

Recent statistics indicate a change in feelings for Israel in the under 35s.

How will this affect Israel? What might this mean to the Jewish Diaspora?

In the wake of the atrocities of the holocaust, the State of Israel was founded upon the ideals of a secular state as the safe haven for the world's Jews. Israel placed itself in a unique position as both defender and spokesman of the global Jewish community, melding this 'never again' mantra into a unified state of pride and eventual prosperity. In light of the recent rifts caused in the Knesset by the Conversion Bill proposed by MK David Rotem of the Israel Beiteinu party, the majority of American Jewry is up in arms once again regarding the reoccurring issue of religious pluralism. With an increasing ultra-Orthodox influence in Israeli politics, many fear a more objective government standpoint has permanently given way to an exclusionary religious doctrine. This hazardous perception is slowly, but effectively decapitating the American romanticized sense of ideological concord for Israel from passing from the older generation to their children in the under 35-age bracket. The Conversion Bill is but a microcosm of the realities Israel is forced to tackle concerning Diaspora relations- with the slow erosion of the next generation of American's perception of Israel, could this be the straw that breaks the camel's back?

This bill represents the formalization of a destructive volatility emerging in the relationship between Israel and the next generation of Diaspora Jewry that is exacerbated by three sensitivities: domestic Israeli politics has disqualified the state from maintaining its

historical position as voice of the Jewish nation, a growing detachment to Israel among the under 35s of the American Jewry and lastly, the perceived divergence between the inherent values once shared between these two nations. Israel is, in essence, cutting the umbilical cord prematurely in it's strive to break free from many of the political, economic and thus ideological dependences on which it was founded. Nevertheless, the sui generis aspects of Israel's foreign policy do not solely depend on its relations with other states, but its good standing and moral support with the Jewish Diaspora. Delusions of grandeur are dangerously shortsighted as Israel prepares to do battle once again for its survival. This threat is no longer it's neighbors but it's brothers, as Israel now runs the risk of alienating itself from it most valuable asset – the future American Jewry. The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations proclaimed "Israel and the United States share political, moral and intellectual values including democracy, freedom, security and peace."¹ This statement, however true it may be, is losing its effect, particularly in the younger generations where fewer and fewer American Jews are growing up Zionists. The divergence, if continued, will sever Israel's most vital lifelines, the allegiance of heart and mind of all Jews to Zion.

Israel as a Voice to the People

¹ "US-Israel Relations." Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. <http://conferenceofpresidents.org/index.asp> (accessed December 1, 2010).

A major factor in the subsequent relations with Israel was that many American Jews were overcome with a sense of guilt due to their inaction during the holocaust. Having secured American Jewry support for the creation of state, Israel now had to determine its relationship to world Jewry. Israel's self-title role as spokesman for all was hotly debated in its early years, as it is once again today. Throughout the 50's, Israeli and global Jewish leaders battled to define the ties that bound them. Where did the Diaspora stand in the eyes of a Zionist Israel? During the 23rd Zionist Congress in 1951, it was discussed whether the American Jewry were considered *gola* or *tfutza*, in exile or mere dispersion.² There was a mixed reception of this notion, as many believed a strong Diaspora to be the pillar not solely of creation, but also survival of Israel. Classic Zionism however predicts a "withering away" of the Diaspora in the presence Jewish homeland, which was followed by repeated calls for aliyah from Israeli emissaries abroad under direct orders of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion.³ The Law of Return itself, by offering immediate citizenship to any Jew choosing to move to Israel, both underlined Zionist ideology as a bedrock value of the nascent Jewish state and expressed Israel's claims to represent world Jewry.

These claims met with significant opposition from prominent Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Committee. The 1950 Ben-Gurion-Blaustein exchange, between AJC

² Larunce J. Silberstein, *New Perspectives on Israeli History* (New York University Press, 1991), 258.

