

RETHINKING PEOPLEHOOD AND ISRAEL-DIASPORA RELATIONS

Moderator: Yehuda Kurtzer

Content prepared by: Yehudah Mirsky

GROUP MEMBERS:

Shmuel Ben Shmuel
Nicolay Borschevsky
Sandy Cardin
Rebecca Caspi
Yuli-Yoel Edelstein
Dede Fienberg
Maxyne Finkelstein
Mario Fleck
Dyonna Ginsburg

Vera Golovensky
Daniel Grossman
Alan Hoffman
Steve Hoffman
Jeremy Jones
Meir Krauss
Isi Leibler
Daniel Liwerant
Herzel Makov

Dan Mariaschin
Gidi Mark
Josh Schwarcz
Yair Sheleg
Levi Shemtov
Lior Shilat
Shmuel Trigano
Aharon Yadlin
Zvi Zameret

The challenge before us is building a global Jewish society in an historical moment which complicates relationships between the particular and the universal, the global and the local perhaps as never before. The welter of forces to which we refer in shorthand as 'globalization' and 'the internet,' not to mention the differing internal dynamics of the State of Israel and Diaspora Jewry, are collapsing distances and reconfiguring the very shape of the elusive but essential mix of meaning and belonging which we call "Jewish identity."

Factual and Conceptual Background

Almost all the world's Jews live in societies characterized by high economic development, and by socio-political environments which promote integration into the global information society. Thus, in most Diaspora countries, assimilation is the normal process of moving into a welcoming mainstream, while swimming against the current – and encouraging others to do the same – is a challenge.

The much-discussed "distancing hypothesis" that younger Diaspora Jews are feeling less connected to Israel is largely correct, but how to interpret it is unclear. A key question is whether it is a function of political discomfort with Israel or of generational patterns of assimilation? (While life-cycle plays a role, there are inherent losses that are not recoverable over time.) We can discern both weakening and strengthening in Diaspora attitudes at the farther ends of the spectrum, perhaps best described as polarization, as the solid center loses at both ends.

One cause for hope is that most (though of course not all) Jews do see Judaism in similar ways in both Israel and the Diaspora, such that there is still a basis for shared understanding. (The most assimilated fringes in US and elsewhere still have a concept or intuition about Israel; it's the last element that melts down.)

Yet the centrality of Israel is by no means taken for granted by young people. Jewish identity is a mix of nationality and religion, in Israel it's built on the national pillar and in the Diaspora, on the religious-cultural-spiritual pillar and that is a real source of the gap. The two can and ought to complement each other.

How can this be translated into action? It must be recognized that the thing we call Jewish peoplehood simply does not function at the level of structures and encounters for common thought and decision-making, and in part that is because it is more broadly-gauged an idea than our current organization structures allow.

Moreover – commitments to a broad and welcoming sense of peoplehood on the one hand, and to Jewish religious and cultural coontinuity on the other, are not identical. People and groups may have rich Jewish religious or cultural identities and yet not necessarily feel connected to the world Jewish community as whole, either because their identities are deeply sectarian or deeply privatized.

Europe

The situation in Europe poses special challenges. There, the distinction between Israel and Diaspora is in many ways ending, as European Jews are identified with Israel whether they like it or not. As multiculturalism gathers force Political leadership identify Jews with Muslim communities, a process of creeping denationalization of the Jews, psychologically and symbolically, Jews are permanently equalized between Jews and Muslims and people think that Arab hostility to Jews is explained by the Mideast conflict, and so the conflict is considered a French problem.

In Europe, Jews are caught in the middle of a clash between two critical processes: 1) the unification of Europe, the end of frontiers and the crisis of the nation-state (in terms of which modern Jewish identity took shape). 2) The huge Muslim migration without integration in the state. In this situation the Jewish community's position is jeopardized, by Muslims themselves and the European's public inability to understand.

The emphasis on the Holocaust, which seems to base Jewish legitimacy on victimhood, may in the end work against us; the universalizing of the Shoah has paradoxically contributed to a human rights discourse which sees Israel, and perhaps all Jewish particularism, as illegitimate. Meanwhile, anti-Zionist Jewish intellectuals enjoy near-hegemony in the media and powerfully shape public opinion.

Political Dimensions

The political dimensions of the Israel-Diaspora relationship cannot simply be reduced to one-dimensional notions of support for, or opposition to, Israeli policies (even if Peter Beinart's much-discussed essay earlier this year made it seem that way). Issues of Jewish identity, as well as the dynamics of local communities – who are regularly called upon to defend Israel – play a large role. Moreover, while the physical front lines of Israel's struggles are in the Mideast, the front lines of the war of ideas – including the waves of delegitimization of Israel itself – are abroad, as Diaspora Jews find themselves dealing with increasingly hostile waves of public opinion.

