

# Israel and Identity Building: Educating American Jews About Israel

BY ELAN EZRACHI

## Pro-Israelism: A Fundamental American Jewish Value

For many years the relations of American Jews toward Israel were shaped by two opposing attitudes. Israel has been the main source of pride and joy in the organized Jewish community. Israel generated intense emotions at every level of public Jewish life. From early childhood education, through the day school and supplementary school system, in camping and at the JCC's, at synagogues, federations, and national defense organizations, Israel was a prominent motif. This strong sentiment of pro-Israelism expressed itself in ceremonies, decorations, public statements, slogans, parades, special events, and any other form of symbolic expression. The high level of

pro-Israelism did not stand in contrast with "American" values, since Israel and the United States were in a close strategic alignment. So, being an Israel supporter was just the *right thing* in the eyes of many American Jews.

This position was part of the ethos that was emerging in the post Second World War era which Jonathan Woocher labeled as the Jewish "Civil Religion" in America.<sup>1</sup> Identification with Israel was part of the survival ideology, which energized the Jewish community, and became the central force of organizations and community processes.

## High Emotion vs. Low Engagement

But American Jews stopped short of going beyond the strong pro-Israel position. Unlike their heightened feel-

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ings toward anything that had to do with the Jewish State, there was little done to translate this energy into an active engagement with Israel. This lack of engagement with the *reality* of the new Zionist experiment reflects the second attitude of American Jews toward Israel.

As Israel is celebrating its 50th anniversary and assessing the various forces that contributed to the shaping of its cultural, economic, and social reality, the American Jewish community receives a few meager footnotes. The small role Americans have played in the emerging Israeli civilization seems to be in total contradiction to the amount of love and affection that so many Americans felt over the years toward Israel.

One might question the impact of American Jewish philanthropy, which is clearly substantial, but allows little involvement of donors with their benefactors. This unique American position of *high* emotion and *low* engagement should be viewed as part of the development of the American Zionist idea. American Zionism, which is the ideological foundation of the pro-Israel position, was unique from the start. As Jonathan Sarna writes:

The Israel of American Jews — the Zion that they imagined in their minds, dreamed about, and wrote about — was for centuries a mythical Zion, a Zion that revealed more about American Jewish ideals than about the realities of Eretz Israel.<sup>2</sup>

American Zionism was an *American* cultural movement. Zionists looked for a *general American* rationale for creating the Jewish State against heavy odds. Alon Gal talks about the “mission ideology” which was developed to respond to this quest, that was universalistic in nature. The humanistic, universal, and moral emphasis served to bring the American Zionists’ vision of Israel into “significant accord with the ethos of the American people.”<sup>3</sup> Thus Israel, which embodied a pioneering spirit and was seen as the sole democratic country in the Middle East, served as a good cause to identify with from an American stand point.

Add to this the geographical distance between Palestine/Israel and the U.S., the low numbers of Americans emigrating or traveling to Israel over time, the decline of Hebrew and European Jewish culture in America—and the trend is clear. American Jews, at best, care for Israel but lack the tools to develop an active relationship with Israel as a civilization.

## Formative Memories

For many American Jews, the love of Israel is associated with certain memories that give the flow of emotions a clear focus. Most of these memories have to do with Israel’s quest for survival, its heroic ability to sustain itself and the dramatic instances that enabled people who are observing from a distance to share in the exciting achievements. Unlike their parents and grandparents, young American Jews do not possess such memories. Most Jews today do not remember the raising of the Israeli flag

in 1948, nor can they recall the sense of fear and relief during the Six Day War. Even the memories of the Entebbe Operation in 1976 or the rescue of Ethiopian Jews in 1991 are fading.

In recent years, Israel awareness seems to be shaped more by the negative images that Israel receives in the media and the growing sense of alienation that is a result of the treatment of the non-Orthodox streams in Israel. It is easier to garnish sympathy through events in which the “Davids” win over the “Goliaths,” rather than what Israel provides today.

Scholars have debated in the early 1990s the extent to which there has been a decline in the support of Israel among American Jews. Steven M. Cohen argues that the distancing theory is not so clear cut. The surveys conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s showed relative stability in the pro-Israel positions, contrary to the overall climate of the effect of the Intifada and the “who is a Jew” crisis. Still, there is evidence “to an impending decline in American Jewish attachment to Israel at some point in the future,” which is a result of an analysis of the trends among the younger generation.<sup>4</sup>

## Jewish Peoplehood As a Key Concept

American Zionism was an ideology that paradoxically encouraged American Jews to focus inward. In this respect, Israel served as metaphor for the American Jewish experience. Identifying with Israel had more to do

with the building of the American Jewish community rather than with actually participating in the building of Israel. The UJA formula of the united campaign, in which money is raised in the name of Israel but more than half of it stays in the U.S. for local needs, exemplifies this position. In other words, continuation of this classic approach is bound further to distance American Jews from Israel rather than bring them closer.

