoly over the rabbinate in Israel and the discrimination against non-Orthodox there.

10 While Cohen places great import on this finding, the consequences need not be as grave as he implies. While it is true that the Orthodox are a smaller group than the Reform and those Conservatives whose attachments to Israel have, apparently, weakened in recent years, it is possible that the increased support of the Orthodox may offset any loss experienced by Israel from among those Reform and Conservative Jews whose attachments have, indeed, become weakened. This is particularly feasible in light of the increased socioeconomic status and Jewish communal involvement of the American Orthodox in recent years.

11 Steven M. Cohen, *The 1986 National Survey of American Jews*, op. cit., p. 68.

Likewise, when asked, "If Israel changes its 'Who is a Jew?' law to exclude conversions by Conservative and Reform rabbis, American Jews ought to reassess their attitudes toward Israel," only a minority, 28%, agreed, while 40% rejected the statement and an additional 32% were not sure.¹² Since many Reform and Conservative rabbis have threatened that such an amendment of the Law of Return would cause the bulk of American Jewry to become alienated from Israel and to reassess its support of Israel, it seems rather astonishing that only 28 percent of American Jews indicated that they would, in fact, reassess their attitudes toward Israel. Moreover, even that 28% did not indicate in what way their attitude toward Israel would be reassessed. We do not know whether such an assessment would manifest itself in an empirically measurable decline in financial, political, or emotional support or whether it might simply mean that 28 percent would then think of, or conceptualize, Israel differently — just as most American Jews no longer think of Israel as the paradise it was once thought to be, where all Israelis are good, most live in kibbutzim and break out into Hora dances at least once an hour, etc. — but that the new conception of Israel would not necessarily mean any less support for Israel.

Be that as it may, the responses to the questions pertaining to the realm of religion and politics in Israel all indicate that the majority of American Jews are not especially concerned with the ways in which religion and politics interface in Israel. Perhaps even more striking, even those who are concerned about that relationship — Reform and some Conservative American rabbis — do not advocate the complete separation of religion and state in Israel. It is not that they want out; on the contrary, they want in. Therefore, what their leadership is lobbying for is a modification of the existing system which would allow for the kind of religious pluralism which would give them equal standing with the Orthodox. Yet, as we have seen, when it comes to religion and politics in the United States, most American Jews are vehemently opposed to even the slightest breaching of the separation of church and state. How is this apparent paradox explained?

One possibility is that American Jews are not especially concerned about the issue of religion and politics in Israel because they are largely unaware of it. Such an explanation seems particularly plausible in light of one of the other major findings in Cohen's 1986 study, namely, that American Jews are largely ignorant of Israeli society and its language, Hebrew. For example, while two-thirds of the respondents were aware that "most major Jewish religious holidays are also legal national holidays in Israel," only one-third

¹² Ibid.

knew even such elementary facts as that Menachem Begin and Shimon Peres are not from the same political party, that Conservative and Reform rabbis cannot officially marry couples in Israel, and that Arab Israeli and Jewish Israeli children do not generally go to the same schools.¹³

If that were, indeed, the reason for the lack of concern among American Jews about religion and state in Israel, it would indicate, as Cohen has suggested, "a critical educational agenda for American Jewish institutions and policymakers concerned with the relationship of American Jews with Israel."¹⁴ This is particularly the case for such structures as the Reform and Conservative rabbinic and synagogue organizations, who would like to be able to involve their constituencies in a campaign to bring pressure upon Israel to grant them legitimacy along with the Orthodox.

It is not, however, all that clear that this is the explanation of the apparent paradox. The fact, for example, that when asked such an explicit question as that which was discussed previously, namely, "If Israel changes its 'Who is a Jew?' law to exclude conversions by Conservative and Reform rabbis, American Jews ought to reassess their attitudes toward Israel," only a minority of 28 percent agreed even on such a question, which did not call for a response based upon previously acquired cognitive knowledge, suggests that more than ignorance is involved here. As with the entire subject of this paper, much more data would be needed to make any definitive conclusions.

