



The Meaning of Israel Today

by **RABBI YITZ GREENBERG**

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Ever since the modern state of Israel became a reality, there have been recurrent claims that Israel is losing its emotional centrality in American Jewish life. In recent years, Steven M. Cohen has published surveys charting the declining intensity, by generations, of identification with Israel. Others cite the negative media images of Israel as alienating younger generations from the Jewish state. Both claims fail to measure the depth of the relationship between world Jewry and Israel. Indeed, the connection between Israel and the Jewish people has been essential to the healthy Jewish soul for millennia. While surface feelings for Israel are more volatile and subject to the vicissitudes of daily news, the deeper attachment is undiminished.

The true picture emerges in moments of crisis, when the full intensity of Jewish feeling for Israel erupts. The fierce rallying around Israel in 1967 retroactively debunked claims by leading American Jewish spokesmen that American Jews were “Americans first,” and that Israel’s importance had declined. Similarly undercut were those spiritual spokesmen

who diminished Israel’s importance, arguing that Diaspora Jewry was independent of and superior to the schools of Jerusalem. In parallel fashion, the closing of ranks and the overwhelming solidarity of American Jewry with Israel since Intifada II began in September, 2000, is a strong indicator of the unbroken bedrock of the connection.

The logic of Jewish attachment to Israel has grown stronger since 1948. The actualized state has proven to be even more magnetic than the commonwealth fantasized in Jewish dreams for two thousand years. This is because Israel is the realization of Jewry’s deepest beliefs. From earliest Biblical days, Jewish religion taught that Jewry has a special connection to the land of Israel. Rabbinic culture emphasized that, once national independence was restored, the history interrupted by exile would come to life again. Even more: the Jewish soul was so attuned to Israel that once the people was replanted in the promised land, the ground would sustain a higher demographic and cultural vitality.

The evidence of five decades is clear. Israeli Jewry is the only Jewish community whose population is growing by internal biological energy and not just by immigration from abroad. The majority Jewish population has created a comprehensive national culture in which

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the calendar communicates the catechism of Jewish faith and history to the masses. Hebrew is again a dynamic and explosively growing language, suffusing all of modern life with Jewish vocabulary and meaning.

The “density” of Jewish life in Israel is amazing. Israel contains 40 percent-plus of the world Jewish population, but 80 percent of youth attending full-time Jewish educational schools live in the Jewish state. The vast bulk of the Israeli population — even the non-observant — experience Shabbat as a special day. Kosher food is a widely available norm, not a minority ‘deviant’ cuisine. On Yom Kippur, the state of Israel exists on a different plane.

For most Diaspora Jews, these aspects of Israel may be irrelevant to their day-to-day lifestyle — but the cumulative effect of this total Jewish reality is transformational on them as well. Those who personally encounter Israel experience Jewish identity as a universal, primary, natural human reality. For many, this encounter liberates them from the Diaspora experience of Jewishness as a minority, second-class reflection of Gentile existence. Consequently, their inner lives and self-images as Jews are transformed.

Israel is also the place where the prime existential decisions of Jewish history taken in the twentieth century are validated. After the Shoah, world Jewry learned two primary lessons. First, that we are one people — united in fate and dependent on each other to restore and

protect the value of Jewish life. Second, that in order to live and uphold Jewish dignity, there is no choice but to reenter history and take power. This permits us to have a significant say in Jewish fate. Although Diaspora Jewry eventually also took up political action, Israel is the primary exerciser of Jewish power. There, a sovereign Jewish majority, guided by Jewish heritage, establishes political, economic and military policies and carries them out. Not surprisingly, Israel has become the image of Jews worldwide. Therefore, the credibility of Jewish religion and ethics is set by the judgment on Israeli behaviors.

Taking responsibility, Israel has rescued Jewries at risk on three continents. The fact that many Soviet and Argentinian Jews have sought security in lands other than Israel does not change the importance (or the nobility) of what Israel has done. In offering asylum to persecuted Jews over the years, Israel has taken in more than triple the number of people in its own original population. This absorption involved vast financial expense and a lowered standard of living — for the sake of immigrants! It was and continues to be an act of generosity unparalleled in human history.

The lives and fates of all Jews have become more intertwined. Israel’s victories and stature have given new dignity and status to Jews worldwide. Yet, in turn, Israel has faced hostility and even rejection because of its association with Western Jews, with the United States,

and with the processes of modernization and democracy. Now, Diaspora Jews find themselves under attack by the forces that lead the backlash against Israel for its unyielding policies of self-defense. Willingness to confront these pressures for the sake of each other is the litmus test of Jewish identity and loyalty today. This is why travel to Israel to connect personally to Israelis is the current criterion of taking responsibility for Jewish history. Those who do not go are, in effect, saying that “I am lucky enough to be out of the line of fire” and abandoning Israelis to their fate on the front line.

The act of returning to the land of Israel was not only an affirmation and fulfillment of the classic prophetic promise that the covenant is unbroken (“...there will again be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate... the sound of rejoicing and joy, the voice of the bridegroom and the bride...” [*Jeremiah 33, v. 10-11, 20-21, 25*])). The triumph of death in the Shoah raised doubts about Jewish belief in God and Judaism’s teachings of the ultimate victory of the good. The reestablishment of vibrant Israeli life after the Holocaust was the indispensable reassertion of the central Jewish teaching of redemption, i.e., the promise that life would be stronger than death. This validates the promise of the final perfection of the world.

After five decades, the entire Jewish people now experiences the astonishing fact that, in the land of Israel, the past is intertwined with the present, and history and tradition come alive. Despite Israel’s modernity and immersion in 21st Century culture, past, present and future interact in a palpable way. This transforms Jewish teaching into a personal experience. This is the secret and power of birthright Israel’s educational vision, for Israel is a peerless resource for Jewish learning and recovery of identity. In Jerusalem, learning and Torah absorption reach extraordinarily intense levels. In this atmosphere, classic norms become a force to be reckoned with and Jewish memory is a mirror of reality. No wonder Jewish values come alive in the land of Israel. To paraphrase Winston Churchill: the whole Jewish people must learn to bring in the new/old world of Israel to redress the balance [of assimilation versus renaissance] in the old/new world of America. 🌸