³ Bayme, Steven. "American Jewry and the State of Israel: How Intense the Bonds of Peoplehood?." Institute for Global Jewish Affairs. www.jcpa.org (accessed November 11, 2010).

Chairman Jacob Blaustein and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, was an attempt to remove many of the irritants present in American Jewish-Israeli relations such as dual loyalty, negation of the Diaspora, and who may speak on behalf of the Jewish people⁴. The AJC were uncomfortable with this idea of interdependence, happy to support financially but unwilling to gamble with their prominence for what they thought to be hollow ideology. This resulted in a change of rhetoric in Ben-Gurion's Diaspora plea, straying from this withering away for a more practical need and skills based call. The message itself however remained the same- "Aliyah now!" In hindsight this exchange has been aptly dubbed a mere 'footnote in history', however Ben-Gurion wisely still afforded a great deal of sensitivity to AJC concerns.

The tone of Israel's relationship with the American Jewry was most accurately depicted during the reparations negotiations with Germany from 1949-1952. Comparable to the dynamics between a president and his speechwriter, Israel was the face of a very carefully constructed collection of interests. This daunting task required a sensitive balance between specific Israeli interests and those of the Diaspora Jewry. Diaspora Jewry did not just act indirectly on Israel's behalf, but also served to later legitimize their direct contact to Germany. Nahum Goldman of the World Jewish Congress organized 22 major national and international Jewish organizations to meet with Chancellor Adenauer in December of 1949, paving the way for the Israeli

⁴ Bayme, Steven. "American Jewry and the State of Israel: How Intense the Bonds of Peoplehood?." Institute for Global Jewish Affairs. www.jcpa.org (accessed November 11, 2010).

government reparations exchange in January 1951.⁵ In the face of economic desperation and in spite of widespread opposition, a reparations agreement was signed on September 10, 1952 between Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharrett and Adenauer. Israel was paid a sum of 3 billion marks over the next fourteen years; 450 million marks were paid to the World Jewish Congress.⁶ Realities proved stronger than ideologies.

Israel once again championed a heroic cause in the name of the Jewish people in 1960. The kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann in Argentina and public trial in Israel sent out the message loud and clear. Considerations were first and foremost for the repercussions this operation may have for the Argentinean Jewish community, foreign relations with Argentina were seen as secondary.⁷ Eichmann's trial and subsequent execution brought a moderate sense of closure to many families of holocaust victims; it also finally put the shameful notion of the 'helpless Jew' to rest. The new Israel represents a new Jew, one that fights back. Germany stopped organizational reparations payments in 1966, bringing with it an end of the cooperative activities that forged these strong initial ties between Israel and the Diaspora⁸. One year later in 1967, the outbreak of 6-Day War allowed no time for a re-evaluation of the nature of this relationship. The

⁵ Liebman, Charles S.. "Attitudes of the Young State of Israel." In *Pressure without sanctions: the influence of world Jewry on Israeli policy*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977. 158.

⁶ "German Compensation for National Socialist Crimes." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <http://www.ushmm.org/assets/frg.htm> (accessed November 20, 2010).

⁷ Carmel, Yosef. "Israeli letters favored sparing of Eichmann." *New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com> (accessed November 13, 2010).

⁸ Larurence J. Silberstein, *New Perspectives on Israeli History* (New York University Press, 1991), 160.

awe-inspiring victory that emerged from this threat to Israel's survival was enough to refuel the tanks of faith, pride and solidarity in the Diaspora that would slowly be depleted over the next four decades. Still riding on the coattails of the 6-Day War, public opinion with each subsequent war has never been adequately rejuvenated in the same manner.

Who is a Jew?

By 1980, the question of "Who is a Jew?" had already led to at least five individual government 'crises' in the Knesset⁹. Under the 1952 Law of Return, Israel awards automatic citizenship to Jewish immigrants, anyone who would have been persecuted under the Nuremberg Laws. A person with a single Jewish grandparent may immigrate and become a citizen under the law, but is not considered Jewish for purposes of marriage and personal status, which was based on Ottoman precedent and assigned to the rabbinate.¹⁰ Population registry and Non-Jews wishing to become Jewish must undergo conversion under the supervision of Israel's Chief Rabbinate, which is Orthodox-controlled.