We are undoubtedly seeing more open dissent than in the past, and there are several reasons for this: 1) The genuinely contentiousness of some Israeli policies, even within Israel itself, especially as regards the Palestinians 2) It is no secret that today's younger generation has no living memory of the Holocaust or of 1967, and so their connection to Israel must ground itself anew 3) The organized Jewish community is more internally diverse than in the past 4) Paradoxically, it seems that one of the reasons that identified Jews feel more free to criticize Israel than in the past is precisely because Israel seems "out of the woods" inasmuch as its fundamental security and stability seem assured. (And indeed, fundamental support for Israel's security, and a corresponding willingness to work with its democratically-elected governments, remains solid in Diaspora communities.) Conversely, others are, in this globalizing and multicultural age, increasingly uncomfortable with strong assertions of national and ethnic identity, and thus with Israel and Zionism.

It must be admitted that there is little room within the organized community for dissent, and that in turn makes the Jewish left even more critical of Israel and its supporters than they might otherwise be.

As for Israel itself, the Government of Israel must pay far more attention than it does to the needs of Diaspora Jewry and recognize that issues regarding the Jewish character of the state, such as the conversion crisis, sex-segregation in public transportation and other forms of religious coercion, are doing great damage to its standing in the Diaspora, especially among younger Jews.

At the same time, there are marvelously entrepreneurial initiatives arising from the grass-roots, in Israel advocacy and education, and Jewish identity, and we need to think of how better to harvest them.

Education

We must recognize that Jewishness now lives in the marketplace of ideas – and Jewish texts, values and ideas must and can compete there. Educational efforts work most effectively, indeed only, when they inhabit a continuum – across lifespan, from birth to death. This means that a continuing and vital emphasis on the university campus shouldn't distract from needing to work across a developmental landscape, including educating Jewish leaders themselves so that they can speak with authenticity and conviction. The 'ecosystem' of Jewish education is far richer than school systems are such, and it is an ecosystem of lifelong learning.

The Israeli government for its part must take more responsibility for educating its citizenry towards Jewish peoplehood and civilization, and engaging in dialogic education with the Diaspora. In the early years of the state, Ben-Gurion articulated a three-fold challenge for Israeli education: a) creating a link to a people whose majority is outside Israel b) nurturing a continuity of history half of which was outside the Land c) transmitting knowledge of a religious heritage and culture to a public which no longer shares those commitments, which was always religious. The Israeli education system, chronically under funded and swept up in a larger ethos of globalization, privatization and individualism needs to begin addressing those challenges again.

Currently the Jewish community not only funds Israel education in the Diaspora - it also funds much of the Jewish cultural and peoplehood education within the Israeli school system itself, and that is neither healthy nor sustainable.

As far as assessing success, perhaps sustainability is the best category. It may well be that by holding on to every small program we tolerate too much mediocrity in Jewish and Israel education. If we start by taking stock of our strengths in the Israeli system and in overseas institutions and capabilities, rather than focusing on the problems, we should be able to build off of strengths more effectively.

Operative recommendations

At the outset, JPPI's detailed recommendations for Israel-Diaspora programming, submitted to the Government of Israel in late 2009, ought to be taken seriously as at least one possible basis for a broad and inclusive platform for deepening Israel-Diaspora ties and commitments.

Young people need to be brought to the table, and the same goes for other groups (women, varying ethnicities or ideologies) who are more often talked about than engaged. Moreover, we must strive for a bigger tent that will make room for the liberal left and make it feel at home in the organized community.

Young people need to become empowered through education. They will make their own choices as to whether or not to join Federations. Rather than reinforce leadership we must create it, by giving young people knowledge, and imbuing them with passion, with which they will go out, engage with existing structures and create new ones.

The importance of youth notwithstanding, Jewish and Israel education is a lifelong project and cultivating a sense of lifelong learning is essential for professionals and lay people alike.

Peoplehood is a mosaic of projects shared by engaged people. We need to find joint projects that inspire people to action, whether it's Jewish literacy, or envisioning how Israel could be a laboratory for a just society, or Israel as the first carbon-free society in the world. For protagonists, we need people who already have shared content, or shared connections. Young Jews with neither will not be likely candidates for meaningful relationships. Jewish artists, academics, social justice activists, share passions but not connections. On the other hand, Modern Orthodox Jews have many connections to Israelis and Jews but don't have shared content or language or peoplehood, ditto for young Jews from FSU, connections, with no content. There are many who currently are at the periphery of Jewish establishment life and it's worth looking at 'peripheral' groups to see if they can be made full-fledged partners.

In a larger sense, we need not a Jewish Agency but an agency for Judaism, as our chief challenges are perhaps most deeply ideological, cultural and religious. What is Judaism? What is peoplehood? In what can and must we believe to sustain Jewish life? What must and can we believe in and defend. Such philosophical questions are no luxury but of the essence; and Holocaust memory, as important as it is, is no substitute, and itself may perhaps be in need of rethinking. Doing our best to find answers for our time is perhaps the *sine qua non* of Jewish life, wherever it may be.

To read the background paper prepared in advance of the working group discussions click [Here](#)