

Israel and the Diaspora: A Reconstructionist Reconsideration of Zionism

BY DAVID A. TEUTSCH

Recently I received a thoughtful letter asking for reconsideration of a note in *Kol Haneshamah: Limot Hol*, the Reconstructionist daily prayerbook, that describes the prayer for rain inserted in the ninth blessing of the *Amidah* as remembrance of the rain cycle in ancient Israel.¹ After reading several scholarly articles on that subject, I now believe that the policy of reciting the prayer for rain beginning on December 4 reflects the custom of the Babylonian Jewish community in talmudic times, not that of the land of Israel, as the note in question suggests. It is quite startling to realize that the Babylonian Jewish community purposely observed a different day for the recitation of the prayers for rain in order to better reflect the needs of the Babylonian Jewish community due to

the nature of weather and farming there.

Even more surprising, Babylonian Jews followed not the Jewish lunar calendar but the Babylonian solar calendar to fix the date for starting the prayer for rain. In the process, they asserted not only the difference in needs between Babylonia and Israel but also the need of every Jewish community to reshape its aspirations and perspective based on where it is located in the world and the natural and political circumstances in which it finds itself. The struggle for hegemony between the rabbinic communities of Babylonia and Israel is quite well known. The greater size and learning of the Babylonian Jewish community resulted in its asserting itself against the older community of Israel, which had history and land on its side. This

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conflict was temporarily resolved only with the destruction of much of the community in Israel fourteen hundred years ago.

A Relationship Emerges

The American Jewish community of the 1930s could not yet imagine a *yishuv* strong enough to make any claims of hegemony over world Jewry. In the 1930s more American Jews looked to Eastern Europe for Jewish authenticity than they did to the struggling and fragile Jewish community of Palestine. With the destruction of much of European Jewry and the emergence of the State of Israel in the 1940s, all that changed rapidly. Fifty years after the founding of the State of Israel, we are still in the throes of working out our relationships, and the relationships are complex. They have a personal level, interpersonal level, Jewish communal level, theological level, and an international governmental level.

The years after 1948 brought a gradually growing affection and bond between the Jews of North America and the young Israeli state. The growth in that relationship through the 1967 Six Day War is well documented. Equally well documented (for example, in the work of Steven M. Cohen and Charles Liebman) are the growing alienation and misunderstanding that now often characterize the relationship between American Jews and Israelis. What has happened, and what are the causes?

Reconstructionism and Zionism

From its inception, Reconstructionist Judaism has been publicly and enthusiastically Zionist. Ties between the leadership of the Reconstructionist movement and the Labor Zionist movement were highly visible for much of this century. The rhetoric of Mordecai Kaplan about upbuilding the land rang out from the pulpit of his congregation, The Society for the Advancement of Judaism. He wrote on the theme frequently and reinforced his views by significant stays in the Holy Land, including a visiting professorship at Hebrew University from 1937 to 1939.

The early logo of the Reconstructionist movement placed Zion as its center. But to understand what that meant for Kaplan, we need to remind ourselves that Zionism was about the full rebuilding of the Jewish people and Judaism's reinvigoration as a moral and cultural force. It was not simply a question of sovereignty and land. Reconstructionist Zionism was, and to some extent remains, this-worldly messianism. "Zionism" is code for the creation of the Israel—and the Jewish people—of our dreams. The centrality of Zion reflects the spiritual Zionism of Aḥad Ha'Am. Aḥad Ha'Am never expected all of Jewry to live in Israel, but he did expect that a culturally, morally, and spiritually vigorous Jewish community in Israel would become the focus of the Jewish world, fueling not only an extraordinary flowering of Jewish cul-

ture but also providing a compelling moral and spiritual voice.

Thus, placing Zion at the center of the Reconstructionist logo conveyed a dream about the thriving of Jewish peoplehood with Israel at its heart. Israel is theoretically capable of producing an intense form of Jewish culture that grows out of the ancient connection to its land, its ability to reinvigorate the Hebrew language, and the unambivalent development of an Israeli culture that is not secondary to an indigenous majority culture. This phase of Reconstructionist Zionism did not anticipate, however, the degree to which Israel would be westernized or affected by materialistic hedonism, or the degree to which major political and economic problems would overwhelm other Israeli concerns.

Dream and Reality

But indeed the challenge was clear by the 1950s. Kaplan, in his book *A New Zionism* (1955), argues strenuously for tackling head-on the fundamental issues facing Israel lest it grow into just another “levantine state.” By then, Kaplan feared that the moral and religious problems facing the state would result in corruption so deep that it could never be the center for his new Zionism. That fear remains with all of us who share some of Kaplan’s vision.