Menchem Begin was elected Prime Minister in 1977. Begin had promised the Orthodox leadership in Israel that he would endeavor to change the Law of Return to insert a controversial phrase, "conversion in accordance with Halacha", to the definition of Jewish identity. A

⁹ Liebman, Charles S.. "Attitudes of the Young State of Israel." In *Pressure without sanctions: the influence of world Jewry on Israeli policy*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977. 98.

¹⁰ Rabinowits, Stanely. "Who is a Jew: Prime Minister Begin and the Jewish question - former Israeli head of state Menachem Begin." *Judaism*, June 22, 1997.

delegation of distinguished Rabbis and community leaders from the American Jewish Committee, including Ambassador Sol Linowitz, Milton Perlmutter and Dr. Max Kampelman of UJA, joined in a united appeal to sway Begin. They were concerned that if the amendment were adopted it would explicitly reject the authority of the non-Orthodox movements in the Diaspora and "any unilateral attempt to change the carefully constructed formula for defining Jewish identity would shatter the unity of the Jewish people, undermine the prospect of aliyah, and result in incalculable harm to the state of Israel."¹¹ Unlike the Ben-Gurion's exchange with Braustein in 1950, AJC pressure was not handled with the same trepidation this time round. The proposal did not pass, but only by narrow margins.

Religious pluralism continues to be the Achilles heel of domestic Israeli politics. On September 1 1987, Prime Minister Shamir addressed the International Congress of Jewish Jurists on the findings of a special ministerial committee that was charged with the task of communicating with knowledgeable persons, both in Israel and in World Jewry, on the matter. Without consensus on the conversion issues, even the more moderate views do not offer the possibility of a solution that could satisfy most. In matters of religion few are ever willing to change their entrenched ideas. He believed there is more that unites the country than that which divides it, that an answer will only come about with tolerance of others' ideas. This is a fitting

¹¹ Rabinowits, Stanely. "Who is a Jew: Prime Minister Begin and the Jewish question - former Israeli head of state Menachem Begin." *Judaism*, June 22, 1997.

metaphor of the Middle East conflict as a whole. Despite their best efforts to develop a foundation of understanding on middle ground, Shamir realizes that “this will not prevent some parties or individuals in the Knesset from continuing their legislative efforts to secure a Knesset majority for their viewpoint.”¹²

Coalition governments in Israel have repeatedly relied on Ultra-Orthodox alliances, only to become extremely weary of their influence at a later stage. Golda Meir in particular was extremely discomforted by this Orthodox monopoly. She stated explicitly that the Rabbinate was not entitled to pass legislation that would determine the legitimacy of conversions that would be carried out in the Diaspora, understanding the serious ramifications on a political level¹³. Tom Friedman exposed this inherent flaw in the Israeli system in an article about the 1999 Israeli elections. Friedman believed that Prime Minister Netanyahu could run for his second term against Yassir Arafat, but he could not run against Ovadia Yosef (Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel) because he needs every ultra-Orthodox vote to get re-elected.¹⁴ Netanyahu once again faces these problems today and The American Jewry has internalized what Golda Meir already

¹² "Prime Minister Shamir to International Congress of Jewish Jurists- 1 September 1987." Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs .

<http://www.mfa.gov.il> (accessed November 24, 2010).

¹³ Abramov, S. Zalman. "Who is a Jew?." In *Perpetual dilemma: Jewish religion in the Jewish State*. Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976. 304.

