



Israel-Diaspora Relations

**American Jewry: The View from Israel,
5748**

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Whether viewed from close or from afar, American Jewry, like the United States itself, is a bundle of contradictions. But, unlike the Marxist meaning of that phrase which suggests that the contradictions must be resolved if life is to go on, Americans and American Jews seem to be indefinitely capable of living with the strangest contradictions.

In my encounters with American Jewry over the past year, I have found members of Orthodox synagogues who believe that Orthodoxy is the only way to be Jewish but who not only continue their touring of foreign parts on Rosh Hashanah, but do not even know that it is Rosh Hashanah. I have followed events at one rabbinical seminary where the year began with an official congratulations to a young couple given birth to their first son -- a couple of lesbian graduates who used artificial insemination. It continued with another graduate leaving his wife and children for a sex change operation, and concluded with one of the institution's students brought before a disciplinary committee on charges of worshipping idols in her room. I learned of a member of a Brooklyn Hassidic community who earns his living as a juvenile worker, who enters a subway station every day in his black uniform, changes into his working costume, the garb of the New York City streets including a long-haired wig (which keeps his head covered as a good Jew should) and on his way home every evening changes back into his regular clothes.

Of course there are the usual statistics and examples of intermarriage, Jews for Jesus, and cult but there is also the productivity of the over 1,000 scholars of Jewish studies holding appointments at American universities. There is the revival of the Hebrew colleges in Baltimore, Philadelphia and perhaps in Boston, that had long since been defined as obsolete and given up for dead,

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and the death of Dropsie University as it was transformed into the Annenberg Center for Advanced Study whose purpose is yet to unfold. There was the 40th anniversary reunion of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, the first of the Ramah camps, for which 250 people paid \$300 a couple for a Shabbaton at a posh hotel near Chicago's O'Hare Airport and 400 more joined them for the party Saturday night, including 10 of the 90 original campers of 1947.

There was the American Jewish reaction to the Pollard case, blown all out of proportion by American Jews in the media and the community leadership making clear how awful they thought it was, looking at Israel as if it were American Jewry's faithful dog that had just soiled the rug and asking "how could you do this to us?" It was the embarrassing spectacle of Jewish leaders falling over their feet to be photographed with the Pope in the Vatican and getting little in return, a very successful exercise in publicity, but one rather short on statesmanship. It was Jacob Neusner ranting against his usual enemies and some new targets as well and being given inordinate attention, especially by the non-Jewish world as a result, and Athur Herzberg remaining the fair-haired Jewish boy of the Times Op-Ed page.

I saw struggles in certain Conservative synagogues between havurot trying to breathe a new spirit into a tired ritual and rabbis afraid that they would and thereby undercut the centrality of the pulpit. On another level, there are the power struggles between UJA, UIA and CJF at a time when the total dollar among of the contributions to the Federation/UJA campaigns have essentially plateaued and continue to decline in real value. All the established institutions feel threatened by the Simon Weisenthal Center and AIPAC, the two Jewish fundraising phenomena of the decade, that capitalize on the appeal of Jewish survival, which Jewish education remains a poor cousin and tuitions to Jewish schools continue to rise, making the cost of living Jewishly ever higher.

These are only a few of the contradictions that I encountered as I wandered across the American Jewish scene over the past year. To me, they and others add up to a great deal of momentum and a community which survives and even thrives on that momentum. Again, like America itself, were American Jewry to become static, the weight of its weaknesses and deficiencies would drag it down and the "gevalt" predictions over its demise would be on target. But as long as there is momentum in positive direction, American Jewry remains lively, bubbling and creative, even as it is assimilationist, non-observant, Jewishly ignorant and more than occasionally vulgar.

It is well to remember in this year of the bicentennial of the Constitution of the United States that 200 years ago the Americans, following Newtonian physics, sought to build a social perpetual

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motion machine that would keep the country in orbit even through it was populated by imperfect people in an imperfect world. American Jewry, which for the most part has abandoned *halakhah* as a vehicle for Jewish continuity, seems to have implicitly adopted perpetual motion as its method for remaining in orbit. It is a fascinating experiment, fascinating to watch from afar, and fascinating to be part of -- and almost impossible to convey to Israelis or Jews from other lands.

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