

Affinities and Israel: A Roundtable

Sh'ma roundtable discussions have often surprised me. I've tried hard as editor of this magazine to create the basis for vivid, memorable conversations among people of often quite different backgrounds, ages, and intellectual temperaments — conversations between people unlikely otherwise to find themselves in the same room and yet who have a good deal to say to one another. *Sh'ma* has always believed in the great value of talk that crosses cultural, political, religious, and professional boundaries — tough, serious talk about all aspects of Jewish life.

I can't recall a roundtable that surprised me quite as much as the one below. Brought together was what seemed to be a group different in terms of experience, background, even geography (three in the U.S., one in Israel, one in Poland), and yet when asked about the role of Israel in the identity of Jewish young people today, the participants responded with an all but resounding unanimity.

Israel has been for so many of my generation as essential to our Jewish lives as

ether, a preoccupation so keen, so inspiring, often so exasperating that it was unavoidable and no less so for those, like myself, who have lived outside its borders. Judging from our roundtable, it seems that the next generation of Jews — including those actively engaged in Jewish life — do not experience Israel as a formative, crucial factor. While young Orthodox Jews, on the whole, continue to embrace Israel fervently and with little equivocation, they stand out as the exceptions. These impressions startled me, and will no doubt surprise some of you, too.

What this will mean remains unclear — perhaps it is a byproduct of the geographical distance, or perhaps less knowledge of foreign affairs that is so much a part of our collective lives as Americans. Perhaps, too, this is a byproduct of an Israel dominated for much of the last quarter century by politics so different from that familiar to most young American Jews. Whatever these findings mean, it seems clear that the discussion below is intriguing, and well worth pondering.

Susan Berrin: In today's Jewish world, what are the assumptions about the relationship of Jews to ideas, issues, and affinities in terms of mapping the place of cultural production and the heart of Jewish life? Is there a center and periphery or peripheries, or is that a retrogressive notion?

Ari Y. Kelman: No, there isn't a center — because of global travel and the role of digital communication. But if there is a place where most of the Jewish intellectual/cultural production happens, it's probably in New York.

Nicole Greninger: I think there are many centers, places that host the most active Jewish life: New York, Israel, L.A., maybe London.

Shaul Magid: Though there are still Jews living in many parts of the world, the Diaspora has basically congealed into one general location — the U.S. When there were very vibrant Jewish communities in different parts of the world, the cultural Zionist program purported that Israel would be the spiritual center and refuge for all Jews subject to persecution. But since the Diaspora has really become one

large vibrant location where there isn't much persecution, oppression, or overt anti-semitism, the notion that Israel would provide the center is antiquated. In a sense, there are two centers and other smaller communities — there are actually two distinct civilizations: an Israeli Jewish civilization and an American (Diaspora) Jewish civilization. These civilizations have overlaps and shared interests but they've really developed into two very different civilizations, culturally anyway.

Tova Serkin: When we look at the majority of next-generation Jews we see that many are less affiliated institutionally, but very affiliated Jewishly. This means that there's less need for them to live near what we would define as a center.

Greninger: For many young Jews, it's not so important to be geographically near what might be called a "center" or a flourishing place of Jewish life, because we can connect with other Jews who are doing exciting things through the Internet, conferences, a variety of retreats or events. We don't need a center

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of struggle, heroism, and survival. But people who grew up post-1967 or -73 never grew up with a sense that there was a deep need for Israel. They had no intrinsic connection to the place. And given how liberal most of American Jews are, it’s not surprising that the majority are not typically “pro-Israel.”

Greninger: For a long time Israel was a real source of pride for Jews. But because of the political situation, that pride has given way to more complex emotions toward Israel today. Interestingly, while Israel trips are significant in shaping Jewish identities, many young people do not necessarily associate that experience with Israel per se. This may be because, for some, it’s more about the group experience — and about being in a Jewish environment — than it is about being specifically in Israel.

Magid: The politics describe everything. American Jews under the age of 40 only know Israel as an occupying power. There’s also something about how American Jews have become more integrated culturally, socially, and creatively into the American environment; they don’t need Israel as much as they did before. It is unfortunate, but for many young American Jews, Israel has become an identity theme park. One goes there to have her “Jewishness” recharged, identity affirmed, and then returns to her diasporic life largely unchanged. This is even more complicated because we live in a post-ethnic world where being a Jew, for many people under the age of 30, is only one part of their identity. And, unlike a generation ago, their identities are divided and more complex than in previous generations.

Kelman: Over the past 30 years or so, an indigenous Jewish culture has taken root in the U.S. Jews are identifying in ways that don’t

today in the same way that one was needed in previous generations.

Berrin: For the past many decades Israel has been iconic in shaping Jewish identity in America. Why has that changed over the past decade?