¹⁴ Friedman, Thomas. "Foreign Affairs; Synagogue and State." *New York Times*, March 23, 1999.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/23/opinion/foreign-affairs-synagogue-and-state.html?ref=thomasfriedman> (accessed November 20, 2010).

feared in 1970, "[The Ultra Orthodox] want all of Israel for the Jews, but not all of the Jews for Israel."¹⁵

Conversion Bill

Representative of the American Jewish community have banded together and are leading a concerted and high-profile advocacy campaign to stop the proposed Conversion bill from this summer. The bill initially tried to prevent Diaspora Jews who have converted in the Reform or Conservative movements from gaining automatic Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. The bill is intended to ease the bottleneck of conversions in the country by allowing municipal rabbis to perform conversions, which currently very few courts are authorized to do. MK Rotem asserts the bill would help 350,000 mainly Russian-speakers, who are not Jewish according to halachic law, living in Israel.¹⁷

The Conversion Bill serves to de-legitimize the non-Orthodox religious streams by giving sole oversight of the conversion process to this orthodox Rabbinat, thus widen rift between the Diaspora and State of Israel. The amendment would place an unequal distribution of power in the hands of the Orthodox Rabbinat and only serve to exacerbate the skepticisms that have long been fermenting within the Diaspora Jewry.¹⁶ The "Who is a Jew?" debate is a bone of

¹⁵ Rabinowits, Stanely. "Who is a Jew: Prime Minister Begin and the Jewish question - former Israeli head of state Menachem Begin." *Judaism*, June 22, 1997.

¹⁶ Newhouse, Alana. "The Diaspora need not apply." *New York Times*, July 15, 2010.

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/opinion/16newhouse.html?_r=1 (accessed December 3, 2010).

contention that has now resurfaced, like wolf in sheep's clothing, under the sponsorship of Foreign Minister Avignor Lieberman and MK David Rotem of the Israel Beiteinu party.

While the specifics of the bill have been muddied over the last few months with each successive drafting, the fundamental issue remains the same- a domestic war has been waged using the Diaspora as a human shield. One must ask, "at what cost?" Leaving room for possible manipulation that would make the Law of Return applicable exclusively to born Jews and Orthodox converts, the potential implications extend far beyond the specific wording of the bill. Conversions conducted by non-Orthodox movements are recognized by Israel's secular authorities but not by the Rabbinate, which is in charge of life cycle events in Israel. In their push to penetrate more mainstream Israeli politics, this bill is in reality a strategy by Israel Beiteinu to secure votes from their traditional demographic of supporters (Russian immigrants) with little concern for anything else. Conversely, the opposition met by the Ultra-Orthodox Shas party materializes out concern over the possible decentralization of their monopoly rather than the desire to uphold halacha.

David Rotem's words in a public speech to Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, resonate with the young American Jewish community deepest fears. Telling 85 percent of North American Jews who are not Orthodox that their religious practices and rabbis are a sham takes its toll on relations. He believes that the only way improve the current conversion system "is if conversion is done according to Orthodox halacha and not according to Reform or

Conservative halacha... if there is such a thing.” To add insult to injury, he continued to say, “If you are telling somebody that he can convert in a Reform or Conservative way and then to come to Israel and be a part of the Jewish nation you are cheating him.”¹⁷ If Rotem considers this cheating a convert out of true Judaism, in turn the convert in turn will see Israel as cheating them out of their support. The conversion bill is the most effective method of alienating the American Jewry, a practice that evidently began long before this proposal.

Future impact on the American Jewry

In an age where America has served as Israel's primary friend and ally, great attention has been given to the unique role of American Jewry in creating and sustaining this special relationship. These two countries constitute the world's two largest Jewish communities, together encompassing approximately 80 percent of world Jewry. Israel's survival in the past has called for policies of inclusion rather than exclusion; for the fostering of Aliyah, and the fusion of diverse communities, all of which seem to be disregarded in more recent Israeli foreign policy.¹⁸

The romanticized American Zionism of the previous generation (sadly for Israel) appears to be no more than a product of a particular era. The Diaspora banded together to champion

¹⁷ Ahren, Raphael. "Bill granting Rabbinate monopoly on conversions sparks fiery debate." *Haaretz* (Jerusalem), October 29, 2010.

