

The Zionist Imperative

Last summer, Israel received a small but stalwart set of reinforcements from North America's Jewish community. Through a joint initiative of Nefesh B'Nefesh and Garin Tzabar (a program run by the *tzofim*, the Israeli scout movement), approximately 200 young men and women from the United States and Canada made *aliya* with the aim of joining the Israel Defense Forces. Journalist Itamar Eichner, writing in the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot*, gushed that "contrary to the image of—to put it delicately—the American 'nebbish' or nerd, the numbers show that we're talking about people with a real gung-ho attitude." And indeed, a substantial number of these new immigrants (more than 70 percent of the men and 50 percent of the women, as of the article's writing) were recruited into the IDF's combat units, at their request.¹

While the new recruits may be a boon for Israel, they should also serve as a point of pride for North American Jews, who nurtured this idealistic, highly dedicated group. Sadly, however, the fanfare surrounding their arrival belies a depressing fact: Increasingly, these passionate young Zionists are the exception rather than the rule. The disaffection, if not outright indifference, felt by many young North American Jews toward Israel has been the source of much hand-wringing (or finger-pointing) of late.² Simply put, among this largely liberal, largely secular crowd, the Jewish state is just too remote, and its problems just too far from their own experience, to garner much interest, let alone identification. "Beyond Distancing," the oft-cited 2007 study by professors Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, drove home

the point: Only 48 percent of young, non-Orthodox American Jews, it reported, would view Israel's destruction as "a personal tragedy."³ In a follow-up interview with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Cohen warned that "young Jews may be creating a latter-day Jewish Bundism, which affirms Jewish belonging but is neutral to the Zionist enterprise. We're seeing this growing phenomenon of Jews who have no problem saying the *Shema* but won't sing 'Hatikva.'"⁴

Then, of course, there are those young North American Jews from whom a little neutrality wouldn't be such a bad thing. This is the case, for example, with the Jewish radicals who decry the State of Israel as an immoral entity, perpetrator of a barbaric, colonial campaign and deserving of the most vehement condemnation. One such organization, Jewish Voice for Peace, never misses an opportunity to lambaste the "apartheid state." Its methods and aggressive rhetoric have earned it a special place in the halls of anti-Zionist activism⁵: Last November, for instance, several of its student members made headlines when they heckled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the General Assembly in New Orleans.⁶ Yet although their stunt roused the ire of most American Jewish groups, even the more critical of Israel among them, the JVP activists insisted on not only the rightness, but also the righteousness, of their actions. Opposition to Israel, they argued, is in truth their moral obligation as Jews; the tradition, values, and historical experience of the Jewish people demand a vocal resistance to the crimes committed by the Israeli state, from the "Nakba" of 1948 until the present day.⁷

To be sure, there is room at the Jewish communal table for dissenting opinions. Certainly, one should not expect American Jews to buy into Israeli policy wholesale, sans any and all reservations. But make no mistake: Those American Jews who express disinterest in the fate of the Jewish state, or who call for actions that would compromise its ability to survive, are not acting in accordance with Jewish tradition. On the contrary, this tradition, which developed over centuries of communal life, delineates the obligation of collective solidarity, and frequently places it above individual interest and

conviction. We might even say that the notion of solidarity has formed the backbone of Jewish identity since its very inception. When viewed in this light, the assumed distinction between one's Jewishness and one's support for the survival of the State of Israel becomes wholly untenable.

Jews' feelings about Israel have always tended toward the impassioned. For the most part, this is all to the good: It's doubtful, after all, if the Jewish national movement could have taken off, let alone succeeded in establishing a sovereign state in its historical homeland, if it lacked the ability to stir the Jewish masses. We can perhaps understand, then, why, in "Beyond Distancing," Cohen and Kelman gauged the measure of North American Jewry's attachment to Israel in distinctly emotional terms. Respondents were asked if they felt "proud of," "excited about," or "ashamed of" the Jewish state; if "caring about" Israel was an important part of being a Jew; and even if they were "comfortable" with the idea of a Jewish state at all.⁸ In a culture deeply concerned with individual choice and preferences, describing one's relationship to a Jewish community in terms of feelings and inclinations hardly turns heads. Yet according to Jewish tradition, when it comes to solidarity, these factors are, simply put, irrelevant.