For example, the existence of a state religion in Israel not only stifles the development of religious pluralism; it has also encouraged disdain on the part of many Israelis for Jewish voices that might address the problems of

our day. The conflict between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews and the prejudice that exists among different ethnic groups of Jews baffle and frighten us. That Arab villages are funded far more poorly by the government than Jewish villages challenges our sense of fairness and social justice. The struggle for peace in the Middle East is negatively impacted by right-wing religious rhetoric. The political scene in Israel is sometimes tainted by demagoguery and corruption. The culture that has emerged in Israel reflects a materialism that suggests some of America’s worst aspects have been imported to Israel. Thus the Israel of our reality is often in shocking tension with the Zionism of our dreams. Furthermore, Israelis sometimes seem interested in American Jews only for their ability to influence American public policy with regard to economic support of Israel. In the face of all that, many American Jews have simply turned away. They seem to be saying that if Israel cannot immediately inspire and uplift them, they would rather not deal with Israel at all.

In considering the meaning of this shift, we should keep in mind that the positive picture of Israel (David the kibbutznik making the desert bloom and defeating the Arab Goliath) that helped a generation of Jews overcome their self-perception as victims after the Holocaust has not, for most American Jews, been replaced with something positive. The current and more critical image of Israel has a significant negative impact on American Jews’ identification with Jewish peoplehood, in part because negative

reports about Israel are experienced as far more prevalent in the American press than positive stories about Jews. This is one reason why what happens in Israel is vital to American Jews.

On the other side of the equation, it is clear that Israelis have much to say that is negative about American Jewry as well. Israelis rightly point out that most American Jews are woefully ignorant about Judaism and Jewishness. They not only cannot follow a simple conversation in Hebrew; they don't know very much about Jewish or Israeli culture. American Jews are gradually assimilating through the choices they make in their daily lives. American Jewish organizations are often high-handed and demanding in the way that they deal with Israel and Israelis. Little surprise that Israelis become angry and frustrated when American Jews critique them for their materialism. Is it not a case of the pot calling the kettle black? Experiencing the relationship between American Jews and Israel, it is quickly clear that we are dealing with two siblings who are both deeply alienated from each other and deeply drawn toward each other.

A Two-Way Relationship

Perhaps a good way to move beyond this impasse is to remind ourselves of some of the things that we need from Israel. First, and in some ways most important, is the living language of Hebrew. Not only does this connect us in a different way to prayer and text; it also has provided an extraordinary flow of Hebrew literature that interacts with contemporary

culture from around the world and critiques it while expanding Jewish culture. As the *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals) composed by Rabbi Ira Eisenstein and Emanuel Goldsmith has it, "Jewish culture is alive once more in *Eretz Yisrael*." Furthermore, journeying to Israel brings a powerful emotional response in Jews that may require difficult struggle but nonetheless deepens our sense of what peoplehood is about. We don't always respect or admire every member of our family, but Jews always take family utterly seriously. Traveling the land results in re-encountering Jewish history and memory in a way that can occur nowhere else because this is not only the place of our people's birth. It is also the place from which our formative tales emerge. We need the experience of reconnecting to land and story.

We also want Israel to be an exemplar of the best of Jewish values. This will not occur unless we manage to achieve the level of mutual moral engagement that Kaplan urges in *A New Zionism*. But if Israel can play the role of exemplar, it will have as powerful an effect on the North American Jewish community as the victory in the Six Day War did in capturing Jewish hearts.

We also need the educational institutions of Israel. They are extraordinary repositories for advanced academic Jewish studies at the university level. They also provide wonderful opportunities for in-depth study at the elementary and secondary levels. We have all seen the impact of junior year at Hebrew University or summers

spent in text study. That is why the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College co-sponsors the Liberal Beit Midrash in Jerusalem.² Perhaps most of all, we understand that Israel is the only place where Judaism is acted out in every day and every way, where the encounter between Judaism and contemporary life is full and intense. We have much to learn from an experience in which Jewish civilization is primary.

And Israelis have much to learn from us as well. The American Jewish community has mastered the use of pluralism, democracy, and volunteerism in a way that can have a transformative effect on life in Israel. Our ability to debate moral questions vigorously, however limited it sometimes seems, could allow us to provide a model for solving some of the challenges facing Israel due to political and religious extremism. And we have much to say about the possibilities of adapting Judaism to changing times so that the choice need not be Orthodox theological assumptions or no meaningful Judaism at all. These are areas where increasing numbers of Israelis are struggling, and where they need our partnership.

Building Relationships

How do we go forward from here in light of the frequent and increasing alienation between American Jewry—the strongest Jewish community in the world—and Israel? Part of the answer lies in increased mutual exposure and dialogue. There are many reasons why the RRC has long had the policy of requiring a year of study in Israel for all of our rabbinical students. Hebrew

language acquisition, familiarization with the land of the Bible, and the impact of full immersion in a Jewish society all play a role in making the year invaluable, as does the importance of understanding Israeli politics and the challenges facing the state. But as important is the need for building bridges between the powerful Jewish communities in America and Israel. Rabbinical students form relationships with Israelis that act as a bridge over the gulf between the communities. Many of these relationships last a lifetime.

