

Reimagining Transnationalism

Deborah Dash Moore

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“What role does the state of Israel play in the development of Diaspora Jewish identity?”

This first question sets out important parameters. It asks about the relationship between the State of Israel—not Israelis, their society and culture—and “Diaspora Jewish identity”—not American Jews, their community and culture. That is, it juxtaposes a nation-state (that modern hyphenated entity looking for trouble) and, by implication, its politics, with personal and individual aspects of Jewish consciousness and self-consciousness, what we call “identity.”

But before we can answer the question of the impact of Israel’s politics on the consciousness of Jews living outside of the state, we must first inquire: How aware are Diaspora Jewish men and women of Israel’s politics? Are Jews still avid readers of newspapers? Do they watch television news regularly? Do they consult the Internet for diverse sources of information and opinion? I can’t answer these questions, which makes my reflection far more personal than I suspect is desirable.

I do know, however, that the news about Israel reported in the general press and on television in the United States is far more sympathetic to Israeli political and military decisions than such reporting in European news outlets. Thus, American Jews who never bother to read Israeli or Jewish publications can know about the four years of *intifada*, the many terror bombings of Israeli civilians, the mounting death toll of innocent bystanders and armed combatants, the Israeli raids on Palestinian cities and refugee camps, the

uprooting of olive trees and razing of homes, the construction of a massive wall of separation, the failure of alternative peace initiatives proposed by Europeans and dissenting Israelis and Palestinians, the deep commitment of Jewish settlers on the West Bank and Gaza to remain in their homes at all costs, and the fervent dedication of Hamas and other radical Palestinians groups to armed struggle against Israel. These are issues reported in the general press, often with an effort to present a “balanced” perspective. Assuming that Jews read the press and watch the news, they would receive such information.

How does this information affect their identity? Perhaps an historical analogy might help to answer this question. (As an historian, I am inclined to turn to the past when contemplating the present.) During the Depression, Jews who supported the Communist Party idealized the Soviet Union. Much of the news about the U.S.S.R. in the general press described its policies as oppressive and economically devastating to large sectors of the population. Yet Jewish Communists largely dismissed such reports. They pointed to the evident antagonism of much of the capitalist and fascist worlds to communism. They saw the Soviet Union as beleaguered, struggling alone against enemies determined to put an end to its extraordinary experiment in collectivism. Negative reports on famines and purges did not shake their faith. They turned to their own Communist press for explanations. There were, in addition, Jews who were fellow travelers, sympathetic to many but not all of the goals of communism, supporters of a welfare state, opponents of fascism, racism, and anti-Semitism, proponents of a more just international order. These Jews worried about the reports of repression coming out of the Soviet Union; they wondered whom they should believe; they looked for an alternative

that would enable them to maintain some idealism in politics. Most Jews, of course, belonged neither to the Communist Party nor to the more amorphous group of fellow travelers, but dedicated ideologues often set the terms of political debate.

I am not suggesting that fervent supporters of the State of Israel, and especially of the Likud and Ariel Sharon's policies during the last four years, resemble Depression-era Jewish Communists, or that advocates of Oslo and the peace process resemble fellow travelers. I am suggesting that the comparison might reveal how bad political news about a state that is idealized reinforces commitments rather than provoking questions. For those who might be characterized as fellow travelers, Israel's response to the *intifada* has stimulated doubts, questions as to whether the bad news might mean there is something wrong with the Zionist ideal. Jews living outside of Israel and the United States might be more prone to articulate such doubts, because the news they receive about Israel is more sympathetic toward Palestinian violence and demands and more critical of Israeli responses, especially its assassinations, military attacks, mass arrests, and unwillingness to negotiate.

Furthermore, these latter Diaspora Jews make their lives in societies where anti-Semitism has reappeared with surprising vigor, unlike the United States. Thus we read, particularly from European Jews, proposals suggesting that Israel does not need to exist as a Jewish state, that binationalism would make a better alternative, that Israel's presence and the violence and hatred it seems to inspire in the Arab and Muslim worlds endanger Jews rather than securing their lives in the Diaspora. The revival of these debates indicates that Israel's politics have made some Diaspora Jews profoundly uneasy, even to the point of trying to dissociate Jewish identity from identification with Israel.

Influencing Jewish Life in both Directions

However, these reflections don't respond to what I think is the coded concern of this symposium, namely, the relationship of American Jews to Israel, rather than the relationship of Diaspora Jews to Israel. Furthermore, the issue is not just the state and its politics, but Israeli society and culture. "In many ways, Israel has redefined the patterns and rhythms of Jewish living." Yes, but in many ways, American Jews, flourishing alongside of Israel, have also redefined the patterns and rhythms of Jewish living. If we turn to religious creativity, American Jews have redefined the meaning of Judaism through incorporation of women as almost equal members of communal life. This change, reverberating throughout the Jewish world, including Israel, has transformed Jewish education, ritual, ethics, and leadership. Jewish women's issues that flow from the fundamental assumption of their equality with men have stimulated innovations that make twenty-first century Judaism radically different from its twentieth-century predecessors. The Diaspora, specifically the United States, produced these new patterns of Jewish life that have influenced development in Israel.

