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Changing Nature of Israel Diaspora Relations and its Implication
for Public Policy Issues Among American Jews

I am not certain the peace process will continue or will continue in the form we now know. But regardless of what happens, it seems likely that in the coming decade the threats to Israel's security is terror rather than invasion by a neighboring state. This threat does not demand the massive financial assistance or massive political support from American Jews that the previous threat required. It is fair to say, therefore, that we are confronting a new reality which will bring to the fore new kinds of issues for both American and Israeli Jews. When we think about Israel, at the level of policy issues, we will be confronting new kinds of issues. But we will also be confronting a new pattern of interrelationships between American Jews and Israel.

As long as the major issue was the threat to Israel's security from foreign states assisted by the Soviet Union, American Jews had no reasonable choice but to follow the lead of the Israeli government. If I am correct, the critical issue will now become the nature of the Jewish State and this is an issue in which American Jews should feel they can voice their opinions.

Indeed, if they do not feel that way, the concept of a Jewish state is meaningless.

This voice, in turn, will have no impact unless Israelis feel that American Jews really consider themselves partners rather than eytza gebbers. The nature of the partnership and the nature of the specific issues that I am about to mention all require far more knowledge, sophistication and sensitivity by American Jews than has characterized their relationship to Israel in the past. I need not add, that the same holds true for Israelis.

Let me illustrate what I mean by raising three Israeli issues all of which concern American Jews. Two of them are or are likely to become central issues to Israelis and a third, regardless of what most Israelis may feel, is obviously central to the organized Jewish community. In all three cases I want to point out certain complexities to which I am not certain the organized American Jewish community is sensitive. In other words, I am saying, here are three issues that will increasingly rise to the fore in Israel-American Jewish relations in the near future. These are three issues on which American Jews have every right, indeed an obligation to make their voices heard. But they are no less obliged to be informed about the issues before they speak.

These are complex issues and sloganeering will do little to resolve them satisfactorally.

The first issue I want to mention, and I'm afraid I must speak in shorthand, is the issue of Israel as a Jewish state. Now I hope you are aware that there is a group of Israeli intellectuals who call themselves post-zionists, whose opponents label anti-zionists and I think that this appellation is correct. This group wishes to dejudaize the State of Israel. At the present time this group, numericlly, is an insignificant minority among the Jewish population of Israel but they are not insignificant within the Israeli academy and their influence among college students in the humaities and the social sciences is not trivial. You may well despise what they stand for, and if you knew the political background of many of them you might despise them even more, but they do have one argument that must evoke a favorable resonance among American Jews even as it does among Israelis like myself. The argument is that Israeli Arabs, "Palestinians" is the politically correct term, will never be really equal, will always be in some resepect second class citizens, as long as Israel is a Jewish state. Israeli Palestinians are increasingly vocal in demanding the dejudaization of Israel and polls show that virtually all of them favor that step. In other words, while the number of post-

Zionists may be insignificant, their influence cannot be dismissed and they have joined forces with a considerable Arab-Israeli constituency.

For those of us whose commitment to Israel as a Jewish state is a basic identity marker, this is a serious challenge. It doesn't make the Israeli-Arab, Palestinian is the politically correct term, my enemy, but it does mean that unless the peace process totally collapses we are on the verge of a very bitter political struggle in which some Jews, overrepresented in the media and among academics, will side with the Palestinians. And when the struggle reaches these shores, as it inevitably will, the opposition will be able to muster very powerful arguments grounded in notions of civil rights, pluralism and multiculturalism. What the opponents of a Jewish state are less likely to mention, on these shores, is that basic to the demand for the dejudaization of Israel is the demand to sever the tie between Diaspora Jews and the state of Israel. The minimal Palestinian claim is that Israel has no right to accord significance, in some respects greater significance to the interests, the needs and the demands of Diaspora Jews than to the needs and demands of its own Palestinian citizens.

This is related to a second issue which agitates American Jewry although they may not appreciate the relationship to the first issue. I am talking about what American Jews, in a somewhat chauvanistic mode, call religious pluralism. I would have thought that religious pluralism would refer to Muslims, Christians and Jews. But we all live in our narrow worlds of one kind or another and as you well know the term religious pluralism is a euphemism for Orthodox, Conservative and Reform and their respective rights in Israel.

