



TWO PERSPECTIVES

*American Jewish-
Israeli Relations*

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THE INSTITUTE ON AMERICAN JEWISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS
The American Jewish Committee

1995

PROMISED LAND AND GOLDEN LAND

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In 1882, the great question on the minds of East European Jews was *le'an*—whither, whereto? In the face of renewed pogroms, the well-known Hebrew newspaper *Ha-Melitz*, published in St. Petersburg, declared that there were but two options: “Every intelligent and far-seeing person realizes that in order to preserve the welfare of our people there are no other places in the world to which we can migrate other than the Holy Land or America.”¹

These two alternatives have indeed served, for more than a century, as the two great options available to oppressed Jews around the world. America, in Jewish eyes, conjured up the image of a *goldene medinah*, a golden land, where Jews might achieve what they had never achieved in the Old World: the opportunity to be treated as equals and to thrive economically, while at the same time enjoying the freedom to maintain their distinctive Jewish identity. Israel, by contrast, conjured up the image of the promised land—*shivat tziyon*, the return to Zion where Jews would finally achieve control of their own destinies, make the desert bloom, and create a secure and flourishing homeland for the Jewish people. As is so often the case in the Jewish world, where two different options exist, they compete. In the case of America and Israel, they have long competed for money. In the nineteenth century, Baron Hirsch gave substantial amounts of his money to settle Jews in the Golden Land; Baron Rothschild gave substantial amounts of his money to settle Jews in the Promised Land. In the twentieth century the competition has been played out in the debate over funding the resettlement of Soviet Jews, as well as disputes within the United States over federation allocations—what percentage should be sent to Israel, what percentage retained for domestic needs? Golden Land and Promised Land have also competed for power: power within the Jewish Agency, power over issues pertaining to world Jewry, even power over symbols—seen most recently in the competition between the Holocaust Museum in Washington and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Finally, Golden Land and Promised Land have competed ideologically: there have been disagreements over the nature of the Diaspora, disagreements over issues of religion and state, disagreements over human rights, and so on.

Yet however much they may have competed and disagreed, both American Jewry and Israel have historically been concerned to ensure that both options—Golden Land and Promised Land—remain viable and vibrant. American Jewry, for more than a century, has allocated large amounts of its economic and political capital to support and strengthen first the *yishuv* (early Jewish settlements in Palestine) and later the State of Israel. Israel,

meanwhile, has devoted substantial efforts toward strengthening and supporting Jewish education, identity, and culture in the United States and elsewhere in the Diaspora.

Ironically, each community has worried almost continuously about the viability of the other: American Jewry worries whether Israel, surrounded by hostile neighbors, will be able to survive; Israelis wonder whether American Jewry—steeped in assimilation, weakened by intermarriage, and attacked by anti-Semites—will be able to survive. In so doing, each community also helps to puncture the other's myth, for, as it turns out, neither Promised Land nor Golden Land has quite lived up to the grandiose hopes and utopian images once associated with them. Neither has been able fully to resolve the problems that Jews confront in the modern world. Yet both, as a result of the other's active concern, have been strengthened. In the final analysis, Promised Land and Golden land have complemented and nourished one another.

Recent developments suggest that this long competitive but ultimately very fruitful symbiotic relationship between Golden Land and Promised Land is weakening; some would say it is coming to an end. The reasons for this change are well known. On the Israeli side, they include (1) the fact that Israel is about to emerge as the largest Jewish community in the world, overtaking the United States; (2) the sense that peace may finally be at hand between Israel and its neighbors; (3) evidence that Israel's economy has strengthened making it much less dependent on Jewish philanthropy from abroad; and (4) the dramatic improvement in the Jewish situation worldwide: for the first time in the twentieth century, perhaps for the first time in Diaspora history, there is today no substantial Jewish community in the world that is being actively persecuted. Israel today is thus less dependent on American Jewry than it has ever been before, and in the eyes of many Israelis its position is strengthening even as the condition of the American Jewish community is weakening. The result is a certain triumphalism: "We are the only viable option in Jewish life," a growing number of Israelis argue. "Let's go it alone."

For different reasons, also well known, American Jewry too is turning away from the historic Golden Land-Promised Land relationship. First, the 1990 National Jewish Population Study shook the community's confidence: one finds in many circles grave concern about American Jewry's future. Second, "continuity" has become the community's watchword, resulting in a turn inward, a focus on domestic Jewish needs. Third, except in the circles of the highly committed, there is also considerable disillusionment with Israel. While some look to Israel to transform American Jewish youth—to turn them on, so to speak, to Judaism—there is a strong sense that the era of creative ongoing engagement with Israel on the part of American Jewry is over. Fourth, America itself is turning inward, becoming increasingly nativist and isolationist. Having won the cold war, it seems intent on stepping back, if it can, from the international arena to focus on domestic concerns. The national mood thus reinforces the sense on the part of a growing number of American Jews—albeit less stridently and without the triumphalism of their Israel counterparts—that the time has come to disengage from the relationship implicit in the once-famous slogan "we are one" and, likewise, to "go it alone."

In the short term, to go it alone—like all forms of isolationism— seems to make sense. Israel has its agenda, American Jewry has its agenda. These agendas are clearly different. Each community should arguably focus on its own internal needs and put its own house in order. Viewed from a broader perspective, however, “go it alone” makes no sense whatsoever. Indeed, our whole historical experience militates against it, and I believe that such a strategy will, in the long run, work to the detriment of all. Let me explain why.