<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/bill-granting-rabbinate-monopoly-on-conversions-sparks-fiery-debate-1.321700> (accessed October 29, 2010).

¹⁸ Abramov, S. Zalman. "Who is a Jew?" In *Perpetual dilemma: Jewish religion in the Jewish State*. Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976. 320.

behind the underdog, but “they fell in love with an Israel that was more secular, less divided, and less shaped by the culture, politics, and theology of occupation.”¹⁹ Ben-Gurion’s leadership was the slave driver to Herzl’s dream of Zion, igniting the imagination and passion of the masses. In the last 18 years however, Israel has had numerous coalition governments and 7 different prime ministers. This instability leaves no room for consistency in future planning. Without a clear vision, there is no common denominator in Israeli politics. In a survey done by Steven Cohen of Hebrew Union College and Ari Kelman of the University of California at Davis, they found that “non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders,” with many professing “a near-total absence of positive feelings.”²⁰ The American Jewry of tomorrow will have no recollection of a united Arab front massed along the borders of Israel, but rather see it as a regional hegemonic power and occupying force. Israel is now considered the Goliath, with the Palestinians as David.

With each passing year, the remaining post holocaust cohort slowly fades as well. In the face of a complete media sensory overload, there is no place for this idealized passion shaped by the past. The world’s attention span has shrunk, looking forward not back, affected only by the stimuli of the immediate. The glorified land of milk and honey has been tainted with a constant

¹⁹ Beinart, Peter. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment by Peter Beinart | The New York Review of Books." The New York Review of Books. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁰ Beinart, Peter. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment by Peter Beinart | The New York Review of Books." The New York Review of Books. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/> (accessed December 10, 2010).

barrage of overwhelming imagery underlying messages of oppression and immorality. Public opinion can be used as a weapon of mass destruction in modern warfare. Pluralistic liberalism is seen as the only viable solution to the Middle Eastern conflict, yet domestic politics have strayed very publicly from these ideals. One is pushed to appeal to the mind not the heart, religious dogma is now seen as the anti-Christ.

There has always been a sense of constant struggle inherent in the mantra of Zionism, driven to overcome adversity at all costs. Zionists have been asked for too long to check liberalism at the door in their support for Israel, these results are now backfiring. A Zionist movement that does not feign concern for Palestinian dilemma is pitted against the broader American Jewish population that no longer feigns concern for Israel. American Zionism is in a dangerous downward spiral because the next generation holds liberalism as their highest value, however these two concepts need not be mutually exclusive. Saving liberal Zionism in the United State has become for Israeli policy makers one of the great challenges of this age, tantamount to keeping the Israeli head above the unfriendly waters of international politics.

At the beginning of the Korean War, Israel's neutrality regarding alignment between the two superpowers came to an end. Israel cut off from the relationship with Russia to ensure they remain in good standing with America, influenced by American Jews that were saying, "Playing

with Moscow will diminish aid from US Jewry.”²¹ When deciding upon which power to pledge Israeli support, Ben Gurion believed that with “the present conditions prevailing in the world and the Diaspora, the state of Israel cannot be neutral because it means alienating ourselves from the Jewish people, from Jewish communities”²². How much more so do this stand true today? American Jewry and US politics are inextricably tied, although this dependence is not ideal, Israel has relied on these two factors to safeguard it’s survival. It is too often forgotten that support from the American Jewry is not a forgone conclusion, but rather very much shaped within the context of current events.