Serkin: The story of Israel as it was told to the American Jewish community shaped the experience. For the past 60 years it was a story

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have anything to do with Israel, creating really vibrant Jewish life — whether it’s music or movies or literature or independent *minyanim* — where people are exploring American Jewish life on American Jewish terms as opposed to American Jewish life filtered through something that American Jews always talked about, called Israel. One of the most interesting findings from “Beyond Distancing,” my study with Steven M. Cohen, is that it’s *not* about politics. We couldn’t find a reliable correlation between one’s political attitude and one’s sense of disconnection from Israel. It didn’t matter whether one identified as politically conservative or progressive; one

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was not more likely to be disconnected from Israel if he or she were identified as more politically progressive. And being critical of Israel is of course different from being disconnected from Israel.

Greninger: As a fourth-generation American, I feel an indigenous American Jewish identity. All of my grandparents were born in the U.S. so even my connection with Ashkenazi or Sephardi Judaism is tenuous — it becomes farther removed with each generation. Today we need to ask, as Isaac Mayer Wise did, “What is ‘Minhag America’ — what are we creating in the 21st century as American Jews?”

Kelman: Is the turn toward klezmer music a turn toward an “authentic” Eastern European cultural tradition for American Ashkenazi Jews, and the turn toward Sephardi music and culture for Sephardi Americans a cause of the waning of Israel as a source of identity — or is it a symptom? As American Jews look for authentic ways to connect Jewishly that don’t involve Israel, maybe they’re digging a bit further back historically — pre-Israel, pre-Holocaust. There, you find very vibrant Jewish communities producing very exciting culture.

Magid: And American Jewish creativity is becoming very popular with non-Jews in America. So American Jews are expressing their Jewishness among non-Jewish Americans, outside the Jewish sphere.

Gosia Szymanska: It’s rather telling that

in talking about what has been shaping the Jewish identity in America we hardly ever mention religion. We talk about various expressions of Jewishness, but not really Judaism.

Kelman: Now we’re talking about Judaism in a broader frame. Judaism is a religion and Jewishness is a broader cultural formation that we’re addressing outside of formal structures.

Magid: In America in the 19th century, Judaism was a religion defined by Reform. In the 20th century, I think the default Judaism in America has been Reconstructionism — the notion of Judaism as a civilization, which includes the arts, culture, recreation, summer camps. This has become the template of how American Jews identify with Judaism — even those who categorically reject Reconstructionism or know nothing about it.

Serkin: Increasingly, the stigma of being culturally different in the U.S. has worn off and, if anything, it’s actually cool to be ethnically or culturally different. Particularly among younger Jews, there’s a freedom to be culturally Jewish and remove religion from it.

Greninger: But within the cultural creativity of Jewish life today, there are many religious elements — in independent *minyanim* or other religious expressions outside of synagogues. Sometimes it’s hard to distinguish between the “cultural” and “religious.”

Magid: Here’s a sound byte for that: Orthodoxy defines religion through practice, Reform defines it through belief, and Reconstructionism defines it through creative expression. The belief and practice serve the greater end, which is an expression of one’s Jewishness and identity. I noticed over the past few years in my university teaching that there doesn’t seem to be much of a vibrant Jewish secularism in America. There was in Europe and also in the early 20th century in America. In Israel, Zionism serves that role. Perhaps we don’t need a Jewish secularism now because religion itself has become secularized; non-Orthodox Jews don’t have a distinct religion in America separate from their secular lives as Jews did when Orthodoxy was the default religion in Europe and Israel.

Kelman: Synagogues are very cultural places. Nor is it a surprise that Matisyahu is the most photogenic Jew in America — so visibly, religiously Jewish; the religious aspect of culture and the cultural aspects of religion bleed into one another.

Magid: At least in America, maybe not in

Israel because there the official religion is Orthodox Judaism.

Berrin: Would you each weigh in on whether American Jewry needs Zionism as it did a generation or so ago. How does it impact the way American Jews play out their Judaism? What role does it play for American Jewry?

Greninger: Zionism — whether religious or cultural — was a strong force in Jewish identity for a long time. But that is not necessarily the case for young Jews today.

Serkin: Does American Jewry need Zionism to maintain American Jewry or does Israel need American Zionism? I don't think American Judaism needs Zionism today to maintain its community and identity.

Szymanska: If we take birthright as an example of a Zionist program, it is very successful; thousands of young kids go to Israel and have a great experience. But the organizations are struggling to keep them connected to Israel after they return home. They make friends, they may feel more connected to Judaism, or Jewishness, or to their Jewish friends, and they might attend an event or two. But it doesn't necessarily mean that it connects them to Zionism in the long term.

Kelman: I'm not sure what you mean by "need" in that context. I wonder what would happen if all those resources now spent on birthright Israel were spent on something here in America. Do I think American Jews need Zionism? No. Do I think that American Jews need Israel? That's a different question and again, I don't understand what the word "need" means in that question.

Birthright Israel was designed to be a silver bullet to save American Jews from the perceived dangers of intermarriage and assimilation. It didn't really have anything to do with Israel, per se. If we had asked the question on the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and found that people who go to Prague have a higher sense of Jewish identity, we would have birthright Prague or birthright Paris or birthright Rio. So what I'm saying is birthright Israel has nothing to do with Israel.

Magid: And the Israel they experience is not the Israel that the everyday Israeli experiences — the part of Israeli culture that is problematic and troubling.