This is exactly where radical change is required. American Jewish education should develop a new strategy of Jewish identity education. Jewish identity begins and ends with a very basic predicament. A Jew, first and foremost, is someone who is part of the *Jewish people*. The Jewish people is divided along two basic demarcation lines. One division is based on religious differences (from ultra-Orthodox to the secular options). The other division among Jews is based on geography. Jews are scattered around the world, and together they form a unique international network, the Jewish People.

Jewish education in America should address these divisions. On one hand, every group should continue to perpetuate its own religious (or secular) ideology in the context of its own constituency. This means doing its best to deepen the spiritual dimension and the quality of its own educational system. But at the same time, Jewish education has to raise awareness beyond one’s own world to the global Jewish scene.

## Implications of Jewish Peoplehood

American Jews, in particular, need to be liberated from the isolation that the American Jewish ethos was so effective in creating. So, even before Israel comes into the Jewish educational arena, the younger generation should be exposed in a serious way to the global aspects of Jewish existence; namely, Jews live all over the world, but are one people.

The message is rather simple: Being Jewish is not only caring for one's immediate community. It is about membership in an international network of people who share a common heritage, have similar existential and ideological challenges, and believe in some kind of a joint meaningful future. Today, with the relative stabilization in Jewish demography and the opening of all political and cultural boundaries, this seems to be a realistic objective.

A focus on Jewish peoplehood requires several elements in the educational process. This is a multi-discipline issue which involves theology, Jewish history, ethnic and cultural studies, political science, and sociology. Young American Jews should be able to articulate what connects them to and sets them apart from other Jewish communities around the world.

## Israel: A Different Kind of Jewish Community

Israel needs to be treated somewhat differently in the broad spectrum of

Jewish peoplehood education. While the universal message of Jewish peoplehood is vital to all Jews, Israel requires an additional lesson. Israel is a polity and as such it carries several unique features that can never be found in Diaspora communities. They are, by definition, ethnic minorities in a majority non-Jewish environment, while Israel is a sovereign state.

Viewing Israel as a polity requires two educational efforts. First, within the realm of political theory, it is important that students will be aware of the meaning of the term polity. It involves understanding key concepts such as sovereignty, military power, status within the international community, and control of key cultural domains such as language, calendar, and national symbols.

In addition to the universal aspects of political existence, there are unique elements that relate to Israel as a *Jewish* polity which require particular attention. American Jews should be familiar with the characteristics of the Israeli political system and the historical processes that shaped its formation. Israel has developed a certain type of political reality, democratic in its basis, but not completely formed and still struggling with key issues that relate to Judaism and to Jews around the world. American Jews should have a good understanding of the complex relations between the secular state and the various organized religious groups operating within it. The struggle for religious pluralism, for example, has to be understood through the prism of the broader scene, namely, the status of religion in a Jewish state. American

Jews will be much more effective in pursuing a more open and tolerant Israeli Judaism if they would demonstrate competence in understanding the way the system works.

## From Engagement to Involvement

The main argument of this article is that from the start, American Jews are deeply attached to Israel on an emotional level, yet they detach themselves on the cognitive and behavioral sides of human expression. This focus on emotional attachment coupled with the generational factor that assumes that such emotions are bound to fade, requires a new strategy that will bring Israel to a new kind of awareness among young American Jews. In addition to a high emotional attachment, Israel has to be part of their identities in other realms.

Looking at this challenge from a theoretical point of view, we stand on shaky ground. People's identities are normally shaped by the culture and environment in which they are raised. In other words, a person's identity is the sum total of individual characteristics together with the alignment circles that this person has, such as neighborhood, ethnic community, region, country, and profession. It is almost impossible to develop an affinity to a group or place that is not part of the person's private scenery.

