

As Jewish communities both in Israel and in the Diaspora evolve, our relationship to Zionism emerges with new questions.

The Future of the Zionist Idea

Arthur Hertzberg

The question posed is about the future of Zionism in America. Being a Jew, however, I am immediately tempted to answer the question with another question of my own: Are we asking about the future of the Zionist organizations in America or about the future of the Zionist impulse and idea?

The answer to the first question is clear and unmistakable. The Zionist organizations in America are either barely holding their own or they are on the way to vanishing. They mattered once when they led the battle against that large part of the Jewish community that was opposed to Zionism; they matter very little now that the community as a whole is pro-Israel. To be sure, there are small Zionist bodies, especially on the right, which are very busy fighting for an Israel which will not give up one inch of "the undivided land of Israel," but these attacks have not forced any fundamental changes in the policies of any Israeli government. The only time in recent memory that Israeli governments have recoiled from actions that they would have undertaken if pressure from the Diaspora had not been

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so fierce has been on the issue of "Who is a Jew." In this battle the fight has been carried not by the Zionist bodies but by representatives of the wider community such as the Welfare Funds and the United Jewish Appeal. The various Zionist organizations may continue to exist because of the good work they do in Israel (e.g., Hadassah and several other organizations of Zionist women), or as playthings, or megaphones for several kinds of partisans. But the days of Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, when Zionist leaders had the stature to influence, and even determine, the policy of the Zionist movement, are past.

The real question, therefore, is whether the Zionist idea, in its American version, has a future. But one must first answer the question: What is American Zionism? What vision does it represent?

Since its very beginning in the 1890s, even among the few who regarded themselves as followers of Theodor Herzl, Zionism in America has been a melding of three themes.

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It never denied the *Galut*. It never thought that it should try to lead the Jews in America to abandon this land and move to Palestine. The American Zionists, with very few exceptions, were sure that the Jews in America were safe. Zionism existed to create a fundamental truth in the old jibe that an American Zionist is a Jew who gives another Jew a contribution to help send a third Jew, probably from Eastern Europe, to Palestine. The second "American" element in Zionism, from its very beginning, was the notion most clearly expressed by Mordecai Kaplan nearly a century ago: The endeavor to create a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine would act as the pragmatic, unifying task of American Jews. It would be the substitute religion for a community that was not practicing Judaism with any particular faithfulness to its traditional forms. The third (and fuzziest) element in American Zionism was the idea that the Zionists were bringing to America from Palestine some of the new Jewish culture and new Jewish verve that the pioneers over "there" were creating. This did, indeed, produce some dances, such as the *hora*, and some popular songs, but it did not produce a serious commitment to modern Hebrew language and culture. On the other hand, it is encouraging that American Jews who have spent time in Israel often return with a measurable increase in the temperature of their caring and commitment as Jews.

Will this American Zionism continue? Of course it will. American Jews will continue to defend Israel in the debates about its policies. They will continue to value, and even to overvalue, its achievements in every field of human endeavor — and they will, sometimes, try to correct Israel quietly, or not so quietly, when it strays from what one or another faction among Jews in America may think is the right path. In sum, the relationship between American Jews and Israel will continue in the paths that have been defined in the last hundred years.

But in *recent* years the relationship has changed very radically — indeed, fundamentally. For most of the last fifty years, American Jews as a whole, and especially those who

are most Zionist-oriented, have believed without question that their labors for Israel — and the memories of the Holocaust, which were inherently related to these Zionist endeavors — would be the certain preservatives of Jewish consciousness and concern. This has been disproved. The rate of intermarriage has risen to an unprecedented level of at least one in two, even though American Jews have been doing wonders for Israel and commemorating the Shoah everywhere from Constitution Mall in Washington to every small town on the prairies of the Midwest.

It is clear now, beyond any doubt, that the passion for Israel has represented, primarily, the momentum of deeply ingrained Jewish loyalties from the past. Those who were rooted in the Jewish religion and in ancestral memory translated this caring into their labors for Israel. Such roots are a precondition to the survival of Jewishness — and, therefore, that commitment must first be created within the American Jewish community by education, and by faith. The Zionist impulse will continue to exist in America not, as we once imagined, as the new American Judaism, but rather as the prime beneficiary of whatever religious and cultural revival we Jews in America will be able to create for ourselves in the next century. The trips to Israel will help, and years of study there will help even more, but the foundation can only be a caring and ever more learned Jewish community in America.

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