

The Jewish diaspora and Israel: problems of a relationship since the Gaza wars

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The relationship of the Jewish diaspora to its anterior homeland resembles that of many other diasporas, but in no other case has it been so durable and complex, despite the fact that for nearly two millennia the homeland was not a concrete reality. It existed in a narrative, imaginary, or eschatological sense and was reflected in religious ritual, including the celebration of festivals and the direction of prayers. It is only since the second half of the nineteenth century that the homeland has been viewed from the perspective of what came to be labeled Zionism – as a reality, ideology, and destination of physical return. This has been especially true since the establishment of Israel in 1948.

From that time forward the diaspora–Israel relationship has become more concrete, but also more complicated. On the one hand, the diaspora has continued to be committed to the principle of *kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* – the mutual responsibility of the Jewish people globally – and has supported Israel economically, demographically, and politically. The diaspora is linked to Israel by religion, history, and ethnic kinship ties, and it regards that country, which contains half of the world’s Jewish population, as a fount of living and dynamic Jewish culture.

On the other hand, the diaspora and Israel have diverged in terms of identity, orientation, and interests. Whereas religion was important in early modern Zionism, it no longer applies fully to the diaspora–Israel relationship. The diaspora and Israel differ on the definition of ‘who is a Jew’: while in Israel it is based on matrilineal descent or Orthodox conversion, in Western democracies it is largely a matter of voluntary



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identification, and ethnicity-based Jewishness has been attenuated due to intermarriage. With increasing secularisation, Jewish religious observance has declined. For many years, Jewish collective identity was sustained by the memory of the Holocaust. But that memory is fading as survivors are dying. For these reasons, Israel became the most important unifying focus of the diaspora. That has continued to be the case, even though the majority of Jews have felt at home in their hostlands, and have identified with them politically, culturally, and socially. Finally, anti-Semitism has declined as a daily threat.

At the same time, Israel has become a more divisive issue. For some diaspora Jews, Israel has been too secular and has abandoned its role as the custodian of Judaism; for others, it has become too Orthodox and intolerant of religious pluralism. For still others, the decline of *kibbutzim* has signaled an abandonment of Israel's commitment to equality. Furthermore, many diaspora Jews are embarrassed about Israel's continuing occupation of the areas captured during the Six-Day War of 1967 and the unequal treatment of its own Arab citizens. Finally, there have been differences in policy priorities: while the diaspora has been concerned about anti-Semitism in its various hostlands, Israel has been fighting for its national security and its very existence.

The relationship between the diaspora and Israel has been heavily



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impacted by the global status of Israel. After the Holocaust, the traditional Christian view of the Jews as a permanently ‘wandering’ people, and therefore not entitled to their own state, yielded to a gradual acceptance of Israel. For some, that acceptance resulted from a guilty conscience; for others, it reflected an idealised vision of a socialist polity. For the first two decades of its existence, Israel had a largely favourable image globally; but its occupation of the ‘West Bank’ has alienated many non-Jews, who came to regard Israel as a colonialist oppressor, and Zionism as a racist ideology.

The image of Israel has deteriorated considerably since the Gaza wars of 2008, 2012, and 2014, especially in Europe. Israel’s actions (including its response to rocket attacks) are equated with the Holocaust; Gaza is compared to a Nazi concentration camp, and its inhabitants are seen as facing genocide. Traditional stereotypes of diaspora Jews are recycled: the old myth about Jews killing Christian children for their Passover ritual is now used to charge Israelis with killing Muslim children. Such comparisons function as a means of exculpating anti-Semites and even as a *post factum* justification of the Holocaust. The result has been the lifting of the post-Second World War taboo against the open expression of Judeophobia.

In the past, the attribution of guilt or blame to Jews was based by

turns on variable principles: by traditional Christians, on theology; by Marxists, on ideology; by Nazis, on race. Today, because of Israel, it is based increasingly on anti-colonialism and anti-racism. Both the Christian and nationalist right and the secular left in Europe tend to be anti-Israel – the former because the country is identified with Jews, the traditional target of hostility; and the latter in the name of solidarity with the Palestinians. Attacks on Israel and Zionism quickly become attacks on diaspora Jewry; ‘Zionist’ is now a code word for ‘Jew’, and anti-Zionism is a euphemism for anti-Semitism, so that the distinction between the two, and between Jews and Israelis, is blurred. In short, the demonisation of Israel and of the Jews in diaspora feed on each other. Pro-Palestinian gatherings quickly degenerate into anti-Jewish rallying cries and calls for ‘death to the Jews’.

The diaspora response has been complex. While few have called for a complete break with Israel, many diaspora Jews have called upon Israel to change its policies. Some diaspora Jews are motivated by what they perceive to be in the best interest of Israel; others have distanced themselves from Israel in order to assert their hostland patriotism, burnish their progressive credentials, or make them feel more comfortable in relations with their fellow citizens. Such attitudes are often a manifestation of traditional diasporic insecurity.

The demonisation of Israel suggests an inversion of positions and attitudes. The state of Israel, whose creation was expected as a solution to the ‘Jewish problem’ has become a major cause of its revival. The pariah condition of the Jews in diaspora, periodically facing genocide, has been replaced by the pariah status of the Jewish state, chronically targeted for politicide. Once envisioned as a utopia, Israel has become for many an unsafe dystopia, constantly exposed to terrorist attacks. For many gentiles, Israel is responsible for contemporary anti-Semitism; and they argue that Israel is not good for the Jews in diaspora. Many Israelis, once immune to anti-Semitism, now fear it: the paranoia of the diaspora Jew has affected them, and they feel that ‘the whole world is against us’. While Israel continues to be a haven for persecuted diaspora Jews, it has also become a place of danger for them.

But a delinking of the diaspora from Israel is difficult, if not impossible. The two are now so closely entangled that without Israel the Jewish people *qua* diaspora (except for a tiny minority

of ultra-orthodox Jews for whom a pre-messianic Jewish state is anathema) would probably disappear as Jews become an increasingly undifferentiated ethnic group, and cease to be the only reliable ally of Israel in its fight for survival. □