



Israel and the Diaspora

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The nature of the land of Israel and its possession by the people of Israel is a fundamental preoccupation of the Torah. Therefore, it is also central to our understanding of our relationship to the State of Israel. Although the attitude of the Jewish people to the land of Israel has not been uniform or consistent through the ages, even less-than friendly interpreters of the past concede that the land has always been central to us. It remains so more than ever in our time.

The land of Israel is not only a matter of interest to its inhabitants, but to all Jews committed to the Torah. A Jewish state in the land cannot be only a state for all its citizens, though it must never be less than that. It is also the state of the entire Jewish people. It is this conviction that gives us not only the right to speak about Israel, whether we live there or not, but also charges us with the duty to do so.

Using, as a starting point, an insight by Martin Buber, I have repeatedly argued that Judaism is always a triangle consisting of faith, people and land. Belief in God, allegiance to fellow-Jews and the quest for a permanent address in the world – Israel, no matter where we live in the Diaspora – are the three dimensions of our collective Jewish heritage. Only through the State of Israel can they come together as a whole.

This is a complex heritage and difficult to put into practice. To simplify it, many contemporary Jews cling to one of the three dimensions only, at the expense of the other two. Hence the insistence by some that Judaism is primarily, if not exclusively, faith; by others that it is people; and by still others that you can only be a Jew if you live in the land of Israel. Many factions in contemporary Jewry can be divided this way. Accepting that Judaism is faith, people and land, in equal measure, would compel them to revise their existing allegiances. Few are prepared to do that.

But things are changing now that the Jewish state is a reality. For example, it is not a coincidence that in Canada, as elsewhere in the Diaspora, the Zionist organizations linked to synagogue communities – Mizrachi on behalf of modern Orthodoxy, Mercaz as an offshoot of Conservative Judaism and Kadima as the Zionist organization of Reform Jews – are thriving, while the old, secular, so-called political parties are still desperately trying to hold on to power.

The three mainstream movements in Judaism have accepted the triangular, multidimensional shape of Judaism. The others have not. They still operate in the mistaken secularist belief that Jews can be like all the other nations of the world. They ignore the fact that, in this way, they are rendering Judaism irrelevant. Why should anybody want to be Jewish only to be like everybody else, given that most Jews can assimilate and be someone else in much greater comfort and at much smaller risk? Therefore, it is those who see commitment to Israel as part of Judaism as a

whole who are in a better position to formulate the new Zionism, as it is emerging after the establishment of the State of Israel.

The new Zionism affirms, by implication, the legitimacy of the Diaspora's concern for what happens in Israel. It entails support of and commitment to the Jewish state. It must never be less than that. But it also means partnership, perhaps even participation, by the Diaspora.

My affirmation of the land arises out of my religious commitment. This means I take seriously God's claim, "The land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me" (Leviticus 25:23). I am aware, however, that not only this sentence, but the chapter as a whole, can be taken in more than one way. The text gives legitimacy to those who say that, because the land belongs to God and we are only the custodians, it behooves us to behave according to the highest ethical standards. "You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security" (Leviticus 25:18).

Unfortunately, these texts also provide a scriptural basis for those who say that, having now repossessed the land, we are forbidden to give any of it back, irrespective of political exigencies, because that would go against the will of God. The Lubavitcher rebbe and his religious opponents can quote the same passages for diametrically opposed conclusions. All that we can hope for is that the one will not accuse the other of heresy and apostasy because of different interpretations.

Of course, it is not the reading of texts that leads to convictions, but convictions that make us find in texts what we are looking for. Let me, therefore, admit what you will have already guessed. I am in tune with those aspects of our tradition that warn us against the exploitation of the land, the abuse of any of its citizens and the unwarranted attacks on any of its neighbours. "Do not wrong one another, but fear your God; for I the Lord am your God" (Leviticus 25:17).

It is this conviction that prompts me to support those forces that regard peace as so precious that they are even prepared to trade territory for it. Paradoxically, because the land is so central, some of it may have to be given up for the security of the rest. It is a difficult decision for a host of reasons, many of them connected to the fact that the enemies of the Jewish people may take advantage of the dissent.

The dissenter is also in danger of being ostracized by his or her own community, because, fearing anti-Semitism, many in the Jewish community, particularly in Canada, see it as their primary role to support the government of Israel, right or wrong. While we do not hesitate to criticize Canadian politicians or bureaucrats or law enforcers, we are, at best, silent when power is abused by their Israeli counterparts.

The reason normally given for such docility is that, since we don't live in Israel, we are not allowed to be critical of its leaders. I don't share this view. I believe the Diaspora is a partner in Israel precisely because Israel is central to all Jewish life. And the same community does not hesitate to express criticism of other countries where Jews live and where Jewish values may be at risk.

The failure to speak our minds has exacerbated our relationship with our non-Jewish neighbours. Increasingly, they question our moral sensitivities that allow us to be so high-minded about others and so uncritical of our own. The irony should not escape us. In an effort not to give enemies grounds for pointing to our internal dissent, we are giving enemies and friends grounds for suspecting our moral will. That we defend ourselves by invoking our past suffering, especially the Holocaust, does not make the arguments stronger, only more pathetic. Precisely because we have been victims, we should know what it means to turn others into victims. Therefore, we should go out of our way to treat them as we would want to be treated ourselves.

So much for some reasons that prompt me to be a dissenter. I prefer the term "radical" because I

take the word seriously: someone who goes to the root of the meaning of things. Our Jewish legacy compels us to go to our prophetic roots. It also warns us against making compromises for the sake of expediency.

But a radical is also an insider. A critic of Israel who remains uninvolved and uncommitted is like the wicked son in the Haggadah. Only those who share the responsibility have the right to dissent. But uncritical supporters of Israel, many of whom know little of its history and even less of its language and culture, may be substituting their enthusiasm for Judaism.

So what's the answer? Of course, there is no single answer, but a suggestion: to open the debate more fully; not to fear critical views of Israel and of each other, and not to hanker after the approval of Israeli politicians in power, even if it means the Prime Minister of Israel will be more reluctant to pose for photographers with the President of the Canadian Jewish Congress than he is with the emissaries of its arch-rival.

Independence of mind and action makes for communal health and increases the stature of Canadian Jewry. The absence of it will alienate many of its members.

At best, those alienated will keep silent and vote with their wallets – refusing to make contributions. More likely, they will want to speak out. Not to give them a voice is to deprive Israel of the support of true lovers of Zion.

Canadian Jewry cannot, must not, be built on the ever-decreasing number of those whose principal aim is to maintain the status quo. It must rely on a much broader base that today consists largely of university-trained professionals who are not afraid, as their parents were, of anti-Semitism and who are not prepared to mouth other people's views only because they have been formulated by Israelis.

The article was written when Israel had a Likud government.

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