Alternatively, it might be suggested that what appears to be a paradox is actually not a paradox at all because the liberalism of America's Jews is not, as some have argued, ideological, but is rather, as others argue, situational and/or pragmatic. That is, the political liberalism of American Jews and, indeed, of those in almost every other country as well, derives not, as Fuchs¹⁵ argues, from inherent Jewish values but is, rather, social/structural in nature and derives from the structural condition of Jews as a minority. For example, Seymour Martin Lipset has argued that the political liberalism of American Jews derives from their status inconsistency as a middle-class or upper middle-class minority in American society.¹⁶ Werner Cohn has argued that American Jewish political liberalism began as the result of the historical condition of Jews in Europe after the French Revolution and emancipation, and has persisted because of the Jews' insecurity about the gentile

¹³ Ibid., pp. 38–39.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁵ Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The Political Behavior of American Jews*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, expanded and updated ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 255–256.

environment.¹⁷ Both Ben Halpern¹⁸ and Irving Louis Horowitz,¹⁹ argue that there is a very pragmatic and functional quality in liberalism for Jews (so long as the liberalism itself does not become too ideological), in that it is important for Jews to eschew political extremism of either the right or the left and to support the more moderate political factions. Even Charles Liebman, who argues that Jewish liberalism derives from the Jewish "desire to impose the Jewish condition of estrangement upon society,"²⁰ is essentially a social structuralist in that it is, after all, the structural condition of the Jews in non-Jewish society which precipitates that desire to impose their condition upon the rest of society. In Israel, however, where Jews are the dominant group and, therefore, their social structural situation is totally different, that liberalism changes and does not necessarily insist on the separation of religion and state.

The fact that American Jews hold different attitudes with respect to the issue of religion and state in Israel than they do with respect to that issue in the United States should not in any way be taken as an indication of the insincerity of their liberalism in the United States, nor should it even be very surprising. Israel is unique among modern states in that it was specifically created as a Jewish state and, while there are many disagreements among Israelis themselves as to what precisely that means, the overwhelming majority of Israelis, even though not Orthodox, do not wish to separate religion and state in Israel.²¹ Most Americans, both Jewish and not, define

- 17 Werner Cohn, "The Politics of American Jews," in Marshall Sklare (ed.), *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group* (New York: Free Press), 1958, pp. 614-626.
- 18 Ben Halpern, "The Roots of American Jewish Liberalism," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 2, 1976, pp. 190-214.
- 19 Irving Louis Horowitz, "The Politics of Centrism: Jews in the 1980 Elections," *Forum*, No. 38, Summer 1980, pp. 31-42.
- 20 Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew*, op. cit., p. 158.
- 21 Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Religion and Politics in Israel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 15-30. Also see their article, "What A Jewish State Means to Israeli Jews," in Sam N. Lehman-Wilzig and Bernard Susser (eds.), *Comparative Jewish Politics: Public Life in Israel and the Diaspora* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1981), pp. 101-109. They indicate their empirical findings accordingly: 93 percent of the Jewish population in Israel thought that Israel ought to be a Jewish state, 83 percent defined that to mean "a state whose population is predominantly Jewish"; according to 64 percent, "which lives in accordance with the values of Judaism"; and, according to 62 percent, "whose public image is in accord with the Jewish tradition. . . . Seventy-six percent of the respondents felt that there ought to be some relationship between religion and state in Israel." (pp. 101-102)

being Jewish as being part of a religious, rather than secular national group, and view the American Jewish attachment to Israel as a religious expression. As Liebman puts it, Israel is part of the religious behavior of American Jews,²² and one would hardly expect the American Jewish attitude toward religion and state to be otherwise. Indeed, support of separation of religion and state in Israel would probably be incredible for American Jews, not only because Israelis so overwhelmingly believe that there ought to be some relationship between Jewish religion and the Jewish State, but because Jews in America believe so as well.

This is one of the reasons that, as indicated above, even those American Jews who are politically active in the effort to bring about religious change on the institutional level in Israel, namely, the rabbinic and lay leaders of American Reform and Conservative Judaism, do not wish to abolish the interplay between religion and state in Israel. Rather, they seek to eliminate the Orthodox dominance in the religio-political sphere, to create a situation of religious pluralism in which they would gain institutional legitimacy and authority along with the Orthodox.