Of course, it hardly bears pointing out that the traditional Jewish concept of communal solidarity took shape under historical and social conditions dramatically different from those that characterize the comfortable life of most Jews in Toronto, Teaneck, or Boca Raton. The Jewish communities of late antiquity and the Middle Ages were more often than not forced to deal with a hostile gentile society and a brutal, oppressive regime. As if that were not enough, the geographical dispersion of the various Jewish communities made the maintenance of ties between them a formidable challenge. To survive in the face of attacks on all fronts required enormous internal strength—and no small amount of self-sacrifice.

Jewish tradition rose to the challenge of continuity by placing the need for unity front and center. Rabbinic literature is replete with images that demonstrate the importance of communal cohesion for the existence of the Jewish people, such as this *midrash*:

R. Shimon ben Yohai says, A parable—one who brought two ships and tied them together and placed them in the middle of the sea and built upon them palaces. As long as the ships are tied to each other, the palaces stand, but once they separate, the palaces cannot stand. So it is with Israel.⁹

Other sources draw their inspiration from the field of biology. R. Yom Tov ben Avraham Asevilli (the Ritva), a leading talmudic commentator of thirteenth-century Spain, compares the nation of Israel to a human body.¹⁰ The idea behind this analogy is plain: The Jewish people, much like a living organism, may be broken down into its various parts, but their sum is infinitely greater, if not altogether different, in nature. Moreover, for the whole to function properly, the welfare of each of its components is dependent on that of the others. When one of them is compromised, the entire body is impaired.

This collectivist view informs the *halachic* position regarding the relationship of the individual Jew to his community. The thirteenth-century R. Meir ben Baruch (the Maharam of Rothenburg), for example, insisted that since all Jews constitute a larger entity, they may not pick and choose in which collective burdens to share; for the sake of the community's welfare, all members must take part in its tribulations. Therefore, Jews are not permitted to present themselves, in their dealings with outside forces, as independent, dissociated actors:

Concerning Reuben, who came to settle in another town and dissociated himself from the community and came to a compromise with the minister to pay him tax on his own account, he has no power to do this, because all townspeople are partners... and even if Torah law did not decree it, since it is the custom in all the kingdom to be partners, it is not permissible to create divisions, for if they were to divide, each person on

his own, this would lead to bad things, with each one relinquishing his burden and putting it on his neighbor, and to great quarrels, to a point that they would be never-ending, for may we be one people and one unity (*aguda ahat*, literally “one association”), and may we survive among those who hate us.¹¹

The Maharam bases his particular ruling on a more general view of the importance of unity and the concomitant danger of divisions within a people. Understandably, the contemporary reader may feel uneasy with his portrayal of the Jewish people as an *aguda ahat*—a portrayal, that is, seemingly overlaid with shades of the fascistic. But we must recall that every group forced to confront an existential threat has no choice but to close ranks. At the very least, it is compelled to delineate the limits of individualism and pluralism, and to balance each against the necessity of solidarity.

The position that places the public good above individual rights and preferences is also what underlies the well-known Jewish concept of *arevut*, or co-signership. Expressed in an adage that echoes throughout rabbinic literature, *kol yisrael arevim ze lazeh*, “every Jew is a guarantor of every other Jew,” it contains a profound idea: Just as the guarantor (*arev*) must assume the debt of someone who cannot repay a loan, so must each Jew take responsibility for the actions—and inactions—of his brethren. The relationship of the individual Jew to other Jews, and to his community at large, is therefore governed not by the mere desire to look out for one’s fellow, or by feelings of sympathy or goodwill. It is instead an obligation—and one, the rabbis make clear, that cannot be abnegated.

There is not a single precept written in the Torah in connection with which 48 covenants were not made. R. Simeon ben Judah of Kefar Acco said in the name of R. Simeon: There is not a single precept written in the Torah in connection with which 48 times 603,550 [the number of Israelites who were present at Mount Sinai] covenants were not made. Rabbi said: According to the reasoning of R. Simeon ben Judah of Kefar Acco, who said in the name of R. Simeon that there is not a single precept written in the

Torah in connection with which 48 times 603,550 [that number] covenants were not made, it follows that for each Israelite there are 603,550. What is the issue between them?—R. Mesharsheya said: The point between them is whether each Israelite is responsible for each Israelite's *responsibility* for each Israelite [to observe the *mitzvot*], or whether each Israelite is responsible only for each Israelite [to observe the *mitzvot*].¹²

