“Retire-ing Israel Diaspora relations as a speak-able concept”

zvi bekerman
School of Education, Melton Centre for Jewish Education
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
mszviman@mscc.huji.ac.il
30 years ago when I worked at the Jewish Agency I was exposed to matters related to Israel Diaspora relations.

Even then, being a light Zionist, I could not understand why discussing these matters was necessary.

My family in Argentina and North America, with whom I had great relations, did not see these relations as related to being in Israel or Diaspora.

Our relations were sustainable because we got something out of them –what we got out was family, a network of trust and a sense of material security, if neoliberalism ever betrays us.
Diaspora and Israel relations is too generic a term.

As if there is one Israel and one Diaspora.

I understand it is necessary to have poor so as to have rich, and that we need idiots to get intelligents, then to have a Diaspora you must need a Homeland.

But could it be, I wondered, that Israel is center and diaspora (truly diasporas) peripheral? As ‘I’ is capital and ‘you’ a small letter?

Could it be that Israel expected Diasporas to relate to it but not to relate to each other?

Could it be this was the perspective of a particular leadership holding to a narrow ‘other’-negating-nationalist-Zionism?
Why would Diaspora Jews involve themselves with such formulations? I asked

Jewish tradition does not demand us to be involved in nationalistic idolatry.

Thirty years later not much seems to have changed. As for foundations-funded-research the most outstanding finding is “to some extent the jury is not yet back on future developments” In short under the cover of a cautious research rhetoric nothing is said.
A very specific kind of Jew is involved in the Israel Diaspora rhetoric. They are all white (racially) and positioned relatively high in social or economic hierarchies, having what to earn materially or symbolically from the said relations.

What identifies them has less to do with their Jewishness and more with their status.

Remember socio economic status and race are the two categories hidden in traditional socio psychological studies of Jewish education and Jewish identity.
Race is important when considering that Jews together with, Norwegians, Poles, Italians, were not always considered white in America. James White argues....“No one was white before he came to America....White men--from Norway, for example, where they were Norwegians--became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women.

Does any one know, how Jews became white in America?
Jews were not necessarily comfortable with whiteness, for Jews suffered from prejudice and persecution in Europe, all of which resonate with anti-black racism in USA.

But, not becoming white would have meant not being able to penetrate America.

Whiteness demanded also loyalty, obedience and conformity to an epistemology, an ethics and an aesthetics. Jews conforming to this epistemology shifted form a self-conception as a people, into a restricted culture/religion.

The new trendy word PEOPLEHOOD will change nothing – for the epistemology in liberal Judaism is lost! We need to retire Peoplehood too!
In the United States, in the years before WW II, Zionism asserted a strong racial view of Jewish identity.

Richard James Horatio Gottheil, first president of the Federation of American Zionists, writes in 1898 that “Zionism has sought and has found for us a basis which is a broader one than the religious one, that of race and of nationality.”

All in all going white in America and becoming Zionists in America can be seen as one and the same
Zionism allowed Jews to be white and to not be seen as a threat to white supremacy in America for they have now a homeland.

All in all Zionism fitted whiteness well for it adopted the colonialist perspective which characterized European whiteness in need of lands which could be ‘rightfully’ claimed/owned.

The hidden resembling characteristics of diaspora and Israeli Jews interested in Israel Diaspora relations are whiteness and socio economic status – a shame to hide them for they have a great explanatory potential.

And yet if so similar how can we explain the question, posed in this session, which implies a doubt.
One thing that immediately comes to mind is Watzlawick Weakland and Fisch who when discussing psychological systemic approaches say
“the psychology of the unattainable necessitates that every actual fulfillment is experienced as a loss, as a profanation: for the devout Jew, the political reality of the state of Israel is little more than the banal parody of an age-old messianic longing; for the romantic lover who at long last conquers the beautiful woman, the reality of his victory is a far cry from what it was in his dreams”.

George Bernard Shaw put the same thought even more succinctly and pessimistically: “there are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart’s desire. The other is to get it”.
Moreover

For the racially white, liberal, and socially privileged North American Jews we are considering, the behavior of privileged white Jews in Israel can be at times embarrassing.

White liberal Jews in Israel, as their peers in Diaspora, have difficulties when encountering ‘difference’.

They remind us of Louis Dumont who thought that liberals were so committed to equality that if they saw someone not equal they felt a strong need to execute him…/her.

We should also consider the paradoxical possibility that the epistemic basis of the said populations set them against each other.
Yet, in a post-industrial globalized world whiteness and nationalism have not disappeared but take new forms. The rich and white unite to get more rich and more white, it becomes difficult to believe intelligent rich whites (liberal Jews) will deny each other.

Could it be that the ideology of those asking the questions and or doing the research might be the problem? Could it be we the researchers have forfeited their obligation to question why they have been invited to research this issue? Might the white and rich in diaspora and Israel be struggling among themselves to sustain their power? Could the nature of their relations be too much dependent on their local contexts?
As for the researchers; these might be suffering from ‘foundation-al pressures’ and or from social psychology’s inclination to idealized forms. The problem that arises from idealized approaches is one of ecological validity (cf. Nesdale & Todd, 2000); with the added danger that the approaches succumb to a form of utopianism which is the weapon of the powerful.

Should the researchers be relieved of their responsibility for explaining the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal or from the burden of explaining the specific nature of “failed or successful” relations within a given set of historical, material, and political circumstances? Or should we finally give up on oliga-psychology to start asking serious questions?
If research in Israel Diaspora relation (Jewish Identity and Jewish Education) continues as is, we fear this research may come to resemble the religious doctrines that Marx famously rebuked: doctrines that involve looking for the sources of salvation in some imagined world to come while masking the causes of misery in this one.

And yet we should not despair we all know that Jewish Orthodoxy (the great witness of the failure of strongly funded and widely researched liberal Judaism in Diaspora) Jewish Orthodoxy all over the world sustains a very strong relationship with Israel.

Moreover we all know relations mediated by good material or symbolic interests can be reached even between perpetrators and victims.
We should not forget that also Germany and Israel have sustained strong relations since they signed the 1952 Reparations Agreement – those present in this conference do very well understand how far money can go.

If Germans and Jews can, why white Diaspora Jews and white Israeli Jews cannot?

May be Bourdieu got it right when arguing that ‘where there is no market there will be no competence’ – paraphrasing him we could say no market no relations

My family, through family, has a great market where relations do not only make sense but flourish – orthodox Jews have one too - so it must be white Jews do not really need it

Taglit might not be in its way to widening the market
My daughter Maayan loves the idea of having the Israeli government pay for her *DISCOVERY/BIRTHRIGHT* program to visit diasporas; a program initiated by Diaspora foundations to create better relation between Jews in Diaspora and Israel – you might have realized by now her father was born in Argentina and lives in Israel in Diaspora

In short we need to ‘retire’ concepts such as Israel Diaspora relations and Peoplehood till we are ready to become serious and critical about them.

Thank you for your attention