



# NORTH AMERICAN JEWS AND ISRAELIS: *Transcending Our Differences*

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For most of its recorded history, our people has lived in two areas: in its biblical homeland and in a wide-spread Diaspora. This fact, firmly anchored in Jewish history, has decisively shaped Jewish reality and destiny. Jewish ideology, theological as well as political, has dealt with this duality, dealt with it again and again, looked for significance, seen it as a positive quality or as something detrimental, pleaded to keep it intact or to do away with it in favor of a dominant Jewish state.

My own position is to learn to accept the continued dual reality of State and Diaspora, to accept it as a challenge to our people, a challenge carrying the burden of sacrifice and the promise of two-fold glory — a glory which has produced not only Avraham Avinu and Moshe Rabbenu, but Moses Mendelssohn and Abraham Geiger, not only David the King, but David the Prime Minister.

For me, both Israel and the Diaspora are infinitely worthy of love and deserving of devotion to a degree beyond measure.

## ***Danger of Misunderstanding***

Still, I recognize that this historical and geographical bifurcation has its dangers. There exists an ever-present threat of misunderstanding and mutual alienation unless our instruments of communication are well-tuned and we “hear” one another; that is, cultivate the ability to hear, beyond the sound of words, the intent of Jews eager to reach their fellow Jews.

Communication is never sim-

ple, never self-regulating. It requires a common base.

It is extremely hazardous to predict the precise shape of relations between North American Jewry and Israel in time to come. We can be sure only of this: those relations will call on all of our communicative skills. Even under the best of circumstances, there will remain as an ever-present source of misunderstanding the fact that each community has so distinct a recent history of its own and has developed so particular a mindset. But who can be sure we’ll be carrying on our relations under the best of circumstances? Far likelier, we’ll be conducting them in a context of crisis, in an atmosphere of nervous suspicion, and even perhaps public conflict between the Israeli government and the United States government, with opinion divided in both Israel and America as to Israeli governmental policy, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza.

## ***The Generational Factor***

Contributing to the tension will be the generational factor — that so considerable a proportion of the Israeli population is young, while American Jewry is increasingly a community of the middle aged and the aging. This generational question is bound to have an effect on the way American Jews and Israelis assess each other. I won’t dwell on this issue except to say that, as we are aware from our own personal experience, two generations never occupy the same ground and never fully share the same world. One generation will delight in —



or sorrow over — what another generation in the very same time span will consider unworthy of its notice.

### Religion-State Separation

I want to turn now to a question which may be more definable for us. Israelis, even the most secularist and anti-clerical, will show little interest in what to most American Jews is very important, namely, the constitutional separation between religion and the state. There's scant prospect then — whatever party or coalition controls the government in Jerusalem — of the disestablishment of Orthodoxy or of governmental recognition for non-Orthodox forms of Judaism. For most Israelis, religion will continue to mean what it has meant in the past: Orthodoxy, with all else seen as inauthentic and probably officially so stamped. In fact, if present patterns continue, with aliyah more attractive to the Orthodox than to the non-Orthodox in the Diaspora, the tendency in Israel to see Orthodoxy as the only authentic religious expression of Judaism will be reinforced.

### Yeridah

Another point of contention may become extremely troublesome. It concerns American Jewry's attitude to aliyah and *yeridah* (emigration from Israel). I am well aware, of course, that there isn't one single American Jewish attitude. I think, however, that most American Jews will agree that aliyah and *yeridah* are ultimately matters for individual decision — that aliyah should be

forced on no one, and that no one should be denied *yeridah*. Yet, that stand of American Jews is repugnant to Israelis, particularly to those Israelis who represent official viewpoints. I think it improbable that American Jewish and Israeli attitudes will move towards congruence on this question.

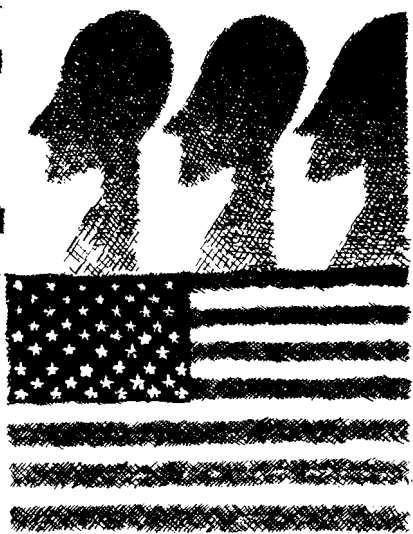
### Military Life

Another matter of considerable importance requires discussion. Most Israelis, whether partisans of the Likud or proponents of Peace Now or citizens standing somewhere in between, have had considerable military training. For them military experience isn't something one reads about in books or sees on television or in a movie theater; it's something central to their personal lives. Their American Jewish contemporaries know nothing of comparable social intensity in their own life experience: they may romanticize the military life or, more likely, abominate it, but it is nothing they're directly

exposed to, it's nothing which marks their citizenship and their social identity. This, it strikes me, is a divergence in social experience which necessarily makes for a gap in social outlook.

