

10 WAYS

THAT ISRAEL LIBERATED AMERICAN JEWRY

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Jacob El-Bez

Israel's fiftieth anniversary is an appropriate time to look backward and forward. What impact has Israel had on American Jewry and how is it likely to transform our lives in the decades ahead?

Looking back, Israel (and before the state, Zionism) clearly made a profound difference in the lives of American Jews. Here is my top-10 list of the changes it wrought.

❶ Where nineteenth-century thinkers, especially the Reform movement, played down the ethnic aspects of Judaism, preferring to focus on it as a religion, Zionism made Jewish peoplehood—national Jewish consciousness—a central component of Jewish identity.

❷ Israel has served, in Solomon Schechter's words, as "the great bulwark against assimilation." "Zionism...succeeded in bringing back into the fold many men and women...who otherwise would have been lost," Schechter said. The movement and the state brought back countless others who had drifted far from synagogue life, providing them—Louis Brandeis is a prime example—with an alternative sphere from which they could draw deep spiritual meaning. In effect, Israel itself became the religion of many of the unaffiliated and, for some, their reentry into religious life.

❸ Israel helped democratize the structure of the American Jewish community. It appropriated the rhetoric and trappings of democracy in distinguishing itself from non-

Zionist and anti-Zionist Jewish organizations. It undermined the stewardship model of leadership propounded by the American Jewish Committee in favor of the parliamentary model initiated by the First Zionist Congress.

❹ Where nineteenth-century Jews, at least in public, disavowed the idea of group politics, Zionism helped make such activities legitimate. Israel authenticated open and vigorous defense of Jewish rights. Organizations like the America Israel Public Affairs Committee developed hardball Jewish political involvement that became a model for other citizen groups.

❺ Israel transformed the Jewish self-image. The successes of the Israeli army shaped a new pride in Jewish

power, and the image of a small nation heavy on brain-power reinforced the intellectual dimension that had long been the backbone of Jewish identity.

❻ The political struggle for Israel, as Ben Gurion University historian Allon Gal has pointed out, "contributed to the advancement of East European Jews in America and to their integration into the more established Jewish community." Louis Lipsky, Abba Hillel Silver, Rose Halprin, Louis Leventhal—these and many others rose to national significance through the Zionist movement.

❼ The building of Israel changed the face of American Jewish philanthropy. Not only did Israel become an increasingly important focus of giving, it also introduced new methods, extending fund-raising from the wealthy to the Jewish masses, and pioneering new fund-raising vehicles such as Israel Bonds.

❽ Conservative, Orthodox and Reform Jews all met under Zionist auspices, thereby reinforcing Israel as the "inspiring and unifying" force, the common ground for cooperation in Jewish life. Sadly, this is less the case in our day, but it held true for much of this century and still stands as a model of Jewish unity amid diversity.

❾ Israel played a key role in the growth of Conservative Judaism and in the revitalization of Reform Judaism. East European Jews were drawn to Zionism and those religious movements that embraced it—Conservative Judaism chief among them. The growth of the *Yishuv* and later the state

also inspired Reform Judaism's renewed twentieth-century commitment to Jewish peoplehood and Zion, paving the way for Reform Judaism's twentieth-century resurgence.

① Zionism and later Israel transformed Jewish education. The educational reformer Samson Benderly and his disciples, who played the central role in modernizing American Jewish education, all were Zionists. These Hebraists made love of Zion central to the *Ivrit-b'Ivrit* (Hebrew into Hebrew) curriculum they championed.

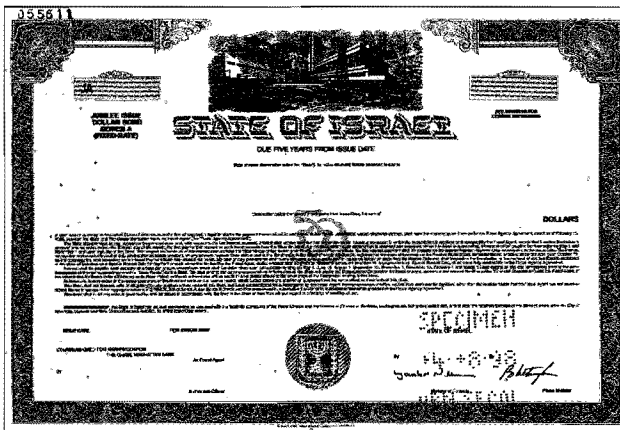
Israel's future impact is much less clear. Few American Jews still cherish the goal of creating a Jewish Utopia in the Middle East; we recognize Israel as a normal state, for better and worse. Nor do most of us still look to Israel as a cure-all that will solve our religious problems and revitalize our community. At best, it will offer some solutions for some problems, while others remain intractable, testimony that there are no easy answers in Jewish life.

