

# Israeli-Jewish Diaspora Relations

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Israel and the Jewish Diaspora are both experiencing major transformations which influence their relations. These include demographic changes: shifts in the centers of the Jewish diasporic communities, the creation of new communities and the reemergence of communities especially in East Europe; improvement of the political, social and economic positions of Diaspora Jews, but at the same time an increase in anti-Semitism and enmity in certain states, the emergence of new cultural, social, political and economic forces in Israel that strongly impact the Israeli society and, consequently, its relations with the Diaspora. It should be added that all these changes occur against the background of globalization, individualization and substantial use of sophisticated communication systems.

These changes and their implications for Israeli-Diaspora relations are discussed in my and Hadas Roth's new book – *Who leads? Israeli-Diaspora relations*.<sup>1</sup> This book is the first of its kind. It presents both an overview and detailed discussions about the most important issues facing Israel and its relations with the Diaspora. It is based on original written sources, publications, interviews with senior politicians and on the expanding theoretical and analytical literature about the general diasporic phenomenon all over the world. From this latter viewpoint, the assumption is that the Jewish Diaspora and its relations with Israel is not unique and that important lessons can be learned from what is happening in other diasporas and their relations with their homelands.

But most importantly, the book is the first to focus on the Israeli side in this sphere. Thus it deals with the ideology, positions, attitudes, policies and behavior of the Israeli public, Israeli senior politicians and bureaucrats, and the media and various non-governmental organizations active in this sphere. The following analysis is based on the findings of the book.

There are various problem areas facing the entire Jewish People, including Israel: a. the urgent need for the reformulation and then the maintenance of the Jewish identity; b. the

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel (Gabi) Sheffer and Hadas Roth-Toledano, *Who leads? Israeli-Diaspora Relations*, Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 2007 (Hebrew)

need for defining the delicate issues of center and periphery in the nation, the loyalties of Israel and of the Diaspora toward Israel, on the one hand, and the loyalties of Diaspora Jews toward their hostlands, on the other, and above all, the need to ensure continuous close connections among all Jews; c. the need to develop and expand Jewish-Israeli education in both Israel and the Diaspora; d. Jewish immigration to Israel and to other hostlands; e. the Israelis' attitudes and policies toward prosperous, reemerging and declining Jewish communities; e. the struggle against anti-Semitism; f. the reparations issue; g. the influence of the media on Israeli-Diaspora relations; h. the urgent need for far-reaching reforms in the Israeli organizations and institutions dealing with the Jewish Diaspora.

Before elaborating on these problematic issues, it should be said that not all is in bad shape in this sphere. Generally speaking, Israel and Israelis care especially for Diaspora Jews in despair, they are ready to extend help to Jewish communities facing difficulties, and for the first time there is some increase in the allocation of resources for these purposes. On the other side of the nation, Diaspora Jews are showing interest in what is happening in Israel, they are donating money to help Israel and Israelis, and they lobby on behalf of Israel in their host countries, etc.

Yet, as mentioned above, it is pretty well known there are also basic matters that should be reshaped in order to ensure the continuous close relations between the two parts of world Jewry. As far as the Israeli side is concerned, when focusing on each of these highly problematic issues (and because of space limitations here only the more significant issues will be discussed) it turns out that situation is as follows:

- Most Israelis lack deep knowledge, proper acquaintance and current information of the situation of the Diaspora. This is particularly the situation among younger Israelis. Even those Israelis who have traveled abroad and visited diasporic communities know very little about the general situation of world Jewry or the specific situation in the communities they have visited. Even worse, most of them are not interested in the Diaspora. This is not surprising since the Israeli school system, the press and the media do not invest much in teaching and reporting about the Diaspora's situation. Consequently there is almost no public discussion and debate about Israeli attitude, position and policies concerning the Diaspora.