According to this logic, a Jew who neglects his responsibilities jeopardizes the entire community. The midrash emphasizes this principle: “And they will fall one upon another’ (Leviticus 26:37). This means not that one will fall with the other, but rather, that one will fall on account of the sins of the other.”¹³ The idea that the collective fate rises and falls on the deeds of the individual is spelled out in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*: “With regard to all the transgressions in the Torah, retribution is exacted from the person who transgresses alone, but with regard to a false oath, retribution is exacted from him and from his family who conceal the matter for him. Moreover, this causes retribution to be exacted from Israel, for the entire Jewish people are responsible for each other, as it is written: ‘Swearing, lying, murdering. . . . On account of these the land will be destroyed, and all who inhabit it will waste away’ (Hosea 4:2-3).”¹⁴

The notion of mutual responsibility is perhaps most noticeable in the realm of *tzedaka*. Although the term is usually translated as “charity,” in traditional Judaism, it is not an act of volition but a solemn duty, not a matter of kindness but of righteousness—which is, after all, the word’s literal meaning. The reason is obvious: Generosity may be one of the highest virtues, but it alone will not feed the hungry. Consequently, Maimonides went so far as to claim that a community has both the right and responsibility to force unwilling members into giving their share: “In the case of one who does not want to give *tzedaka* or who gives less than he should, a court should beat him with blows of chastisement until he gives what it is estimated he should. They should collect the money in his presence and take from him what he should have given, and they may pawn his property for *tzedaka*, even if it

is on the eve of the Sabbath.”¹⁵ In this way, rabbinic thought ensured that every member of the Jewish community, rich or poor, would look out for the minimum welfare of every other member—whether willingly or not.

This practice, and the worldview from which it derives, is clearly at odds with the modern liberal perspective—the perspective, that is, of the majority of North American Jews. To them, as to the non-Orthodox world at large, the concept of *tzedaka* is usually associated with the virtue of altruism, the motivation to do good without reward.¹⁶ It is also the means *par excellence* of expressing one’s emotional connection to the Jewish people and state. But the voluntary approach to philanthropy, which is by all accounts commendable, is a luxury the Jewish communities of the past could never afford. The question is, can Jews afford it now?

To be sure, American and Canadian Jewry’s support for Israel has its rewards. One could argue, for instance, that in exchange for its financial and political backing, Israel has acted as the most consistent and unifying element of North American Jewish identity over two generations. But ultimately, North American Jews’ solidarity with their Israeli brethren is about neither sentiment nor self-interest. It is, rather, about the recognition that we are all part of a whole. Yes, there are significant cultural differences between the Jewish people’s two largest centers. But these differences, from a *traditional* Jewish perspective, do not constitute a metaphysical wedge. Simply put, all those communities are in fact components of a single—vibrant, dynamic, unstable, and complex, but all the same, single—Jewish supercommunity.

Fortunately, during numerous crises of the past two centuries, Jews from around the world recognized this fact and acted accordingly. Beginning with the Damascus affair of 1840, in which a blood libel led to the torture and death of Syrian Jews falsely accused of killing a friar and his servant, international Jewry accepted the challenge—and obligation—of defending its own. Through editorials and mass protests, American Jews

announced to the world that they were a political force to be reckoned with; in Europe, the affair catalyzed the growth of the modern Jewish press, which in turn articulated a national agenda.¹⁷ The Edgardo Mortara controversy of 1858, in which a Jewish boy from Bologna was kidnapped by the Church and raised in its care as a Roman Catholic, had a similarly galvanizing effect on Jewish communities around the world. Most notably, it prompted the founding two years later of the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle, among whose stated aims were “to defend the honor of the Jewish name whenever it is attacked,” and “to work, by the power of persuasion and by all the moral influences at our command, for the emancipation of our brethren who still suffer under the burden of exceptional legislation.”¹⁸

More recent history also provides examples of trans-Atlantic Jewish solidarity, such as the American movement to free Soviet Jewry, which played a key role in ensuring the liberation of more than a million Jews trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Crucially, it was not just a sense of emotional identification with a poor, oppressed offshoot of their people that ignited the passions of America’s Jewish youth. It was also, if not more so, their realization that American Jewry cannot lock itself behind golden doors: It, too, bears responsibility for the plight of other, far less fortunate Jewish communities.

It is worth noting that these expressions of modern Jewish solidarity on the part of strong, wealthy Jewish groups toward their poorer, weaker brethren were in truth driven by a convergence of universal and particular values. The French Jews of the late nineteenth century were empowered by post-revolutionary discourse, which trumpeted tolerance, modernity, and secularism (or at least anticlericalism). The American Jews who fought for their Soviet counterparts’ freedom were inspired by the rhetoric and tactics of the civil rights movement. Neither group saw a contradiction between a commitment to their own country’s cultural values and an obligation toward Jews elsewhere. Indeed, their concern for the fate of their own people and their desire for justice for all humanity lived together in perfect harmony.