Yet at least three large-scale changes resulting from Israel's reestablishment do promise to transform diaspora life in the decades ahead.

First, Israel is poised to overtake the United States as the largest Jewish community in the world: Current populations are 5.6 million in America and 4.6 million in Israel. Considering the high immigration and birthrate in Israel and the virtually static American Jewish population, Israel's ascension is inevitable. For American Jews, the change may well prove sobering. How will it alter the self-image of American Jews, so long fond of their notion of being Israel's

protectors? How will it transform our fund-raising, our sense of responsibility for *klal yisrael*?

Second, the diaspora in the next century is likely to be a lonelier place. Since 1939, it has lost more than 40 percent of its population. Jews are more concentrated than ever before, and 93 percent are confined to just 10 countries. Most of the 200 or so lands, including several where Jews had lived for millennia (Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia) are barren of Jews or show tiny unsustainable communities. Indeed, huge areas of the world show no Jewish presence at all. To be sure, there is a silver lining: The vast majority, as Hebrew University researcher Sergio Dellapergola has shown, have moved to "economically affluent, politically stable and socially attractive environments" over the past 50 years. Yet this comes at a price. Whereas the world's other great faiths—Christianity, Islam and Eastern religions—are expanding, Judaism is contracting. Where other peoples are preaching the gospel of globalism and spreading



Courtesy of Israel Bonds

their presence north, south, east and west, we are reducing our exposure to the larger world. In the coming century, do we need to recalibrate the balance between diaspora and Zionism, emphasizing the former a bit more, the latter a bit less?

Finally, in the last decade we have witnessed the demise of the great causes that energized world Jewry for much of the twentieth century. Israel was unquestionably our greatest modern achievement as a people, but it has lost some of its capacity to inspire our younger generation. The efforts to free persecuted Jews suffering in the Soviet Union, in Arab lands, in Ethiopia, were similarly crowned with success, and as a result these effective missions have also come to an end. Today, for the first time in memory, no large community of persecuted Jews exists anywhere. There is no shortage of important secular causes—social justice, environmentalism, animal rights—with a sound basis in our tradition. But these are not ultimately Jewish causes. Diaspora Jews today are poorer for not having a well-defined, elevating mission.

Simon Rawidowicz, an early twentieth-century Zionist thinker, in some respects anticipated this situation. A voice in the wilderness, he spoke out in 1920's for a model of Jewish life he described as "an elipse with two foci: the Land of Israel and the Diaspora of Israel"—Jerusalem and Babylon. Setting himself apart from those who viewed Israel as center and the diaspora as periphery, he insisted that the Jewish people in Israel and in the diaspora *together* constitute the People of Israel.

Each community must strive to create a Jewish life," he insisted, "as if it alone were responsible for the entire existence of Israel... What is important is the independent spontaneous creativity of each center." He knew history would say "that no community alone created the whole, but that all created it together."

Rawidowicz penned these words when 94 percent of Jewry lived in the diaspora, but he insisted prophetically that his words would "apply equally when that percentage will be 50 or 40." No matter what, he concluded,

diaspora Jews "must be responsible for their [own] life and creativity."

Today his vision takes on new appeal. Our task is to achieve a new balance, to create a more vibrant Jewish life in America. We must act as if "the entire existence and creativity of [*klal*] Israel" depends on us. Just as twentieth-century American Jewry was reinvigorated by the efforts to build and support Israel, so in the years ahead will Israel be reinvigorated by efforts to revitalize American Jewry. Let us strive to strengthen both at once. **H**

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