

Israel and America: A Roundtable on Deepening the Dialogue

Many have commented recently on the changing relationship between Jews in the United States and Israel — especially on what seems to be a greater distance felt by younger, non-Orthodox Jews, including those with intense relationships to Jewish life. Quite how Israelis view American Jews is, it seems, less known, vaguer perhaps, with vastly different perceptions felt in the various sectors of Israeli society. Sh'ma gathered together a small group with intimate knowledge of both communities to reflect on current attitudes.

Steven J. Zipperstein: *Was there a Golden Age when American Jews and Israelis felt they had much more in common than today — perhaps in the wake of the 1967 war?*

Hillel Halkin: Certainly, the 1960s were a high point in Israeli Jewish and American Jewish relations. You might say that it took American Jews ten or fifteen years to get used to the fact that Israel existed, another ten or fifteen years to get used to the fact that Israel was an embarrassment, and in between there was definitely a high watermark.

Yossi Klein Halevi: That's true on the American Jewish side. One of the frustrations in the relationship is that we seem to miss each other in terms of a connection. I sense a much greater willingness on the part of many Israelis today to take the Diaspora seriously; they have a keen interest in a real partnership, which of course was not true in the 1960s and 1970s. This new openness and interest is coming at a time when, as Hillel noted, much of the Diaspora, much of American Jewry, is losing its interest and maybe its love for Israel.

Elise Bernhardt: I spent three months in Israel on a kibbutz in 1973, right after the Yom Kippur War. We Americans all had a great time and I always thought I'd go back. But for 35 years I neither went back to Israel nor paid the country much attention. A couple of years ago, we took the word "National" out of the name of the Foundation for Jewish Culture, in part, because we wanted to be more inclusive of the great art — visual arts, music, dance — coming out of Israel and other parts of the world. It seemed odd to establish borders around Jewish culture. We're definitely experiencing a Golden Age in terms of interest in cultural exchange and collaboration.

Gordon Tucker: While American Jews certainly felt warmth for Israeli Jews, it turns out we knew very little about each other. There are areas in which commonalities can be built: There are common interests in the development

of Jewish scholarship and culture; and of meaningful secular Jewish identity. Economic interests overlap, and from my vantage point as a Conservative rabbi, there are shared interests in developing a practice of religious pluralism.

Halkin: There is, though, a considerable sense of mutual disappointment. Except for the Orthodox communities in each country, the communities are drifting steadily further apart.

Zipperstein: *To what extent are we speaking about embarrassment or disappointment, or is this part of a larger phenomenon — the contemporary disengagement of so many Americans from foreign affairs, from anything beyond their borders, from anything conducted in another language, and fewer people reading newspapers? To what extent is this phenomenon born out of political or cultural distance, or is it simply part of a larger disengagement with things alien or foreign?*

Klein Halevi: Your point reinforces Hillel's argument about the disappointment of Israelis — that American Jews are acting more as Americans and less as Jews. While tuning out Israel because it's foreign might be an understandable American response, it is totally incomprehensible as a Jewish response.

Bernhardt: We're experiencing a strange chilling effect — maybe a disengagement. An example is the response to last summer's San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. The festival, which is the mother ship of all Jewish film festivals, shows lots of Israeli work, and last summer one of the 71 films they screened was about Rachel Corrie, the young woman who was killed trying to keep Israelis out of a Palestinian village. While the festival made what I see as a tactical error by inviting Corrie's mother to speak, a big vitriolic blow up followed. The entire Jewish cultural community in San Francisco is now, I would say, afraid to do anything that mentions Israel in any way except in the most golden light. That

Elise Bernhardt is president and CEO of the Foundation for Jewish Culture. Hillel Halkin, a writer and translator, moved to Israel in 1970. His most recent book is *Yehuda Halevi*. Yossi Klein Halevi moved to Israel in 1982. An author and journalist, he writes for *The New Republic* and has worked with the Shalem Center for the past six years. Gordon Tucker is the rabbi at Temple Israel Center in White Plains, N.Y. A former dean and adjunct faculty member for the last sixteen years at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he is editor and translator of *Heavenly Torah*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's three-volume work on rabbinic theology. They spoke with Steven J. Zipperstein, Daniel E. Koshland Professor in Jewish Culture and History at Stanford University and author most recently of *Rosenfeld's Lives: Fame, Oblivion, and the Furies of Writing*.

type of fear — specifically, of losing funding — is a problem, because people who want to have a real discussion about Israel can't do it. In Israel, one can have all kinds of conversations; people have opinions and, at least until lately, no one worried that they were going to lose critical funding. That's not the case in the U.S. anymore, and that could create a wedge between the communities.