Israel would sustain crippling damage when major donors and bond purchasers, already painfully aware of these trends, now realize that their congregations have also been humiliated by the repudiation of their converts. While American-Jewish aid is not implicitly regarded as a quid pro quo for Israel’s contributions to Jewish people hood, most Israeli leaders share the conventional view that it was and is vital to the Jewish state’s very survival. This change in feelings from the next generation of American Jewry, from every walk of life, will be not only simply apathetic, but likely to be actively opposed to an Israel as it is seen today. The case of

²¹ Michael Brecher. *The Foreign Policy System of Israel: Settings, Images, Process*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972; London: Oxford University Press, 1972. 41 pp.

²² Liebman, Charles S.. "Attitudes of the Young State of Israel." In *Pressure without sanctions: the influence of world Jewry on Israeli policy*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977. 158.

Effi Eitam, ex-cabinet minister and war hero, is a frightening representation of just how deeply antithetical the values of the current Israeli coalition government may be to the young Diaspora. In 2006 Eitman proposed the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the West Bank, suggesting “we’ll have to expel the overwhelming majority of West Bank Arabs from here and remove Israeli Arabs from [the] political system”. Despite these statements, Eitam merged his small Ahi Party into Netanyahu’s Likud in 2008. During the 2009–2010 academic year, the “Caravan for Democracy”, a special emissary for overseas “campus engagement”, toured dozens high schools and colleges throughout the States on the Israeli government’s behalf. Eitman was chosen as spokesman for this campaign. Once you strip away the irony, the implications of having this character as the initial point of contact for many of these young Jews is truly harrowing. This hypocritical juxtaposition only serves to shake those already rocky foundations from a progressively younger age.

What place would this holy land hold in the hearts of the Rahm Emanuels, David Axelrods or Kagans of tomorrow? They are more conscious than their parents of how much Israel strays from these liberal ideals, and less willing to excuse their actions in the name of security, let alone divinity. Religious extremism too often joins forces with extreme nationalism, to the detriment of democracy and to the pursuit of peace. “There is a fundamental assumption that Israelis are basically like Americans in their belief in democracy and in the rule of law,” said

State Department Official Jon Alterman, “When this assumption is undermined, it will hurt the sense of communality that binds the two nations.”²³

Conclusion

The American Jewry see Netanyahu’s coalition as a scary representation of long term trends in Israel: a drastic increase in the ultra Orthodox movement, an increasingly radical settler movement, and a Russian immigrant community that is particularly prone to anti-Arab racism. American youth, above all else, want peace in the region and have no qualms about openly criticizing Israel. Saying that their religious beliefs are a sham emphasizes their belief that the whole peace process is as well. Avignor Lieberman’s increasing prevalence in Israeli politics is seen as nothing short of terrifying for these young hopefuls, while the Conversion Bill only serves to validate their fears by casting them in stone. Whoever controls domestic politics, dictates foreign policy. Israel is no longer seen with the same sense of nobility as the past, a nation to which the Diaspora is not willing to tie their fate. The bad blood created over the religious pluralism debate has divided the homeland to its extreme detriment.

Israel finds itself no longer having the authority to speak on behalf of the Diaspora, and there first needs to be a consensus regarding domestic representation in the Knesset before Israel can consider itself a global representative once again. While the realities we find ourselves in

²³ Guttman, Nathan. "Jewish Leaders Largely Silent on Lieberman’s Role In Government. *The Jewish Daily Forward* (Jerusalem), February 18, 2009. <http://forward.com/articles/103178/> (accessed November 10, 2010).

today have changed, too much of Israel remains static. The next generations of American Jews have been born into a different world and their disassociation from Israel must likewise be combated differently. The American Jewry is desperate for a reminder, a reassertion as to why their grandparents believed so wholeheartedly in the values and ideals the beautiful dream called Israel. There need not be another '67 like victory, however a new symbol of hope is essential. Shimon Peres said that "[Israel] wants to be friendly with the United States in order to strengthen the link with American Jewry, not the other way round."²⁴ They now run the risk of losing both.

²⁴ Liebman, Charles S.. "Attitudes of the Young State of Israel." In *Pressure without sanctions: the influence of world Jewry on Israeli policy*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977. 164.

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