Serkin: People know it's a trip meant to promote Israel from a particular point of view, but the social experience of birthright is im-

portant. I've staffed birthright trips. If you took the same group of people to a beautiful country somewhere else, it might not have exactly the same impact as birthright, but it would have some similar rates of success. It's like Jewish camp in many ways.

Kelman: Then my answer to the question "do Americans Jews need Israel?" would be: No.

Greninger: We are, however, reliant on Israel for its role as a Hebrew language training ground. Most American Jews who have any significant fluency in Hebrew spent time living in Israel where they were surrounded by Hebrew. And that does influence — if not the folk culture or religion of Judaism, certainly "the elite" in terms of research and scholarship and Jewish life; our ability to access Jewish texts is so dependent on Hebrew.

Magid: What would it take to acknowledge openly that we're in a Diaspora and it is

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not exile? Much of American Jewry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was anti-Zionist, at least until the early 1930s. After the Holocaust and the establishment of the State, everything changed. Then the war in 1967 put Zionism into turbo drive in America. But by 1977, this enthusiasm started to wane slightly and it's been continuing on that trajectory ever since. On this subject, Ari's survey with Steven Cohen is quite illustrative. There's a cycle to American Zionism, which we should confront honestly.

And what would American Jewry look like in the next 25 years if we didn't look to Israel or Zionism as a center? I think it would be healthy for us and for Israeli society, too, to separate our civilizations. Does Israel really want to be a refuge, or playground, for American Jews? I think not. I think it wants to be a normal country like any other. Maybe American Jews need to liberate Israel from our dependency on it and find other ways to cultivate our Jewish identities. In fact, we are already doing so.

Berrin: What would that look like for you?

Magid: I don't know. I have two children living in Israel; I lived there for ten years, served in its army, and am a citizen. I had a whole life there, so I connect personally. I


don't know what it would look like for me, frankly. But it seems as if there's a fear among many American Jews to come out of the closet and say, "I am a proud Jew but I'm actually not a Zionist."

Serkin: Israel needn't be the central focus of any Jewish community. Rather, the central focus should be the global Jewish people. I'd rather see American Jews feeling connected to their Jewish peers around the world including those in Israel.

Magid: For that to happen, Israeli Jewry must openly acknowledge that it is on equal ground with American Jews. It has to give up a very deeply embedded negation of the Diaspora mentality.

Greninger: When I lived in Israel, part of me wondered how I could be alive in this era and not be living in Israel, contributing to this exciting and important experiment in Jewish statehood. And then another part of me wondered why we should have a state that's specifically Jewish. For many people in my generation, the concept of a "nation state" is problematic. What does it mean to have a

state that is defined by religion or ethnicity? That's almost anathema in my generation! And so there's a cognitive dissonance associated with the idea of a "nation state" that doesn't allow for the same kind of connection to Israel today that Jews used to have in the 20th century.

Kelman: There's a new generation of Jewish cultural producers in the United States. Too often they feel frustrated. They can't say anything about Israel because if they say, "I'm not a Zionist," they won't get the financial support they need to do the work that is going great, has a track record of success, and is engaging lots of Jews who otherwise wouldn't be engaged in Jewish life. If you say — if you breathe the word "not" — "I'm not a Zionist," not I'm an anti-Zionist but I'm just not a Zionist, then it doesn't work. So I'm interested in the flipside of Shaul's question — what would it take to acknowledge openly that we live in Diaspora and not in exile. And the flipside is: What would it take for the older generation to let go of the illusion that this is exile and that Israel is still the center? 

Not the Center, Not the Periphery, but an Ever-expanding Circle

Jaime Walman

When I was 23 years old, my post-college world of bartending and waiting tables was strangely interrupted by a man who somehow saw my lack of interest, experience, and knowledge of all things Jewish to be the ideal combination for a Hillel Program Director. During that two-year stint, I learned that Uganda, of all places, was an option for the Jewish state but Israel was chosen instead. Three years later, I volunteered in Uganda with a Jewish community called the Abayudaya and this piece of Zionist history was all I could think about. Uganda was beautiful; why did we choose Israel, a complicated, already occupied, land? A few months later, I moved to Jerusalem for the year. And then I finally understood.

I am your typical Gen X-er: impatient, questioning, critical, overly communicative (read: glued to BlackBerry), less institutionally affiliated but Jewishly connected. I search for meaning and balance in perspective and voice. Striving to create a balanced and nu-

anced space to talk about Israel, infused with multiple perspectives, is both personally and professionally challenging. The expectation to support Israel based only on our history is antiquated and irrelevant.

I started working for JDub Records about six months ago. One of the first issues I confronted was multiple calls and e-mails from various organizations desperate to find ways to connect to their local young adult constituent base around Israel, and inquiring about JDub's emerging Israeli artists' participation in their "Israel at 60" events. I couldn't help but wonder whether or not the majority of that constituency even knows what Yom Ha'atzmaut is. And, if they do, if it holds any meaning for them. I am conflicted about these large, community festivals for Israel's birthday, which are often targeted to young families and elders. Thinking about people waving their plastic Israeli flags and dancing the hora to music from the time of the *halutzim* (pioneers) doesn't interest me; it

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