On the other hand, the ethnic pluralism of Israeli society has encouraged American Jews to recognize how all sorts of people could be Jews and to embrace diversity within their communal institutions. American Jews seldom cite this diversity in their debates on outreach, conversion to Judaism, and intermarriage. Still, the willingness of Israelis to offer citizenship to men and women related to Jews by marriage or distantly connected to Judaism in past centuries helps to offset the ongoing conflict over Jewish identity within the state itself. Thus the move toward inclusion on grounds both of gender and ethnicity is one of the results of Israeli and American Jewish interaction in the past

half century. Hopefully, as American Jews move toward inclusion on grounds of sexuality as well, they will also inspire Israelis to adapt.

Living in a sovereign Jewish state makes Jewish identity an aspect of national identity for most Israeli Jews. Most Israeli Jews feel Jewish the way most American Jews feel American. It's natural. It comes with the territory, with school and language, with home and culture. It is not something that requires contemplation or self-consciousness, unless one travels abroad. But along with their national Jewish identity, many Israelis also experience Judaism as something set apart, fixed, controlled by rabbis, unresponsive to personal needs. So many Israeli Jews understand Jewishness in rather diametrically opposed fashions: as ineluctable yet potentially immaterial, and as inert yet potentially vital. Traditionally observant Israeli Jews, of course, find personal meaning in Jewishness through Judaism as well as through politics, but they are a minority of Israeli Jews, just as traditionally observant American Jews are a minority of American Jews. Increasingly, the latter, too, are seeking personal meaning not only through religious practice, but also through political action.

It is not clear to me that Israel retains its centrality in contemporary Jewish life in the United States. Zionist sentiments continue to animate many American Jews, and the Jewish press energetically covers Israel, but even a cursory examination of congregational life suggests that Israel is far from central. In communal politics, support for Israeli policies remains a touchstone of inclusion; groups that openly espouse alternatives (e.g., B'rit Tzedek v'Shalom) exist on the margins of the organized Jewish community. In cultural life, translations of Israeli writing, film festivals, art exhibits, and

music concerts indicate Israel's presence, but these exist alongside American Jewish writing, films, art, and music.

Were Israel more central to American Jews, the diverse voices of its writers and artists would allow American Jews to identify with sectors of the Israeli population rather than with the state and its policies. These connections would inform and inspire American Jews. Hearing from many different types of Israelis would help to move American Jews away from an idealized understanding of Israel; American Jews would come to appreciate the complexities of the issues Israelis confront. This possibility, rather than the type of connections developed in the 1970s and 1980s between individual donor communities in the United States and local neighborhoods or towns in Israel, seems to me to hold more promise for moving to a new type of transnationalism that could reconfigure what is implied in the term "Jewish state."

A Model of Transnational Citizenship

American Jews need to pioneer in producing a model of transnational citizenship that involves participation in Israeli society. American Jews also need to permit a variety of Diasporic perspectives to be expressed. Participation and expression form two elements of responsible transnationalism. A term describing the identity and practices of contemporary immigrants, transnationalism assumes multiple social relationships—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political—that link together societies of origin and settlement. An essential element of transnationalism is multiplicity of involvements, operating at various levels from intimate to institutional. American Jews do not need to become immigrants, though they do need to adopt migrant practices, such as regular visits to the country where one is not living (i.e., regular visits to Israel). That

is, they need to build upon the customs of contemporary immigrants to fashion a Jewish transnationalism. Multiplicity rather than uniformity should be recognized as the best way to support and sustain Israel in the context of its political struggles with the Palestinians. Thus American Jews would fulfill their responsibilities to Israel, not only to the state and its policies, but also to the people and their concerns. Cultural exchange, mutual support, political engagement, religious dialogue, social interchange, economic cooperation, educational fellowship—all these make up elements of transnational Jewish citizenship.

Israel, in turn, ought to seek to redefine its understanding of a “Jewish state” to include a commitment to the well-being of Jews. This would involve reexamining Zionist belief in the negation of the Diaspora and the corresponding assumption that only Jewish life in the State of Israel is viable. Discussion about far-flung Diaspora communities that lack a critical mass of Jews should be shared with Jews from the United States and other large communities. The creation of a Jewish convocation could provide the forum for such debates as well as for decisions regarding distribution of assistance. Cooperation rather than competition should characterize responses to changing circumstances. In addition, Israeli Jews should share in transnational Jewish citizenship, visiting Jewish communities outside of Israel on a regular basis and forging those multiple ties of involvement that would broaden and deepen their understanding of Jewish peoplehood.

Should Jews be able to develop a new form of ethical peoplehood, one that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state, they would help the world reimagine the possibilities of religious community and responsibility. At a time when religious politics involve placing strictures on the lives of women, Jews could propose alternatives that

liberate and extend democratic processes to all members of the Jewish people. The transnational model possesses the potential to transcend the accepted binary poles of Jewish thinking, Israel vs. Diaspora, with multiple relationships. It lets us move beyond the tensions and traumas of the present moment toward a new, invigorated future.

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