

THE ATTACHMENT OF EUROPEAN JEWS TO ISRAEL

The British Experience

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The attachment of Diaspora Jews to Israel can no longer be taken for granted. In recent years, there has been a radical shift from a community-wide consensus concerning attachment to Israel, which was probably as secular as it was religious, to a more narrowly based attachment linked to religiosity and to personal experience. At the same time, there is declining support for Israel-oriented charities. In the future, Israel will increasingly appeal more to Traditional and Orthodox Jews than to other members of the Jewish community, and Zionism as an ideology will become increasingly irrelevant.

The data in the 1995 Jewish Policy Research (JPR) survey of social attitudes and values of British Jews suggest that marked changes have taken place in the nature of the relationship between British Jews and Israel in recent years. Although we do not have comparable data for other European communities, it seems reasonable to assume that patterns are not that different elsewhere. The changes are summarized and the trends highlighted in Table 1. It indicates the direction in which matters look as if they are going, unless something changes or there is intervention to bring about change in the interim. In other words, these are probable trends; they are not inevitable.

Those Jews who are most closely attached to Israel are far more likely to be Orthodox by synagogue affiliation or by religious outlook. It is the Traditional and Orthodox Jews who are more likely to have friends in Israel, to visit more often, to have thought about *aliyah*, and to consider making *aliyah* in the future. They are more likely to support Israel causes and to tend to adopt a more hawkish approach to the peace process, being far less likely to want to exchange land for peace. This sug-

gests a narrowing, in religious terms, of the base of the attachment to Israel in the British community. Although we do not have definitive social survey data from the past on this issue, the thrust of the evidence in the 1978 survey conducted in Redbridge (an outer London borough with a large Jewish population) indicated a much more broadly based attachment to Israel at that time. We would argue that this downward trend in attachment is borne out by experience and accounts of the history of British Jewry over the past two decades.

Younger Jews are more polarized in their attitudes to Israel. In the aggregate they are less likely to give to an Israel charity and more likely to disagree with the view that "the only long-term future for Jews is in Israel." Their attachment to Israel is much more dependent on actual experience of the country and its people—having friends and relatives there, and making visits—than is the attachment of older people.

What seems to be happening then is a radical shift from a community-wide consensus concerning attachment to Israel, which was probably as secular in character as it was religious and which grew out of ideological and emotional feelings, to a more narrowly based attachment linked to religiosity on the one hand and to personal experience on the other. It is after all the national-religious trend in Israel that has been ideologically and

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politically dominant in the last two decades, despite the advances in the peace process. The socialist-Zionist ethos is in eclipse. If anything challenges the national-religious camp it is Israel's secularism and consumerism, which hardly offer themselves as a point of positive identification for liberal or secular Diaspora Jews. Whether one agrees with their point of view or not, it is the national-religious camp that has conveyed a more certain, more coherent view of what Israel is and is to be in the future. Whereas Israel once appealed to all denominations in the community, as time passes it looks as if increasingly it will appeal more to Traditional and Orthodox Jews than to others.

This pattern applies to the new episodic connections between British Jews and Israel that have arisen in recent years. Many British Jews have invested in vacation and retirement properties in Israel. Business travel and business links have developed. Teenage trips to Israel have become almost a rite of passage for young British Jews. Yet as any casual observer of airline travelers to Israel can observe, the Orthodox are overrepresented. While secular and progressive Jewish teenagers who visit Israel tend to spend a few weeks of their summer vacation there, Orthodox youngsters are more likely to spend a year at a religious yeshivah or seminary.

Israel has been a powerful mobilizing force in British Jewry, especially at times of crisis, such as the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War. That force has been employed, with phenomenal success, for fund raising. For

years it was taken for granted that Israel was the primary focus of communal fund raising, in terms both of priority and of the amount of money raised. It is probably still the case that a high proportion of charitable funds from Jews go to support Israel in one form or another. However, the JPR survey clearly shows that those funds must come from a shrinking group, among whom are a number of elderly people and individuals with large foundations who give substantial donations. Not only is the proportion of the Jewish population supporting Israel financially relatively small—26 percent—but younger people are showing even less interest. Israel used to be the primary focus of communal fund raising, but there is now declining support for Israel-oriented charities.

Zionism in the Diaspora was never simply an ideological machine for producing *olim*—immigrants. It became a cultural and educational force; one only has to look at the role of the Zionist Federation in establishing Jewish day schools. Through the creation of that Zionist space within British Jewry, Israel came to be an essential component and a medium of expression of Jewish ethnic identity. But as elements of Israeli culture became part of the fabric of Jewish life, Zionism as an ideology began to lose its resonance. It was simply no longer necessary to buy into all the theory that made up the Zionist idea in order to have a close relationship with the reality of Israel. JPR survey data show that most Jews in Britain see themselves as firmly rooted in British society and not as a Diaspora waiting