We need to make it easier for Jewish professional and lay leaders to spend larger blocks of time in Israel. We also need to encourage American Jews to visit, not just to take a whirlwind tour of the sites, but to participate in volunteer and study programs that will bring them in regular contact with Israelis. We particularly need to send our young people for extended stays to Israel—for summers certainly and for a year of study if possible. Such visits should be preceded by substantial and careful orientation programs, and they should be followed by careful debriefing as well. Research has shown that these visits are critical in maximizing the positive impact of the experience.

Just as important, we need to bring Israelis to the United States. They need to have meaningful experiences of the liberal Judaism of our congregations, the thinking of serious Jewish theorists, and interaction with American Jews as they really live. The RRC is attempting to find ways to bring Israelis to Philadelphia for prolonged

periods of study as part of this effort.

Reconstructionism in Israel

We need to help Israelis create a form of Reconstructionist Judaism that reflects their social situation. The ideas of Reconstructionist Judaism are, if anything, more important to Israel than they are to America. But the forms of social organization will necessarily be different. We are based in congregations in North America because the structure of Jewish religion here (i.e., the congregation) is the one we have learned from the larger American society, a structure that helps us fit into the larger society. In Israel, where reliance on professional teachers may be much less important (in part because there is no language barrier in studying Hebrew texts) small study groups and *havurot* may be a much more cost-effective and socially acceptable large-scale means of Jewish social organization than in the United States. We need to be supplying resources in Hebrew for such study groups and to be providing the means to help them organize. The goal should not be to duplicate the North American Reconstructionist movement in Israel but to help an indigenous Israeli movement utilize the same ideas for developing a network that works for them. This Israeli movement will be an ideal dialogue partner for North American Reconstructionists.

We need to focus our fiscal giving not only on building up a Reconstructionist presence in Israel but also on strengthening democracy and pluralism. It is clear that some people in the

American Jewish community have no qualms about strengthening religious fundamentalism and right-wing fanaticism in Israel. We must respond by strengthening organizations committed to civil rights and pluralism.

For many years the American Jews who lobbied for a peace initiative when the Israeli government was not yet interested were attacked as self-hating, destructive, and unpatriotic. They were in a position not unlike the early American opponents of the Vietnam War. In retrospect it is clear that resistance to the Vietnam War reflected both high ideals and patriotism. In this context the attacks on the authenticity of liberals and progressives by Israeli and American Jewish politicians and religious leaders seem dangerous and misguided. The future of Israel may depend on our support for those in Israel who reflect our values.

Toward a New Zionism

Where do we go from here? We have a shared fate, we Jews in America and our brothers and sisters in Israel. What we do politically, morally, and religiously affects us both psychically and in terms of the eyes of the rest of the world.

Several times each day Israel comes up in our prayers. We pray for the "rebuilding of Jerusalem." We pray for "peace in Israel." We pray for "restoration of Zion." Our Jewish consciousness cannot remain a Jewish consciousness if we exclude Israel from our thoughts and deeds. How do we manage this? Kaplan's Zion—the messianic perfection of the world and

the re-invigoration of the Jewish people—is still at our center. The real Israel, with its full vigor and its flaws, cannot be at the center in the same way. Rather, like Babylonia, we realize that the weather and social situation are different.

Equally important, the American Jewish community, even without the rest of the Diaspora, is greater than Israel in terms of numbers and wealth, and close to its equal in terms of academic Jewish scholarship. American Jews—like the Sadducees of old—respond powerfully to the officials and trappings of the Jewish State, but on key issues we more strongly than ever choose to follow our own direction. Nevertheless, we must remain in dialogue with the real Israel as an equal partner. And both American Jewry and Israel need frequent reminding that our shared goal is building the Zion of our dreams.

Thus we must move toward forging a more mature long-term relationship between the two largest contemporary Jewries. This will require mutual listening, openness to mutual criticism, and empathy for the differences between us. If we develop that kind of mature relationship based on hard work and mutual caring, then at last we may exceed Herzl's dictum about Zionism: if we will it, it will become more than a dream.

1. The letter was from Peretz Rodman, a scholar in Jerusalem. He referred me to several articles by Daniel Lasker. The blessing is found on pp. 110/111, and 228/229, and 304/305.

2. The Liberal Beit Midrash for English speakers opened in 1997 with the co-sponsorship of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and Leo Baeck College. It meets on the Bet Shmuel campus of the WUPJ in Jerusalem.