First, as Jehuda Reinharz has recently shown, Zionism and the State of Israel have benefited enormously from their skillful relationship with great powers, particularly the United States, and in each case local Jews have played an important role in nurturing and maintaining this relationship. Since there is but one great power in the world today, it would be utter folly for Israel to abandon what has been a brilliantly successful policy. For purely selfish reasons, then, Israel’s engagement with American Jewry is imperative.

Second, my own reading of modern Jewish history suggests that the availability of multiple Jewish options—what I have called here Golden Land and Promised Land—has been enormously beneficial for world Jewry, much more beneficial than either option would have been alone. Even the competition between the two communities has, as we have seen, been wholesome. I know of no era and no community in all of postbiblical Jewish history that has benefited from a go-it-alone mentality. If anything, Jewish history seems to me the ultimate proof of John Donne’s famous dictum (which I am, of course, slightly amending): “No Jewish community is an island, entire of itself.”

Third, focusing now more narrowly on just one of the “go it alone” proposals, the suggestion that the Israel Bonds program be dismantled and that American Jewish fundraising be fully directed toward domestic American Jewish needs totally misunderstands the role of philanthropy in American Jewish life. Jewish philanthropy in America is in many ways a didactic tool: it promotes Jewish identity and it educates Jews in their responsibilities as members of the Jewish community. To cut off American Jewish aid to Israel would be tantamount to telling American Jews not to care about their brethren in Israel—hardly a message that any of us would want to project. Moreover, American Jewish assistance to Israel plays an enormously important role in helping to justify U.S. government aid to Israel, and that assistance, as well as the “special relationship” that results from it, should not be jeopardized.

Fourth, American Jewry and Israel are clearly destined to be the world’s two most significant centers of Jewish life for the foreseeable future. The absence of a working relationship between them must, therefore, be detrimental to all Jewish interests. Even if American Jewry is about to fall to number two in size in the Jewish world, and is declining in strength both in absolute and relative terms, it remains a formidable force, larger than most other Jewish communities combined, and it maintains very significant elements of strength (in fact, its decline is proceeding much more slowly than demographers had earlier predicted). Marshall Sklare, echoing Simon Rawidowicz, once dubbed American Jewry the ever-dying people. Rumors of its impending demise are greatly exaggerated, and policies based on its impending demise are, in my view, doomed to fail.

Finally—and most important of all—the “go it alone” strategy is wrong because it abets one of the most pernicious and dangerous trends in Jewish life today, the undermining of *klal yisrael*, that sense of responsibility, destiny, and kinship that should link all Jews wherever they may be. Throughout the Jewish world, one sees the idea of *klal yisrael* under attack. In the United States, the recent demise of the Synagogue Council, founded in 1926 to unite congregational and rabbinical organizations across the spectrum of Jewish life, represents a blow to *klal yisrael*. So does the withdrawal of Orthodox representatives from the American Zionist Movement. The Reform decision on patrilineal descent—recognizing as Jews people either of whose parents are Jewish—is a blow to *klal yisrael*. So is intermarriage. So is conversion, since so many conversion classes emphasize religion and not peoplehood. So is the whole American movement to base Judaism on consent rather than descent (*klal yisrael*, after all, depends on kinship ties, not ideological ones).

In Israel, *klal yisrael* is likewise under attack: witness efforts to change the Law of Return, to delegitimize Jews from non-Orthodox backgrounds, and to write off the Diaspora altogether. *Klal yisrael* is also under attack elsewhere in the Diaspora, in England and the former Soviet Union, for example. David Vital, the distinguished historian of Zionism, goes so far as to argue that “the old unity of Jewry . . . lies shattered today almost beyond repair.”² I am not quite that pessimistic, but I am certain that *klal yisrael* ranks high on the list of endangered Jewish values.

Rather than further damaging *klal yisrael* by pursuing a “go it alone” strategy, we need to strengthen the ties that bind Jews together. Renewing the relationship between Promised Land and Golden Land would be an excellent way to start. How to begin? Let us recognize first and foremost the historical reality that the existence of multiple competing options in Jewish life like Promised Land and Golden Land is a positive good. Next, let us revitalize this relationship, utilizing the strengths of each community to promote much-needed change and to improve Jewish life worldwide. Some of this revitalization, I am happy to say, is already taking place: witness changing patterns of Jewish philanthropy in the United States, and valuable new trade and business partnerships between American Jewry and Israel. Witness, too, creative efforts to involve Israel in American Jewry’s continuity agenda, and the innovative Wexner program, as well as the Brown Fellows Program of the American Jewish Committee, that bring young Israeli leaders to the United States for study and training. Many more such programs are needed.

But we also need to educate both American Jews and Israelis to appreciate the value of this pluralistic dynamic in Jewish life, and that is no easy task. For Israelis, it requires abandoning *shlilat ha-golah* (negation of the Diaspora) and viewing the Jewish experience more realistically in terms of the benefits that multiple options in Jewish life—Golden Land, Promised Land, other lands too—have brought to the Jewish people and to Jewish communities worldwide. For American Jews, it requires a new vision of the relationship with Israel and other Jewries, one that is less imperious, paternalistic, and insular, and instead is more generous in its understanding of how others have strengthened American Jewry, even as American Jewry has strengthened them.

Today, as in 1882, the question we Jews face is *le'an*—whither, whereto? The answer I offer is *kadimah*—let us move forward, competing with one another, assisting one another, strengthening one another, and working together for *klal yisrael*.

Notes

1. 18 (April 27, 1882): 302; quoted in *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 59 (December 1969): 182-183.

2. *The Future of the Jews: A People at the Crossroads?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 148.