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Do Israeli and American Jews Need Each Other?

By Yehudah Mirsky



Starting in 2005, American readers of the Israeli daily *Haaretz* noticed something new in its pages: well-informed, jaunty analyses not only of American politics and diplomacy but of American Jews and American Judaism. The paper's correspondent was clearly a native-born Israeli, but, in decidedly un-Israeli fashion, he not only was genuinely interested in understanding American Jewry from within but regularly had insightful things to say about it.

Now, three years after the end of his stint in the U.S., and having established himself as a leading journalist on both sides of the Atlantic, including as the author of the popular *Jerusalem Post* blog, *Rosner's Domain*, Shmuel Rosner has gathered the fruits of his reporting and research in a Hebrew volume aimed at his native audience.

Despite its flip title, <u>Shtetl, Bagel, Baseball</u> is an excellent *tour d'horizon* of current trends in American Jewish politics, demographics, economics, and religion. The subtitle, "On the Dreadful, Wonderful State of America's Jews," well conveys the author's dual approach: a characteristically skeptical, Zionist take on the future of American Jews coupled with an un-Zionist willingness to be charmed and dazzled by their accomplishments and relentless experimentation. In the latter respect, Rosner (a friend and colleague) certainly parts company with the more doctrinaire versions of classical Zionism's "negation of the Diaspora."

By virtue of its size, wealth, organizational heft, and socio-cultural and political salience at the nerve centers of the world's leading power, American Jewry is unlike other Diaspora communities. Moreover, despite its genuine problems, it alone can plausibly claim to offer a political and cultural alternative to Israel as the chief locus of the Jewish future. And that is what makes Rosner's book so welcome an entry at this particular juncture in history. For while Israel

has long been, for large numbers of American Jews, a significant if not indeed a central feature of their identity, younger Jews seem to be charting a course whose arc increasingly tends away from the Jewish state, as from fixed <u>ethnic and national attachments</u> generally. Meanwhile, as far as most Israelis are concerned, American Jewry scarcely registers at all.

Rosner is well equipped for the task. An avid student of American history, he is also an obsessive consumer of reports, policy papers, polls, and press releases. His book, although alarmingly thick with statistics and studies, is saved from dreariness by his acute skills as an analyst, his peppery style, and the generous helpings of on-the-scene reporting he serves up. Refreshingly, though New York, Washington, and other major centers are never far from view, Rosner offers compelling reportage from such places as Corpus Christi, St. Louis, and San Diego.

Among the issues Rosner surveys: the arguments over just how many American Jews there are; the complexities faced by intermarried couples and the synagogues and communities trying in one way or another to include them; the high cost of communal membership and Jewish education; the growing popularity of the concept of *tikkun olam*; the hypothesis of an inexorable drift of the young away from Israel; the uneasy relation of American Jews to the evangelical Christians who love Israel and say they love Jews in general; stirrings of fracture in the <u>religious denominations</u>; the damaging effects of Israel's religious politics, and the rabbinate's statesanctioned de-legitimization of non-Orthodox movements, on Diaspora feelings of solidarity.

Naturally, American politics is at the heart of this book, and party affiliation is at the heart of that. Rosner observes that even today it doesn't take much for an American politician to be "pro-Israel" in the eyes of American Jews. A declared commitment to Israel's existence is enough to ensure that most will vote according to their general socio-cultural predilections, which is to say, Democratic. Conceivably, a mass shift toward Orthodoxy could change this, but demographically speaking, that would be a long way off.

On the religious issues, Rosner perceptively notes that the debates roiling all three major movements reflect the steady dissolution of familiar lines: Orthodoxy is torn between an increased ultra-Orthodoxy and a distinctively traditionalist brand of feminism; Reform between greater spirituality and ever more radical revisions of identity and tradition; Conservative Judaism among the truth-claims and expressive tendencies at work in the movements on its left and right flanks.

Rosner touches on theology only to the extent that (as in the claims entered by proponents of *tikkun olam*) it affects social and political attitudes. And he hardly deals at all with culture, with the literary and performing arts where American Jewry has created an idiom and sensibility all its own, or with the world of the public intellectuals. He does mention Philip Roth, but only in aid of asserting that American Jewish writers are in general obsessed with Israel.

Yet Roth's obsession, though genuine, is at best sporadic, and it is also exceptional; the striking thing about American Jewish letters is how *little* room there is for Israel in the works even of those (like Saul Bellow and Cynthia Ozick) deeply and publicly committed to it. Indeed, the other writer Rosner discusses, Michael Chabon, presents Israel (in *The Yiddish Policemen's*

Union) as that which gets in the way of Jewish identity. In general, the American Jewish creative imagination still seems wreathed in the memory of Yiddish and in the aesthetic and moral values of irony and political distance: a place where Israel has a hard time making itself heard and perhaps even making sense.

This deep but subtle disjunction emerges in Rosner's recounting of an <u>exchange</u> some years ago with the American columnist (and IDF veteran) Jeffrey Goldberg in *Slate*. Describing American Jews as "self-deprecating and violence-averse" and Israelis as self-confident and humorless, Goldberg quips: "Who needs jokes when you have F-16s?" But, Rosner points out, you do have F-16s, or at least your country does.

Implicit in this exchange between two friends is Zionism's enduring challenge to Diaspora sensibilities: namely, the Jewish assumption of responsibility for society as a whole. It is a challenge that American Jews can meet only if they take their own wider responsibilities as Americans just as seriously. Israel, Rosner writes, "hasn't made life easier for Diaspora Jews, it's made life more complicated. It forces them to make an unpleasant choice—to stay or to go—and forces them to justify that decision . . . not just to themselves, but in a way that will sound appealing to the generations coming after them."

The statement goes to the core of Rosner's fundamental perspective. He clearly loves American Jews and clearly finds them fascinating. Yes, he writes in his conclusion, "they don't live here. But I love their caring about Israel. I'm not convinced that they've lost interest Almost none of them actively want Israel to fail." But, as a Zionist, he also continues to see things in classically binary Zionist terms. One center or the other will prevail. In what he calls "the great relay race" of Jewish history, only one team of runners can win, and you have to place your bet.

It need not be that way; indeed, throughout most of Jewish history, it hardly ever was. Nor is it quite that way, or yet that way, in our own time. In one of the paradoxes noted by Rosner himself, even as American Jews remain leery of Israel's claims to Jewish cultural and spiritual centrality, the one seemingly successful effort in recent years to engage young Jews short of religious revival has been to send large numbers of them to, precisely, Israel. America, for its part, has much to teach Israelis about how people of vastly different persuasions can somehow live together, how religion thrives precisely when it keeps its distance from city hall, and how Jewish identity not only takes its lumps from but can also flourish in the endless experimentation of freedom.

It comes down to this: for the two Jewish centers truly to engage one another on all levels, each would have to reach out fully to the other while fully holding its own. Sadly, the likelihood of *that* happening is a bet against very long odds.

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