I don't want to discuss the substance of the issue. I have done so publicly within Israel. I find it much easier to do so there than here. I'll only say that in principle I welcome the presence of Conservative and Reform Judaism in Israel for reasons that are quite different than those most often heard. (I hope someone asks me to elaborate on this in the question period.) The point that I do want to make is that if Israel is to be a Jewish state in any meaningful sense of the term, the notion of religion-state separation, as Americans understand that term, is out of the question. If Israel is to be a Jewish state, than the state has got to make some decisions with regard to what does or does not constitute Judaism just as if it has a law of return it has to decide who is or is not a Jew. Forget, for a moment, what decision it should take. All I am saying is that it must decide.

That's what being a Jewish state is all about. If being Jewish is a legal category, and Judaism is a state acknowledged cultural category, then the state has a stake in the definition of the term. It's no good saying that this is a private matter and the state has no business in deciding what Judaism is or who is or is not a rabbi. I may not be happy with what the state decides, but don't think it is possible to achieve the kind of easy solution in Israel that you can in the U.S. by saying that every expression of Judaism merits equal treatment or an equal voice, or equal communal benefits. The solution may, unfortunately, be arrived at through political negotiation in which secondary, incidental and often misguided and self-serving forces are at play. But doesn't make it any less of an ideological issue of the first magnitude which has to be resolved by substantive decision and not by avoidance. If Israel is a Jewish state, then I must remind you that Judaism or Jewishness is not the kind of voluntaristic category that it is in the United States and the community will not be structured in the way a voluntaristic community is structured.

I don't mean to suggest that this is an all or nothing proposition. It's not that simple. There are shades of distinctions and room for different types of agreements in the grey area between preserving Israel as a Jewish state and

preserving freedom of conscience, individual rights, and even group rights. But the values of a Jewish state on the one hand, and civil and cultural rights and liberties on the other are ideas that I suspect and hope most of us cherish. It is, therefore exceedingly difficult to acknowledge that they may be somewhat contradictory. When I hear the argument over religious pluralism in Israel I sometimes get the impression that American Jews are insensitive to the issue that affects all of us -- the issue of the meaning of a Jewish state.

The third issue I want to discuss is the issue of women or women's rights. This will inevitably assume a larger role in Israeli life because a changed security situation, and a changed economy in general, will necessarily reduce the status of military service, will probably reduce the amount of time Israelis have to serve in the army, and thereby reduce one of the two major barriers to fuller participation and greater equality for women in Israeli life.

There are at least three aspects to the women's issue all of which deserve more than the passing mention I can give to them. One is the issue of economic equality, a second is the issue of political equality, and finally there is the issue of religious equality. I will only discuss the third, not by way of adopting a

substantive position but by what of helping inform you about the issue from the perspective of one Israeli observer. (I didn't say from the an Israeli perspective because there are many Israeli perspectives on this as on all other issues).

First, a pitch. I am the director of the Argov Institute for for the Study of Israel and World Jewry at Bar-Ilan University. The Argov Institute and the American Jewish Committee are now engaged in the publication of a series of monographs on the impact of North American Jewry on Israeli life. The first monograph is a marvelous study by Rochelle Furstenberg, just published in January, on the impact of American Jewry on the Women's movement in Israel. I urge you all to secure a copy from AJC. What you will learn, from that monograph, among other things, is that religiously concerned women in Israel see the problem of religious equality and deal with the problem of religious equality differently than do their sisters in the United States. Indeed, the chasm is so great that in some respects the two sides have stopped listening to one another. We all have an image of an unchanging, rigid, Orthodoxy. In case you didn't know it many Orthodox Jews, including rabbis whom I know, share this image. In many respects it is a fair image assuming that we focus on some aspects of Orthodoxy. But if we ask what is happening in the Orthodox community in Israel, on the women's

issue, than I must tell you that a revolution, a sea change is taking place of which American Jews seem to be totally unaware.

Religious women in Israel may be unhappy with their status but as a community, not as a lobby or network but as a community of women, they have pushed the limits of halakha and succeeded in changing halakha, de facto, on the matter of women's learning -- the obligation, not only the right but the obligation of women to study sacred text as a matter of religious imperative. A further step has been the commitment of an elite group of Jewish women to study text as a full time vocation so that they will become halakhic decisors themselves. This is the firmest base I know for authentic religious transformation. More is involved than the mastery of sacred text by a small group of women or the familiarity with sacred text by a large group of women. As important as that is, what is no less important is the example that women are showing by their activity. For they are demonstrating that they are engaged in what, within the traditional Jewish world, is activity of the highest merit. If masses of women are engaged in serious textual study, and some of them have made a career of such study, then an existential reality is being created in which women cannot be perceived as the functional equivalent of slaves and children. Religious change doesn't come about by resolutions and votes and semantic

manipulation on the part of marginally committed individuals. It comes as a result of living in accordance with one's ideals by those with the strongest religious commitments.