This is where a comprehensive educational initiative can help. Education can stretch the boundaries of a person's identity beyond the natural forces of socialization (or, say, good

education can go contrary to sociology). The main goal of this educational campaign is to include Israel in a person's self-identity. Thus, growing up as an American Jew (an identity challenge as it is) means that an affinity with Israel is part of the package. And unlike the old-time focus on the emotional identification, this new approach is more pragmatic and wishes to develop an American Jew who has competence to engage and be involved with Israel and Israelis.<sup>5</sup>

## Israel As a (Second) Home

As we approach the twenty-first century, we are entering a new period regarding the place of Israel in the lives of American Jews. The State of Israel has been in existence for a half century. It is a modern country which, while beset with problems and challenges, has established itself as a vibrant and dynamic contemporary Jewish society. Israel has changed; the North American Jewish community has changed; and the world that we live in has changed.

Israel education has to adapt itself to these new realities. First, Israel education should not be restricted to discrete educational domains. Israel education is a life-long process that applies to every type of educational experience and communal framework.

Second, the aim of Israel education is to bring American Jews to an active engagement with Israeli culture, people, and day-to-day life. The Jewish community has to develop a comprehensive plan that will relate to all ages and express itself in every aspect of communal life. *The Israel Experience*, a

term that has been associated with youth programs in Israel, should be expanded to other populations: families, adults, special interest groups, study and volunteer programs, internships, and even groups involved in political lobbying.

### Engaging Israel and Israelis

Third, American Jews must become literate in every aspect of Israeli culture. This is no small challenge, since it is conditioned on a sense of strong motivation that includes a willingness to learn Hebrew, to keep in close touch on current events and to travel frequently to Israel. Once the elites of the American Jewish community demonstrate such an attitude the message to the broad community will be clear. Today, the common image of an American Jewish leader is someone who comes to Israel for a few days, stays in an elegant Jerusalem hotel, and speaks only English. Israelis interpret this posture of American Jews as remaining perennial outsiders.

Finally, Israel is not a static entity. It is a community. American Jews have an opportunity to personalize their relations to Israel through engagement with Israel's most viable commodity: Israelis. Today, there are many venues upon which to base the Israel connection through interaction with Israelis. Known as *mifgashim* (encounters), Americans and Israelis (and Jews from other countries as well) can reach out to each other through peer connection, which is becoming increasingly more widespread.<sup>6</sup>

A word must be said here about

Israelis. For them, meeting Diaspora Jews is equally important. Israelis suffer from the same isolation syndrome that was analyzed earlier concerning American Jews. Meeting American Jews and establishing relationships is a crucial factor in shaping the future of Israel as an open pluralistic Jewish society. Interaction with Israelis is most likely the most effective way for American Jews to influence Israel to move in the direction that is compatible with the American Jewish experience.

Post-modern life suggests that people are citizens of a global community. They learn about other cultures, acquire languages, travel frequently and even live for extended periods of time in other countries. This seems to be an accepted mode in many circles. Being an American (or French, Italian, or Israeli) stands in no contradiction to being immersed in other cultures. The time has come to apply this orientation to the Jewish community. Being Jewish is about membership in a particular Jewish community, while at the same time participating in the global Jewish Village.

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1. Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

2. Jonathan D. Sarna, "A Projection of America As It Ought To Be: Zions in the Mind's Eye of American Jews," in Alon Gal, *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews* (Hebrew University, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1996), 41.

3. Alon Gal, "Overview: Envisioning Israel—The American Jewish Tradition," in Alon Gal, *Envisioning Israel...*, 21.

4. Steven M. Cohen, "Did American Jews

Really Grow More Distant from Israel, 1983-1993—A Reconsideration,” in Alon Gal, *Envisioning Israel...*, 368; Also Steven M. Cohen, “Israel in the Jewish Identity of American Jews: A Study in Dualities and Contrasts,” in *Jewish Identity in America*, ed. David M. Gordis and Yoav Ben-Horin (Los Angeles: University of Judaism, 1991).

5. Several organizations joined forces recently and initiated the “*Israel In Our Lives*” project. IOL is a comprehensive approach to Israel education at all levels of the North American Jewish community. It includes a series of 15 guides written by key educators and scholars.

“*Israel in Our Lives*” is sponsored by the CRB Foundation, The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, and The Charles R. Bronfman Mifgashim Centre, in cooperation with Jewish Education Service of North America and Israel Experience Inc.

6. Elan Ezrachi and Barbara Sutnick, *Israel Education through Encounters with Israelis*, a booklet in the series *Israel in Our Lives*, published by the CRB Foundation, the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, and the Charles Bronfman Centre for the Israel Experience (Jerusalem: Mifgashim, 1997).