Zipperstein: *Daniel Gordis, a colleague of Yossi's at the Shalem Center, commented on this juncture as the by-product of an increasingly individualistic America vs. a still collective Israel. How strong is Gordis's argument?*

Klein Halevi: In Israel, peoplehood is the core of Jewish identity and that's not weakening. In the United States, one sees an understandable turn toward religiosity, which unfortunately sometimes comes at the expense of peoplehood. Jews around the world shared an emotional trajectory that began with dread in May 1967 and moved to relief on June 5, 1967. That grew into an emotional bond because of the Soviet Jewry movement, which I think was American Jewry's finest moment, its greatest sense of peoplehood.

Tucker: I have a lot of people in my congregation and in my community and, I know, in my colleagues' communities who are quite serious about their Jewishness. They don't necessarily know exactly how to define it, but they're serious about finding a workable and deep definition and practice of Judaism. They are, regrettably, not terribly engaged with Israel. Gordis's piece makes what I consider to be a very false connection between being disengaged from Israel and being a rank individualist. This disengagement between many American Jews and Israel is not about whether one is an individualist or a communitarian, and American Jewish sentiments about peoplehood are not necessarily identical with Israeli nationhood. While I lament this situation, it does not help to characterize this as a fundamental difference between these two populations — one being an individualist libertarian and the other connected to a larger sweep of peoplehood.

Zipperstein: *Is today's emphasis on peoplehood, presumably also inspired by the Soviet Jewish experience, a by-product of a certain anxiety, a mounting uncertainty about just what links will actually hold the peoples together?*

Klein Halevi: Peoplehood is not an abstraction. Peoplehood is a daily experience among those who share language and culture and face problems together. American Jews share less of that commonality with Israeli Jews.

Bernhardt: The concept of peoplehood is garnering a lot of interest and financial backing. It seems to be the bandwagon that the Jewish communal world is jumping on right now.

The difference between being a people and a collection of communities is that Jewish communities can function anonymously — go their own way without paying attention to each other's needs.

Zipperstein: *Hillel, when you wrote your great post-1960s book, Letters to an American Jewish Friend, did you feel that American Jews and Israelis had a good deal in common?*

Halkin: That book was premised on the assumption that there is an inherent and necessary argument between Israeli and American Jews — that, on the one hand, each side understands its and the other's place in Jewish history differently, and that, on the other, each side understands that an honest relationship with the other depends on debating this question openly. Today, the argument has disappeared, not because it has been settled — it has not been and cannot be — but because neither side has the moral courage to carry on with it anymore.

Zipperstein: *If you, Gordon, were to begin to flesh out the Jewish priorities of your congregants, your colleagues, and the rabbinical students you teach, what might those priorities be and how have they changed over the last decade?*

Tucker: There is probably no way to describe their priorities other than in ways that sound necessarily clichéd, and they're clichéd because they're so universal and so timeless. Many of my congregants start with human concerns about finding some transcendent meaning in their lives — standing on some kind of firm, ethical, and moral base and feeling that they belong to something that is greater than themselves. They desire to pursue, struggle, and answer questions in Jewish terms. That's why they come to a synagogue, why they gather with other Jews, why they pay attention to me as their rabbi. One of the reasons I talk about and visit Israel as much as I

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do is because I want to exploit that opportunity to direct some of those energies toward a greater reattachment to Israel, but it doesn't start with Israel.

Zipperstein: *In a sovereign Jewish state, where a Jewish language is the language of the street and Jewish law in one way or another is debated and discussed all the time, how could that state's existence not play an essential role in the lives of people who feel themselves deeply Jewish? And if it doesn't play a central role, what does that imply?*

Tucker: It is a regrettable and significant hole, but that doesn't mean that American Jews are vacuous or empty. It means that they are missing some dimension of their Jewish life. I was not suggesting that my community, as a whole, is detached from Israel. On the contrary, I was commenting on those who are not yet as attached as I'd like them to be, and that is a result of disinterest in a communal life. Among those who are less attached to Israel, I would not attribute it to individualism.

There was much culture before there was a State of Israel, and yet the state has added so much. Because the culture coming out of Israel is so rich, not necessarily in its Jewishness but in its aesthetic quality and in its Israeliness, we can't separate those strands.

Klein Halevi: The difference between being a people and a collection of communities is that Jewish communities can function autonomously, separately from each other, as increasingly Orthodox and liberal communities do in the U.S. They're going their own way without paying attention to each other's needs or red lines, something that is much more difficult in Israel, where we are, for better or worse, on top of each other.

There is also a potential convergence on the part of at least some Israelis and some American Jews in their common search for what Gordon defined earlier as "meaning." In Israel, the importance of the spiritual search is different than it is among American Jews, and I would trace this roughly back to the beginning of the terror war. While Israelis have always had a certain intimacy with death, we now have a generation that's grown up since the year 2000 encountering death at a very early age. The proliferation of "New Age" movements over the past decade could,

potentially, move Israel toward a post-secular Jewish identity. It might also help break the Orthodox monopoly and begin moving Israel away from an artificial schism between Orthodox and secular, which officially defines Israel but does not reflect Israeli reality. Such a move would open Israelis to a greater and a deeper dialogue with American Jews.