The fact that the majority of America's Jews is not now attuned to this struggle by the Reform and Conservative rabbinic and lay leaderships, is unconcerned with denominational issues in Israel and is unaware of any discrimination against the non-Orthodox in Israel, does not mean that that the religious parties in Israel can feel unconstrained by American Jewish public opinion in their effort to enhance the position of the Orthodox in Israel.²³ The fact the only a minority of those polled stated with certainty that if Israel amended the Law of Return so as to exclude Reform and Conservative conversions American Jews should reassess their attitudes toward Israel, does not mean that this situation would not change if, in fact, that law were so amended. It is quite feasible that if such an amendment was enacted, the institutional leadership of Reform and Conservative Judaism would become much more overtly involved in a serious effort to have that

- 22 Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew*, op. cit., pp. 88-108.
- 23 I specifically avoid designating their efforts as designed to change the "status-quo" in the public sphere because the religious and secular camps in Israel have conflicting views as to who really is trying to change the status-quo. And, as Liebman and Don-Yehiya point out, "Contrary to popular opinion, the fiercest conflicts over religious issues have broken out not in response to attempted religious coercion but in response to what the religious public interpreted as antireligious coercion — that is, interference by secular circles in religious matters and the right of religious Jews to conduct their lives in accordance with their principles" (*Religion and Politics in Israel*, op. cit., p. 27).

amendment rescinded and to make religious pluralism a reality in Israel. The public relations and "consciousness-raising" campaign which would be likely to ensue could dramatically alter the level of American Jewish support for the prevailing religio-political situation.

A third possible reason for the fact that American Jews seem to hold to a position for Israel which is very different from that to which they hold in other societies is that they do not relate to Israel in political terms. Rather, they relate to it in extended familial, ethnic terms. It is suggested that it is not the State of Israel, the political entity, to which American Jews are so attached. Rather, it is the Land of Israel, Eretz Yisrael, to which they attach so much meaning. This is suggested in the reactions of American Jews upon arriving in Israel, visiting Israel, and even immigrating to Israel, "making *aliya*." Invariably, American Jews relate to Israel as "home" and to their visits and even *aliya* as "coming home."²⁴ American Jews subscribe to political liberalism for political entities. Israel, however, being perceived more as a "home," a "haven within a heartless world,"²⁵ than as a political entity, is therefore not subject to the rules which apply to political entities. Just as the family does not necessarily operate according to the rules of democratic procedure, so with Israel, which is part of the extended family. Just as the family does not necessarily function in accordance with rational or legal-rational rules and is the place where "they'll always take you in," so many American (and other) Jews relate to Israel in similar terms. And, the political and other leaders of Israel frequently reinforce this perception of Israel when, for example, they speak of the obligations which world Jewry has to Israel. In fact, it might be suggested that the very existence of the Law of Return supports this notion of Israel as the home of the extended family.²⁶

24 These were the ways in which those whom I interviewed expressed it, in my study of American Israelis living in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip. See my article, "Political and Social Attitudes of Americans Among the Settlers in the Territories," in David Newman (ed.), *The Impact of Gush Emunim: Politics and Settlement in the West Bank* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 200-220.

25 Cf. Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Beseiged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

26 This conception of Israel as home rather than as a political entity is, however, not unequivocal. Clearly, there are times in which American Jews, along with others, do relate to Israel as a political entity. Sometimes, they even go so far as to expect much loftier political standards from Israel than they do from other nation-states. But that may be precisely because Israel is also family.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Almost all of the above has been predicated upon very meager data. It has, essentially, been an attempt to suggest alternative ways of interpreting very limited data which seem to point to a difference between the way in which American Jews relate to the issue of religion and state in Israel as compared to the way in which they relate to it in the United States. In the final analysis, this is an area which begs for much more empirical data before anything even approaching definitive conclusions can be made. Given its relevance to the practical, policy-making arena as well as to the theoretical realm, it does not seem presumptuous to suggest that it is an area in which we might soon expect further exploration with much more extensive and reliable data.