- A close examination of the positions of the majority of the Israeli public, the main parties, the government and the Israeli organizations dealing with the Diaspora shows that a traditional, but archaic, Israeli-centric ideology and attitude is held by the vast majority. These views that strongly influence the actual policies and actions of the Israeli governments and organizations are far from fitting the current situation of the Diaspora and its relations with Israel. These ideology and attitudes have not been re-examined or even discussed here
- There is a lack of formative leadership that is willing and capable of overcoming the inertia in Israeli formal and informal positions in a way that might lead to new attitudes and policies which will be more suitable to the Diaspora's current situation and will lead to the needed changed relations between the two parts of the Jewish nation. The problem is that the actual activities in this sphere are determined by political, organizational and personal self-interests of the persons dealing with these issues.
- Most of the statements made by the few Israeli politicians and bureaucrats who deal with Israeli-Diaspora relations are devoid of serious meaning. Such statements are merely lip-service to the need of close relations between Israel and the Diaspora. These statements also cover up the fact that there is a lot of confusion and lack of action in this respect.
- Despite the statements made by the Israeli "professionals" emphasizing the good performance of the various organizations dealing with the Diaspora and the need for reforms, actually all these organizations and institutes are facing severe difficulties as far as their personnel, financial resources, formal and informal status in Israel and in the Diaspora and their true ability to conduct reasonable relations with the Diaspora and pursue adequate policies.
- There are severe problems in policy formation and implementation in Israel. Policy making is specific, not regular and systematic. Most of the decisions are made not by senior Israeli politicians, but rather by the "professionals" in accordance with their personal and institutional whims. Most of their policies and decisions are dealing with marginal matters and avoiding any major decisions that are urgently needed to improve and buttress Israel-Diaspora relations. In regards to critical issues such as Jewish identity, immigration to Israel, Jewish and Israeli education and requested support for Israel, on

the one hand, and for the Diaspora on the other (especially for communities facing difficulties) there is no clear cooperation between the government and the organizations active in Israel, or even between the various governmental ministries and the various departments in the organizations dealing with Diaspora matters.

- There is problematic cooperation and coordination between the Israeli government and organizations, on the one hand, and the main organizations in the Diaspora, on the other. Successive Israeli governments have not succeeded in creating proper mechanisms for dealing with these discrepancies. This situation is pretty obvious concerning recruitment of donations and other resources for Israel, and the order of priorities in the use of available resources. There are clear gaps in the needs and priorities in this respect.

Then what should and can be changed in this sphere?

First and foremost, there is a need to adopt new patterns, some of which are known, to deepen and widen Israelis' knowledge and understanding of what is currently happening in the Diaspora in order to increase their awareness and solve some of the existing difficulties in the relationship. Thus, the number of classes and their programs in elementary and high schools and courses and seminars in the universities and colleges in Israel should be significantly expanded. The Israeli media should be encouraged to expand its continuous coverage of what is happening in the Diaspora. In this context, the Israeli organizations should change their current position, and support research and development of non-conventional approaches to these issues, including the study of the vast literature on the general diasporic phenomenon, which can shed new light on various questions facing Israel and the Diaspora.

Despite the widespread skepticism concerning the significance of ideologies that are expressed in the parties' platforms and in the Israeli government's publications and announcements about its basic policies, there is a need to reformulate them. Most important is the need to critically reexamine the Israel-centric basic approach of most Israelis and institutions. This is not a new position. It goes back to the pre-state period and further developed by the founding fathers of Israel and especially by Ben-Gurion. If there is a true belief and wish for a unity in World Jewry this position must be altered. It does not mean that all Jews abroad should be granted the right to vote in Israeli elections, as some

observers have suggested, but that when basic policies are made the needs of the Diaspora should be equally considered.

In this connection, there is an urgent need to deal with the redefinition and consolidation of Jewish identity – what is known as the highly contested question of "who is a Jew"? In this context it should be noted that there are increasing doubts especially about the widely accepted notion of the religious nature of Judaism. An increasing number of Jews in the Diaspora and in Israel think about it in terms of ethnic-national-religious identity.

Such a reexamination of the Jewish identity should include the issue of center and periphery in the Jewish nation. It has been noted that Israel's centrality in the nation is seriously questioned by many in the Diaspora, especially younger persons who have been fully integrated in their hostlands. In order to avoid the estrangement of such Jews the implications of these growing positions among them should be seriously considered, and the new clear understanding should be widely communicated to the Jews in the Diaspora.

Consequently, there will be a necessity to reorganize the structure of organizations like the Jewish Agency, or even establish totally new organizations on an equal basis between Israel and the Diaspora as far as representation, control and management are concerned. It will mean greater involvement of the Israeli government and representative organizations in the Diaspora.

Without a clear Israeli acknowledgment of the current contested and problematic issues in Israel's relations with the Diaspora and readiness to invest unconventional thinking and action in their change, there is a clear possibility of additional deterioration in Israeli-Diaspora relations. Despite their personal and organizational limitations, the senior Israeli politicians should undertake the rethinking and reorganization in this critical sphere for Israel and the Jewish Diaspora.

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