Furthermore, most Israelis understand that it is in Israel's interest to have a healthy, culturally and spiritually vibrant American Jewry.

Zipperstein: *Are movies like "You Don't Mess with the Zohan" or "Munich" idiosyncratic or are these films, perhaps, significant markers in how American Jews see Israel?*

Klein Halevi: Both Adam Sandler's and Steven Spielberg's films represent what Israeli society went through as we began to deconstruct our myths. We're now beginning to re-construct — not blindly re-embrace — old myths because there's a growing realization here that too much was thrown out. We almost deconstructed ourselves to death. In fact, "Exodus" might work for the first time now in Israel. The irony is that while it would have once been embarrassing to show "Exodus" here, we're in the process of rediscovering some basic truths about the Zionists' mythos that we spent so much time in the 1990s dismantling. The First Intifada convinced a majority of Israelis that the occupation was untenable and the Second Intifada convinced the majority of us that peace was untenable. American Jews, in my experience, still tend to be living either in the 1970s and 1980s in the case of the right or the 1990s in the case of the left, and that contributes to a deepening gap in political perceptions. It also has cultural implications.

Zipperstein: *If not in their historical imaginings, perhaps then in their cultural prognosis, were those Jewish ideologues that imagined a semitic past and future, who like the "Canaanites," on target in their assessment of what Israel was likely to become? How do their ideas look now from the vantage point of the early 21st century?*

Halkin: In many ways they were right in their prognosis, but if they were right they were tragically right.

Tucker: Many of their questions were right. What is the meaning of the State of Israel within the context of Jewish history, and what's

the meaning of the State of Israel within the context of the Middle East? That those two questions are not the same question speaks to the nature of Israeli identity: These are questions that are still very much on the agenda.

Halkin: The “Canaanites” had a very simple analysis. The sad thing is that in some ways it may have been correct. Secular Zionism always strove to create an Israeli culture that would be deeply Jewish, drawing on Jewish sources, on Jewish history, on Jewish texts, on Jewish memories. I was once much more optimistic about Israel’s ability to create such a culture than I am today. I think that the idea of secular Jewishness in Israel has, in many ways, collapsed.

Klein Halevi: But look at Israeli popular music — the soundtrack of our life here in the last years is increasingly Jewish. In the last year, we’ve had our leading rock singers and bands release albums based on the poetry of Yehuda Halevi and Solomon Ibn Gabirol and we’re seeing an extraordinary renaissance in Jewish culture coming through the most secular form of Israeli culture, our rock music.

Bernhardt: The institution in Tel Aviv that Ruth Calderon founded, ALMA Home for Hebrew Culture, which acquaints Israelis with the wealth of Jewish heritage through text learning and culture, wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for a huge surge of interest in delving deeply into textual study, and not from a religious perspective.

Zipperstein: *Hillel, you seem to be suggesting that Israel is moving further and further away from the Jewish culture you value most, and American Jews are moving further and further away from Israel. Do I summarize that correctly?*

Halkin: That is my overall feeling.

Bernhardt: At the foundation, we talk a lot about diasporic culture. I’ve come to understand that there was much culture before there was a State of Israel, and yet the State of Israel has added so much. Because the culture coming out of Israel is so rich, not necessarily in its Jewishness but in its aesthetic quality and in its Israeliness, we can’t separate those strands. Maybe I’m looking through the wrong end of the microscope, but I feel actually quite optimistic.

Zipperstein: *Rather than seeing Israel as “value added,” does it remain crucial?*

Bernhardt: I don’t disagree that it’s certainly

crucial, but Jewish life and values existed before there was a State of Israel. Certainly, the State of Israel has added to that mix; there was longing for and then there’s having.

Tucker: “Value added” is not a trivial thing and shouldn’t be seen that way. Peoplehood is an idea that American Jews still buy into, but it has a long history that predates the State of Israel. Israel is an enormous “value added,” just as a child is in one’s life, but it doesn’t mean that the marriage was not fulfilling and that one’s life was not fulfilling before the child was born. When I was dean at JTS, I never understood why we sent rabbinical students to Israel for a year, as every rabbinical school does, without insisting that Israeli rabbinical students spend time in the U.S. I now have an associate rabbi who is from Jerusalem who is having an enormously eye-opening experience and learning to appreciate what American Judaism is about. I think we just need to do a whole lot more of that type of exchange.

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. To what extent are American Jews — like Americans in general — disengaging from foreign affairs, from anything beyond their borders, from anything conducted in another language, and how does this phenomenon impact the relationship of American Jews with Israel?
2. How have globalization and the porousness of borders changed Jewish life around the world?
3. What role do disappointment, frustration, and a sense of exclusion play in innovation? And how can such sentiments be channeled creatively to build more entrepreneurial and engaging community options?



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