How does the Jewish state fit into this picture? Radical and ultraliberal critics of Israel present it in the darkest possible terms, as an ethnocentric, militaristic, paranoid entity. Even to the more levelheaded outside observer, the Jewish state's actions can seem clumsy at the best of times, belligerent at the worst. But in the Jewish heart and mind, Israel deserves a special place, and a different kind of consideration. For much like the traditional institutions of Jewish communities of old, the State of Israel provides perhaps the most critical of services for its people. Indeed, it is an institution fundamental to the survival and prosperity of the global Jewish community. Through such means as the Law of Return, the IDF, and the Israeli security services, it provides Jews with a home and a sanctuary in times of emergency. It also instills in them a sense of pride that only a sovereign nation, living in its own land, can foster.

True, the Jewish people has come a long way from those dark days in which its communities were forced to stand watch at all hours. Yet even today, it can ill afford to let down its guard. Antisemitism has once again reared its ugly head in places from which it was thought to have been long banished, with the result that observant Jews fear to walk the streets of Amsterdam, Paris, or Stockholm with *kippot* on their heads. On Western university campuses—supposed bastions of tolerance—Jewish students regularly endure anti-Israel vitriol and harassment. Worse, the Jewish state itself faces multiple existential threats, the most dire of which takes the form of the Iranian nuclear program. Seen in this context, the destruction of the State of Israel is not a hypothetical scenario used to measure the reaction of young North American Jews. It is, instead, a real possibility, one that must be prevented at all costs. To do so, Jewish solidarity, with all its practical implications, must be viewed as a matter not of choice, but of the utmost necessity.

Bitter historical experience teaches that Jewish sovereignty has no substitute. Of course, this does not mean that diaspora Jews should view Israel's policies as unimpeachable. On the contrary, precisely because Israel fulfills such a crucial role in safeguarding the continued existence of the

Jewish people, Israel's leaders and citizens *ought* to take into account what their brothers and sisters abroad have to say. But differences and disagreements aside, every person who identifies himself as a Jew must recognize that while membership in the Jewish community has its privileges, it also carries with it real obligations. And support for the State of Israel—as difficult to muster as it may at times be—is one of them.

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Notes

1. Itamar Eichner, "Zionism 2010: From California to Commando," *Yediot Aharonot*, December 16, 2010 [Hebrew].

2. See, for example, the recent and much discussed article by Peter Beinart, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment," *The New York Review of Books*, May 26, 2010. See also Steven M. Cohen, "Relationships of American Jews with Israel: What We Know and What We Need to Know," *Contemporary Jewry* 23 (2002), pp. 132-155.

3. Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel," Jewish Identity Project of Reboot, 2007, www.acbp.net/About/PDF/Beyond%20Distancing.pdf.

4. Sue Fishkoff, "Study: Young Jews Less Linked to Israel," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, September 6, 2007, www.jta.org/news/article/2007/09/06/104016/israelstudy.

5. See www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org, especially its mission statement and FAQs.

6. See Gil Shefler, "As GA Ends, Heckling of Netanyahu Leaves Bitter Taste," JPost.com, November 10, 2010, www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=194675.

7. See the organization's statement in response to its appearance on the ADL list of the 10 most influential anti-Israel groups in America, www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/blog/adl-it-again.

8. Cohen and Kelman, "Beyond Distancing."

9. Sifrei Deuteronomy, par. 346.

10. Yom Tov ben Avraham Asevilli, *Chidushei Haritva* on Rosh Hashana 29a.

11. *Responsa of Maharam* (Lvov, 1848), vol. 1, p. 108 [Hebrew].

12. Sota 37b.

13. Sifra Leviticus 6:5.

14. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Oaths 11:16.

15. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7:10.

16. See Gary A. Tobin, "The Transition of Communal Values and Behavior in Jewish Philanthropy," Institute for Jewish & Community Research, 2001, www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/10097.pdf.

17. See Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States: 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), p. 176; Johannes Valentin Schwarz, "The Origins and the Development of German-Jewish Press in Germany Till 1850: Reflections on the Transformation of the German-Jewish Public Sphere in Bourgeois Society," paper delivered at the 66th International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions Council and General Conference, Jerusalem, August 2000, <http://ifla.queenslibrary.org/iv/ifla66/papers/106-144e.htm>.

18. See www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1264&letter=A.