

The Vertical Alliance Today

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A late colleague of mine, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, famously proposed that since the Middle Ages, Jews have always sought a “vertical alliance” in politics. With this phrase, he meant that the main Jewish political strategy — a smart if not uncomplicated one for a typically beset minority — was to ingratiate ourselves with the highest

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power around. At first, it was the king from whom the Jews sought whatever protections they could get in a dangerous world — and especially against local hatreds. Yerushalmi observed that the vertical alliance survived the collapse of European monarchies. Instead, it was simply transferred to the new nation-states that arose as monarchies fell. How else to understand the fact that Jews have been among the most fervently French among the French, German among the Germans, and American among the Americans?

But no one until now has applied Yerushalmi’s notion of the vertical alliance to international affairs. In the 1940s, when the United Nations was founded, a few Jews thought the time had come for fidelity to the vertical alliance to be elevated even higher than the modern nation-state in an era of new international governance. Earlier in this issue, Karen Naimer describes Hersch Lauterpacht and Raphael Lemkin — two Jews who made such a plea, albeit in very different ways. And in a time when the U.N. is treated by many Jews as a pigpen where anti-Zionists plot to destroy Israel in the language of high principle, it is certainly worth recalling how, in the 1940s, a few Jews fervently hoped to construct a model of international governance that would make the world safe for the Jewish people. Indeed, one could name a series of figures, including French Jew René Cassin, one of the authors of the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, who were central to a new form of Jewish internationalism.

It is tempting to celebrate the attempt in the 1940s to construct the U.N. as the vertical

pinnacle of Jewish politics. But with greater historical hindsight, it is clear that Jewish internationalism wasn’t new in the 1940s. And, in retrospect, the U.N. failed to become the vertical pinnacle that attracted the Jews’ highest political allegiances.

On the one hand, Jewish internationalism dated back to the 19th century, long before there was any global treaty like the one that founded the League of Nations between the world wars or the U.N. a quarter century later. As Abigail Green has shown in her magnificent scholarship, notable Jews like Sir Moses Montefiore in Great Britain allied with their states in their imperial globalism. It was such imperial nation-states — like France, where the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the first global Jewish advocacy group, was founded — that seemed the most likely agents to keep the Jews safe from their enemies. In terms of the vertical alliance, the buck still stopped at the state. When crises like the Damascus affair broke out, with Jews in foreign lands suffering at the hands of their states, Jews mobilized to bring the pressure of the British and French empires to bear on their oppressors.


On the other hand, the U.N. — as its very name implied — originated as a concert of states and, in fact, of great powers. Its Security Council still reflects the World War II situation in which a few hegemony planned to rule the globe. The General Assembly, where the rest of the people of the world sit, is relegated to mostly symbolic authority, though its proclamations surely do have some weight. But because the U.N. did not purport to provide an alternative to the state, it never transcended the notion that the primary allegiance of Jews was to states. As a result, the U.N. ended up becoming another place where the states in which the Jews claim citizenship — and especially the United States — could act on their behalf.

As internationalists, Lauterpacht and Lemkin insisted that states can go terribly wrong — and clearly the vertical alliance of German Jews with their state did not work out well. Yet Jews voted with their feet in the 1940s in still choosing the nation-state as the power that would protect them, most graphically in the creation of Israel but throughout the Diaspora as well. And in the post-World War II

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period, many campaigns of Jewish protection would show that the 19th-century model remained in force. When it came time to “save” Soviet Jews suffering repression, it was not to the U.N. that Jews turned, but rather to the United States in an effort to help their co-religionists abroad.

The failure to create a vertical alliance with the U.N. does not imply that the U.N. is useless for Jews, either historically or today in broader human affairs. We should also recognize that the vertical alliance Jews have long sought in politics still largely culminates in their nation-states, like the State of Israel the U.N. helped recognize in the same year it proclaimed “human rights.”

Of course, it is critical to remember that many Jews have emotionally cherished and defended those ideals the U.N. helped introduce to the world — including the human rights of non-Jews living under Jewish sovereignty or occupation. But perhaps the best proof of where the vertical alliance stands today is how Palestinians have sought to make use of the U.N. in concert with their international supporters. Like the Jews in 1948, they have sought the U.N.’s help in forging their state, which shows that for most peoples, the vertical alliance still goes only so high. 

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides *Sh'ma* readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Is it legitimate to draw parallels between the U.N. recognizing the State of Israel and a state of Palestine?
2. Should Israel care about what happens at the United Nations?
3. Do you think the Arab states will ever accept a Jewish state in the Middle East?
4. How might the Israeli leadership move forward toward a two state solution with Palestine? If so, how?
5. Why is attention — good or bad — disproportionately focused on Israel? Is Israel held accountable to a different, higher standard?
6. How has the U.N. vote influenced the position, or status of the United States in the Middle East and as a global leader?

The United Nations’ War against the Jews: Destructive and Self-Destructive

GIL TROY

Tragically, the United Nations has gone from being the Jews’ best friend to the Jews’ worst enemy. This descent not only hurts Israel and the Jewish people; it damages the U.N. itself. Like so many times before in Jewish history, the noxious, obsessive, attack on the collective Jew — in this case, Israel — has revealed deep flaws in the organization’s character and structure.

Back on November 29, 1947, the U.N. appeared to be the Jews’ savior. It was not just that the U.N. had recognized Jews’ rights to a Jewish state in Palestine. More important, the U.N. embodied the Allied ideals mobilized to defeat Nazism. Jews, particularly American Jews, believed in the U.N.’s promise — that this world body could solve conflicts with words, not weapons, advancing justice and peace in a world that had just devoured six million Jews.

By 1975, the U.N. had established itself as a brand name for doing good worldwide. The General Assembly’s Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both adopted in December 1948, established a language and a legal structure for advancing human rights. U.N. peacekeepers, with their distinctive blue helmets, calmed the world’s most volatile flashpoints, patrolling in Cyprus, the Congo, and the Sinai. The U.N. also was — and remains — the most effective international social service agency in history, pushing economic reform, championing education in developing countries, fighting parasitic diseases, pressing for universal immunization, and, ultimately halving child mortality rates.

In 1975, however, the U.N. passed Resolution 3379 on November 10, declaring

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