It's not that American Jews are pacifist while Israelis reflect a military, perhaps even a garrison mentality. Rather, the sense of personal engagement with public policy, with national survival as it faces the individual Israeli, has virtually no American Jewish parallel. An American Jew and an Israeli Jew of the same age, even of similar intellectual or professional interests, live in different worlds in important respects.

Do we really and realistically



understand the military dimension of Israeli life? Israel's young people, willingly or not, have marched on Beirut. They have faced the Syrians in the Valley of Lebanon. They have imposed curfews on Hebron and Nablus and Ramallah. When, as it appears, the Uzzi makes for so formidable a *mehitzah* (separation) between us, can we be satisfied



with idealized notions remote from a world of harsh realities?

Another divisive factor is the circumstance that American Jewry is primarily of Ashkenazi and, even more specifically, of East European descent, whereas a majority of Jewish Israelis is Mediterranean and Middle Eastern in ancestry. Again, we are speaking of Jewish groups with different self-images, different social and economic and educational horizons, different cultural assumptions. What is typical of the Israeli scene is not what one finds in Rehavia or in North Tel Aviv or Herzliah Pituah or the Central Carmel in Haifa. Far more typical is what one finds in Musrara and the Katamonim and South Tel Aviv and Kiryat Gat and Bet Shean — and that is a very far cry from what is typical of American Jewish Life, the suburban upper middle-class enclaves that so many American Jews call home.

**Non-Jewish Relatives**

Little attention has been paid to yet another factor of at least potential division between American and Israeli Jews: we see in American Jewry an increasing number of individuals who have close non-Jewish relatives or are themselves of partial non-Jewish ancestry. Nothing, or at any rate very little, in the Israeli experience parallels this phenomenon. Of course, there are many Israelis of mixed European-Oriental ancestry. But only a minuscule proportion knows what it is to have non-Jewish relatives. Even fewer, I'm inclined to think, would be comfortable with the idea. Even if there are non-

Jewish relatives, they are likely to be somewhere overseas, not resident in Israel and not encountered with any frequency. It is hard to determine how to assess the effect of this phenomenon on relations between American Jews and Israelis, but in all probability it won't make for solidarity — especially if the Israeli government enacts a law that invalidates the conversion of many thousands of Jews. There can be no doubt but that such action would be detrimental to Israel-Diaspora unity.

I have had a lot to say about barriers and sources of tension. Even so, nothing I have said is intended to suggest that there

**American Jews and Israeli Jews are confronted by a common threat: assimilation. Rejection of or indifference to Jewish values is widespread. In common, both societies face the crisis of spiritual bankruptcy.**

can be no strong sense of kinship or commonality between American Jews and Israelis. Disunity, lack of sympathy, lack of mutuality are certainly and dangerously in evidence. But they should be taken as challenges to what binds the North American Diaspora and Israel together. I do not regard them as insurmountable or impassable barriers. Tensions need not be destructive. They can be made into channels for better understanding, if their sources are honestly examined and exposed. While a complete congruence of consciousness may not seem readily achievable, it may be approximated through a sympathetic exercise of reason and moral sensibility.

**Assimilation**

Toward that end, it is essential for American Jews and Israeli Jews to realize that they are confronted by a common threat: assimilation, we call it here; *hitbolelut*, in Hebrew. While Israelis have been thought far less susceptible to assimilation than American Jews, it is nevertheless the fact that it threatens both societies. Rejection of or indifference to Jewish values — loss of Jewish identity — threatens Israel as much as it threatens American Jews. In common, both communities face the crisis of spiritual bankruptcy. It is not

only in America that alienation from Jewish sources is felt. In Israel, as well, the sources of Judaism are often relegated to the periphery of an individual's life. Both societies are threatened by nationalistic machismo, consumerist passion, hedonist enticements and a devotion to the letter rather than to the spirit of Jewish observance. In moral terms, a life devoid of Jewish content is as much a threat in Israel as it is in America — neither community may justly claim immunity.

If we cultivate the awareness of what truly unites us as well as what legitimately makes these two communities different, we will be able to reduce the danger

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## North Americans and Israelis

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of a centrifugal drift into irreparable misunderstandings. This will call for an ongoing exploration and use of our mutual communicative resources. It will require our determination to overcome the discouragements and the frustrations likely to arise when consensus is hard or impossible to achieve.

Ultimately, what may strengthen our will to communicate above and beyond any barriers of sensibility, ideology, or experience is the expectation, arising from our common heritage, that ongoing communication will make both communities feel safer, less exposed, less lonely in a world which — how can we forget it? — was ready to see us annihilated. The memory of that threat, if not the renewed threat

itself, is part of our twentieth-century Jewish reality.

Beyond the fears of catastrophe, there are affirmations which bind us. Among these is the belief in the interdependent fate and faith of a world people which transcends geography, language, and economic status.

We are an old-new people which has restored an old-new land and is in the process of developing an old-new promise. We are in the process of becoming, and the stresses and strains which pull within us are marks of our maturation.

Therefore, what is required is sympathy and patience with the pain of growth. The ongoing debate must be conducted in a spirit of honesty and compassion.