Table 1. Israel

<u>The Past</u>	<u>The Future?</u>
Appeals to all denominations	Greater appeal to Traditional and Orthodox Jews
Attachment based on ideology and emotion	Attachment based on experience
Primary focus of communal fund raising	Declining support for Israeli charities
Zionism as most widely held ideology	Zionism ideologically irrelevant
A medium for the expression of Jewish ethnic identity	Jewish ethnic identity more broadly based
A focus for Jewish communal consensus and a strong unifying factor	A source of communal division
Central in Jewish life	Diminishing centrality

to return. They do not see the only long-term future for Jews in Israel, and if they are contemplating aliyah, they are most likely to be Traditional or Orthodox Jews. However, even then only a very small minority say they are actively making preparations to go. Zionism was once the most widely held communal ideology, but in the future it looks as if Zionism will become increasingly irrelevant or the tool of one communal faction. An erosion of the center and the end of consensus politics are not just British Jewish phenomena but global trends as religious fundamentalism and local nationalisms grow.

Other JPR survey data indicate that British Jews are becoming more like an ethnic community, but that the components of that ethnicity are becoming more broadly based and complex. A rise in Jewish group identity among the young has not translated into increased Zionist feeling. Israel is part of Jewish ethnicity, but by no means as important to it as is generally assumed. Certainly, to call Israel the central focus of Anglo-Jewish identity is not justified by the JPR data. Some people have spoken of Zionism Mark II or of a renewal of Zionism, and it is not mere coincidence that they did so in the year marking 100 years since the first Zionist congress. Yet, their assertion flies in the face of reality. The trend for Zionism is toward ideological irrelevance and for Israel to be very much present in, but diffused throughout, the increasingly complex mosaic that makes up contemporary Jewish identity.

With eyes now focused on the issues that were always held in abeyance—the future of Jerusalem, Israel's final borders, the possible creation of a Palestinian state, the status of Palestinian refugees, the very nature of the Jewish state—disagreements among Jews have become much sharper.

The JPR survey data reflect this in the division over such issues as land for peace between Orthodox Jews and some Traditional Jews on the one hand, and the rest of the Traditional, Progressive, Just Jewish, and Secular Jews on the other. The survey data relate to the situation in late 1995. We can be

assured that the Rabin assassination and the election of the Netanyahu government mean that today, far from being a source of cohesion and consensus, in some respects Israel is becoming a source of communal division.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Such developments and trends must have an impact on the centrality of Israel in Jewish life. Diaspora Jews do not see themselves as living in exile. They have freely chosen to live where they are, and if they want to live Jewishly in any sense they are increasingly giving priority to problems internal to their communities and related to the maintenance of Jewish distinctiveness. They can see that the state of Israel and the Israeli population are managing quite nicely without their perpetual concern. Thus, fewer feel the need to give charitable support to Israel. Many see no relevance in Zionism. Those who are actively attached to Israel are drawn more and more from one sector of the community. And the incipient struggle over the crucial issues facing Israel's future, including the power of the Orthodox religious parties to determine who is a Jew, is likely to make Israel less a focus of consensus and more a source of division and alienation for liberally minded Jews. In this light—and if Israel is integrated more into the Middle East—can Israel's centrality hold for all Jews?

If these trends prevail and if nothing happens or is done in the interim to change them, we could be seeing a turning of the circle in British Jewry's attachment to Zionism and to the idea and the reality of the Jewish state. It began as the concern of a mostly secular minority, grew to embrace the entire community, and could be in the process of returning to be the concern of a minority, although now a minority with a mostly Traditional or Orthodox religious outlook.

This situation can be viewed as a natural process and a product of the success of the Zionist project. Israel has grown up; it does not require the support of Diaspora Jews as it once did since it is no longer under immediate threat. If there is to be a relationship with

Jews outside of Israel, why should it not be based on practical and personal connections—visits, friends, and so on—or on some kind of religious imperative? And meanwhile, Jews turn increasingly to the problems of their own community or the world. This may be the normal position, and those whose primary concern is Israel may simply have to adjust to this new reality.

On the other hand, this new situation could be seen as a huge problem, a major crisis given the role that Israel once played in fostering contemporary Jewish identity and in keeping Jews broadly united around a central issue. Given the link between experience of Israel and attachment to Israel among younger Jews, it suggests that enormous resources would need to be poured into giving young Jews that experience, only to prevent any further erosion of attachment to Israel.

The challenge for policymakers is therefore considerable: to let matters take their course, the implications of which may well be as outlined in Table 1 or to gear up Israel-

oriented charities and organizations to prevent further erosion, the implications of which could be the taking of even more money out of Diaspora Jewish communities for Israel-oriented activity.

The onus could also fall on Israel to take the initiative. Since ideology plays such an important role in Diaspora Jews' attachment, Israelis have to decide if it is in their interests to modify their policies and how they present them in order to appeal to a wider spectrum of Diaspora Jews. They could also consider the way in which the intermediary role played by the media in portraying Israel's government and society affects the attitudes and feelings of many Diaspora Jews.

As the twentieth century ends, time and historical processes seem to accelerate. So even as we commemorate the triumphs of Zionism, the centennial of the First Zionist Congress in 1897, and the jubilee year of the establishment of the State, paradoxically one fact is clear: The attachment of Jews to Israel can no longer be taken for granted.