

Blog Post: Young American Jews and Israel

Let's talk for a bit about young American Jews.

But first, a word *from* our sponsor. Not *by* our sponsor, whose approval for this commercial I have not sought nor has it been reviewed or authorized by APN. What prompts this opening just now is the realization that this is the 61st installment of our ongoing conversation. That works out to just about one every eight days since we began sixteen months ago. I don't spend all that much time looking at blogs, but what time I do spend reinforces my view that this space is quite special. I take some of the credit for that, of course, and I happily and gratefully share that credit with our participants – the regulars, the occasionals, and the intermittents alike. But truth be told, a significant chunk of the credit goes to Americans for Peace Now, which thought the idea up in the first place, which has gently sustained it all this while – and which so persistently and so fervently and most of all so ably fights the good fight “out there.” And out there is, all things considered, far more important than in here.

Mostly, I'd guess, APN is thought of as an “American Friends of ...” And, in a way, it is that, providing, as it does, anywhere from 60 percent to 90 percent of Shalom Achshav's budget. But it is much more than that as well. Sometimes less successfully, often more, it anchors the effort to talk sense about peace to decision makers in Washington. I can say, from personal experience, how encouraging it is to visit with a member of Congress and hear, as I have any number of times, his or her delight at being offered something other than “the party line,” being offered something that makes great good sense but that the member of Congress mistakenly feared had no constituency within the American Jewish community.

Hence this commercial: If you really care for the kind of conversation we have here, as also for the kind of work APN does, you might favorably consider a generous (and tax deductible) gift to APN. It would be both much appreciated and wisely spent. And you can find the address quite easily at peacenow.org.

All that is, in fact, not unrelated to the question of young American Jews. A virtual avalanche of data has been presented in recent years showing that intimacy of association with Israel correlates highly with age. The younger the cohort, the less likely it is to profess significant political or, for that matter, psychological connection with Israel.

I'm told that data soon to be published is still more depressing, if not actually alarming. The indifference to Israel that has been so well-documented in recent years is now morphing into genuine antipathy towards Israel. That's not to say, by any stretch, that antipathy is now the dominant response to Israel – but it is a growing and plainly worrisome trend.

Obviously, some part of the problem is truly generational. Young people today have grown up since the glory days, the years of ingathering, of heroic battles, preeminently of reunion – with language, land, families, the people Israel. Earlier generations retained a sense of Israel as miracle. If old enough, their memories went back to a time when there was no Jewish state, and the emergence of that state, especially so soon after the great tragedy of our people, seemed to

stand outside history itself. The Kingdom of Night had been supplanted by the Republic of Hope.

There's also the kinship issue. My parents, for example, were immigrants to America. Between them, they had 13 siblings – of whom nine ended up in Palestine. So I was put to sleep as a child with the same stories of the old country as my first cousins in Israel. But generations have now passed. The stories have changed, the music has changed, the topography has changed, the culture itself has changed. American television programs are often broadcast in Israel, and CNN is everywhere, Home Depot and MacDonald's are just down the street, but it's other mountains and other rivers and other experiences – in particular, the experience of war – that frame the Israeli imagination. We in America have become more fully American, they in Israel have become something else (it's hard to say they've become more Middle Eastern), and while we've both become somewhat more globalized, when we meet as fellow global citizens our special bond as Jews may be considerably less compelling.

As you can doubtless already tell, I am dancing around the hard disincentive for intimate association between American Jews and Israel. Issues of cultural and generational change do matter, and by themselves would likely have altered the texture of the relationship. But there's more: In my view, the descent from the 1976 post-Six Day War peak began in the summer of 1982, with the invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut. There had been unsavory episodes of Israeli behavior in prior years, but they were by and large hazy and usually fleeting. The Occupation was, for the most part, background noise. But it was in 1982 that, for the first time, Israel conducted an extended campaign that raised serious questions about both its wisdom and its military's ethics.

An old joke with a new twist: In 1970, an octogenarian is taken by his family on his first visit to Israel. When he returns to his rest home, his friends all ask, "What was it like?" And he answers, "You know all those lies we've been telling all these years? They're true!" The current version: Same beginning, but when they ask their question, he replies, "You know all those lies *they've* been telling all these years? They're true!"

Sure, it's partly a question of "image." Far too many media people experience a kind of schadenfreude in reporting on Israel's flaws and failings. But much of it derives from the ongoing effects of the now nearly 40 year-long occupation of the West Bank (and, until recently Gaza). Minimally, young people easily discern that to enter whole-heartedly and whole-mindedly the complicated world of Israel and its relations with its neighbors (and, albeit to a lesser degree, its diverse internal crises and serious problems), to care deeply about Israel and its safety, is to open oneself to confusion, to ambiguity, to psychic pain and distress. Why bother?

I have no doubt that much of the apparent renaissance in Jewish cultural life in America, from the spread of klezmer music to the study of Yiddish to the renewed commitment to social justice work, is in some part the product of people searching for ways to be Jewish that effectively end-run Israel.

Yes, Taglit/Birthright is an effort to rekindle older flames, and yes, many Jewish students engage in pro-Israel activities on their campuses, so no, it is not (yet?) time to “shrei gevalt,” to sound the third alarm. But one alarm should be a sufficient wake-up call.

We here cannot wave a magic wand over Israel and transform it overnight into a Jewish Denmark. If we care about handing down a tradition of deep concern for Israel’s safety and welfare, it is in a different arena we need to operate. Specifically, we need to build on the important but still relatively modest fora for expression of what I will call here “progressive Zionism.” (I could come up with another term, but I want to rescue “progressive” from the dungeon into which Alfred Rosenfeld has sought to cast it.)

No, PZ doesn’t answer the underlying question that gnaws at some young people: “Why should I care?” But it does answer the derivative question: “How shall I care about Israel in a way that is compatible with my concern for human rights, with my understanding of what the Jewish tradition teaches, with my abiding distaste for some of Israel’s more voluble American defenders, with my sense of personal integrity?”

Several of the more important Jewish social justice organizations, organizations I admire and support, have chosen to keep the Israel issue off their agendas. I have no quarrel with that choice; no one can do everything. But there are several organizations with particular appeal to young Jews that have chosen to take a clear – and critical – stand on Israel at the same time that they devote themselves to mending America’s diverse fractures. I think especially, in this context, of the Progressive Jewish Alliance, in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and the degree to which it gives people who might otherwise regard themselves as essentially apart *from* the community the opportunity to see themselves as a part *of* the community.

I have written the following words before, and doubtless will again: Israel is the most consequential project of the Jewish people in our time. It is essential that we do what we can to make that project succeed. Its success cannot be measured by growth in GDP or in the number of tourists who visit it or by the number of Evangelical Christians who preach passionately about it. Its success, for the time being, means its coming to live in peace with its neighbors – and then, once that happy time is reached, moving on to ensure a more equitable society, a repaired education system, an end to religious coercion and to discrimination against Israel’s Arab citizens. (I don’t mean to imply that those problems should only be addressed after peace has been achieved. The priority of achieving peace is not temporal.)

There may not be all that much we here can accomplish by way of accelerating the peace process, although I believe that what there is for us to do is terribly important. But one task that is within our power to address vigorously is simply raising up a generation that will take up Israel’s cause with real energy and without compromising or holding aside its progressive values.