

Israel and the Jewish Nation

By Yossi Beilin

When in the mid-90s I attempted to persuade Jewish and Israeli institutions and wealthy members of the Jewish community to implement what several years later became Birthright, I attracted considerable criticism in Israel. At the Knesset Absorption Committee I was asked why Israel had to contribute to funding the costs of youngsters from well-to-do families, spending ten days in Israel, when there was still poverty in Israel. My reply was that Israel, as a Jewish country, was committed to the continuity of the Jewish people and that this had to be its main priority whether or not Diaspora Jews considered Israel responsible for this. Today few argue with me over the success of Birthright, although there are still some who view it as a luxury. I feel that Israel will lose its right to exist if its main concern is not focused on the issue of Jewish continuity.

Israel is an unparalleled solution, although its very existence generates dilemmas and questions for the Jewish people which it has not previously addressed. It is the only place in the world where, when you leave the room, no one says behind your back: “you know he’s a Jew?!”, and it is the only place in the world where a Jew can become a citizen and make his home without quotas, without favors and without tests. In this respect, it meets the original Zionist intent, and we haven’t even mentioned the democratic and economic success story, science and culture, education and the Hebrew language.

But Israel constitutes a new problem, the aspects of which were not entirely considered by the Zionist visionaries – the unprecedented concentration of Jews in one place which, as such, is vulnerable to an existential threat through weapons of mass destruction. This is a danger to which the Jewish Diaspora is not exposed. In its policies and actions, and in the ideas expressed by its leaders, Israel generates threats to the Jews of the world, creates pretexts for modern anti-Semitism, and creates dangers results from the fact that there are those who seek to harm Jews around the world as a means of gaining revenge against Israel.

Israel also creates a dilemma for the Jews of the world, and a 60-year problem with the issue of loyalty. Even if the Jews of the world are primarily loyal to the countries in which live, they are often asked to demonstrate particular loyalty to their home country, so they are not viewed as being patriotic to Israel. This is a delicate issue which Diaspora Jews have to address wisely, and which Israel has to take into consideration.

In the first decade of the 21st century, a new picture of global Jewry is emerging in which there are communities of equal size in Israel and in North America, and together they comprise about 85% of all the Jews in the world. Almost all the remaining Jews live in developed countries from which they have no intention of emigrating. The main problem for most of the Jewish people today pertains to the question of Jewish continuity, as most Israeli Jews are not religious or identified with institutionalized communities, and most of the Jews who live outside Israel do not provide their children with Jewish education.

The primary issue for the leaders of the Diaspora is that of Jewish continuity, and this is an area of increasing concern in view of the high percentage of Jews who are marrying non-Jews. Particularly since the 1990s, the question of the very existence of the Jewish people in the Diaspora one generation hence, other than among ultra-Orthodox Jews, is increasingly coming to the forefront.

Today, the greatest challenge faced by the leaders of the Jewish people is how to find their place in contemporary trends, grab a ride on globalization and on modern means of communication, and to come up with proposals that will allow continuity in a non-Orthodox age, with Israel acting a bridge, a Jewish meeting point – as the State of the Jews and as the only place where the issue of Jewish continuity does not exist, and where Jewish education and Jewish culture are available to all.

I hear criticism that Israel is not a Jewish enough country. This is an absurdity. It is, thank God, not a religious state but it is the only place in the world where a person can go through their whole life without entering a synagogue, and without there being any doubt over their Jewishness and Jewish identity. When my granddaughter comes back from kindergarten and recites the four questions from the Passover *seder*, and the tales of the Hasmoneans at Hanukkah and gets angry with Haman at Purim, no one in the world can tell me Israel is not Jewish enough.

Israel is an actual and potential home for all the Jews of the world. It has succeeded in creating a Jewish culture that changes with the spirit of the time, and it has a sense of responsibility towards the Jews of the world. The bond between the Jews of the world and Israel is constantly changing. If sixty years ago, the Jewish leadership in the United States asked Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion not to dare say that Israel represents the Jews of the world, so they would not be accused of dual loyalty, today Israel's leaders can say that openly, without attracting criticism from anyone. If in the past, there was a joint struggle to save Jews in distress, this struggle has ended and has been replaced with a joint effort to ensure the future existence of the Jewish people. If in the past, Israel was able to exist due, among other factors, to the generous donations from the Jewish people, in recent years Israel has contributed to educational and other activities in the Jewish world, and its economic stability has allowed it to fund various projects in the Jewish world itself.

It is not taken for granted that Israel is the center of the Jewish people. If it is important enough to it, Israel has to prove it with deeds, by developing Jewish studies, and offering appropriate role models. The ongoing debate between Israelis and Diaspora Jews with regard to the centrality of Israel is both superfluous and ridiculous. This is not an issue that will culminate in a showdown, rather with development over the coming years. What I feel is important, far more than the matter of centrality, is the issue of the relationship between the two great Jewish communities, for the sake of the future of both.

I find it hard to understand why there is no joint ongoing institutionalized forum for both these communities which addresses the issues that are important to both of them – such as Jewish education, dealing with attacks on Jews around the world, developing modern Jewish culture, addressing issues of marriage and divorce or conversion etc. How is it that encounters between the two communities are always accidental, or take place within outmoded frameworks, such as the World Zionist Congress, which only represents a small sector of the world's Jews, or the Jewish Agency which is fundamentally anachronistic and offers no real forum for discussion between the two communities, which could lay the foundation for decisions.

I am convinced of Israel's essential position as the country of the Jewish people, as it is the country of all its citizens. I see it as a democratic Jewish state that is proud with the way it has realized Zionism even though for a large part of the Jewish people who perished in the Holocaust it happened too late, and Herzl's desperate calls at the beginning of the 20th century were not adequately heeded. I say this, of course, alongside all the criticism I have of the continued Israeli occupation of the Territories, which is diametrically opposed to Jewish values and which endangers the Jewish majority in the near future. Relations between us and the Jews of the world must be equal, without any sense of superiority by any of us. Most of us find ourselves in a situation which we did not choose ourselves, rather because of the place where we were born. The real question is whether we are able to maintain a genuine common forum where we can raise problems and offer creative solutions. This will not happen in the institutions that exist today.

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