

Review

Zvi Ganin, *An Uneasy Relationship: American Jewish Leadership and Israel, 1948–1957*, Syracuse University Press, 2005, xix + 255 pp

Fred Lazin, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry in American Politics: Israel versus the American Jewish Establishment*, Lexington Books, 2005, xii + 356 pp

Stuart Altshuler, *From Exodus to Freedom: A History of the Soviet Jewry Movement*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005, xv + 213 pp

ON MAY 10, 2005, ISRAEL'S Central Bureau of Statistics announced that the country's population of Jews (including self-declared Jews not recognized by government) had reached a grand total of 5,550,000.¹ The parallel number for Jews in the United States (where the figures are admittedly less precise and more controversial) is 5,290,000.² With little fanfare, Israel has overtaken the United States as the largest Jewish population center in the world.

Even before this news arrived, scholars had begun to re-examine the relationship between American Jewry and Israel. "We Are One"—Melvin I. Urofsky's early book on this subject—echoed a celebrated UJA slogan, but actually reflected more hope than reality. Upon closer inspection, the author himself concluded that "relations between American Jewry and Israel are composed not only of ties that bind, but of differences that sunder."³ Charles Liebman and Steven M. Cohen's *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences* and Deborah Dash Moore and S. Ilan Troen's *Divergent Jewish Cultures: Israel and America* expanded on those differences, exploring how "divergent cultures . . . emerged from shared origins."⁴ Taking an even more downbeat tone, Steven T. Rosenthal entitled his volume *Irreconcilable Differences?* Subtitled "The waning of the American Jewish love affair with Israel," the volume traces ". . . the rise of community consensus and its subsequent dissolution in the face of a series of critical confrontations between American Jews and the Jewish state."⁵

The three books now under review revise and complicate our understanding of the relationship between the world's two largest Jewish communities. Zvi Ganin's *An Uneasy Relationship* focuses on the era when Israel was young, 1948–1957. Ganin, author of a previous volume entitled *Truman, American Jewry and Israel* and a longtime professor at Beit Berl College, studies leadership elites, and for the most part the American Jewish leaders that he examines stood far closer to Washington than to Jerusalem. Several of them, notably American Jewish Committee leader Joseph M. Proskauer, described themselves as non-Zionists and had earlier opposed Israel's creation. Concerned about dual loyalty and worried that Zionism would threaten his status and hard-won privileges in American society, Proskauer (p. 4) described the plan to create a Jewish state as "a Jewish catastrophe." Though he later softened his views, he continued to hector David Ben-Gurion with patronizing letters urging him, among other things, to show "restraint and moderation" in his policies, to display more "tact and diplomacy" in dealing with the disposition of Jerusalem, and above all to disclaim "any intention on the part of the State of Israel to interfere with the life of American Jewry." (p. 39)

This latter concern also agitated Proskauer's AJC colleague, Jacob Blaustein, who is very much the hero of this book (in fact, it is dedicated to the memory of Blaustein's son). A businessman, oil magnate, and legendary workaholic, Blaustein succeeded Proskauer as AJC President and is best remembered for his 1950 exchange with David Ben-Gurion that sought to set forth in precise language the appropriate relationship between the State of Israel and the American Jewish community. Ganin's extensive research places this important exchange in its proper historical context—fear of the anti-Zionist American Council for Judaism,⁶ on the one hand, and of a worldwide conflagration sparked by the onset of the Korean War on the other—and it adds details not found in previous scholarship. Ultimately, he credits Blaustein, Ben-Gurion and several others with redefining the relationship between Zionists, non-Zionists, and the State of Israel. "Keenly aware of both Israel's precariousness and the mutual dependence of the American Jewish and Israeli communities," he concludes, they "eventually worked out a viable and creative *modus vivendi*." (xix)

As significant as the Blaustein–Ben-Gurion relationship may have been, American Jewish leadership between the years 1948–1957 actually extended far beyond those figures considered by Ganin. Religious leaders—Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox—go almost unmentioned in his book, and the American Jewish Congress, B'nai Brith,

Poale Zion, and numerous other Jewish organizations involved with Israel find no place within it either. This volume, focusing as it does on the “upper crust”, also fails to recount the subtle ways through which Israel, during the first decade of its existence, slowly began to permeate the homes, schools, and religious lives of ordinary American Jews. Nevertheless, *An Uneasy Relationship* points toward a highly important conclusion: That far from being “one” with Israel during its early years of existence, some of America’s most significant Jewish leaders found themselves pulled in two different directions. Married to America and courted by Israel, they slowly moved from a reflexive embrace of U.S. government policy toward a more nuanced and independent role, acquiring in the process a “sufficient self-confidence as American citizens to have their own concept of America’s national interest,” apart from that of the U.S. State Department. (p. 217)

While openly courting American Jews such as Jacob Blaustein, the young State of Israel also worked behind-the-scenes to assist Jews in the Soviet Union. In 1952, the State established a secret “Liaison Bureau” (*lishkat ha-keshet*) code-named Nativ, to maintain contact with Jews behind the Iron Curtain. Three years later it expanded the bureau’s mission to include winning support for the Soviet Jewry cause in the West. Eventually, through the Liaison Bureau and other diplomatic channels, Israel came to play a decisive, if behind-the-scenes, role in the American movement to free Soviet Jews.⁷

Fred Lazin, Professor of Political Science at Ben-Gurion University, describes this role in his study of *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry in American Politics*. Perhaps the best researched of all the English-language books on the Soviet Jewry movement, Lazin’s study supplies a great deal of new information on the central (“establishment”) organizations that worked to free Soviet Jews, the squabbles among different leaders and organizations, and the wrenching policy dilemmas that they faced together (such as whether to define the issue broadly within the context of the Cold War or narrowly to avoid its politicization; whether to seek to free all persecuted Soviet citizens or to focus on Jews alone). “Israel,” he concludes, “used American Jews to further its own interests (Soviet Jewry) within the American political system. [It] urged, cajoled and at times manipulated the American Jewish community to pressure its government to act on behalf of Soviet Jews with the ultimate goal being immigration to Israel.” (p. 301)

Lazin focuses the bulk of his volume on the great Israeli-American debate over *noshrim*, so-called ‘dropouts’, who left Russia on the basis of invitations to settle in Israel but ultimately chose to settle in the United States. The issue, he shows, developed over several decades and was vastly

more complex than recognized at the time. Nevertheless, at its core, it pitted Zionist values ("the ingathering of the exiles") as well as the demographic needs of the State of Israel against the longstanding American value of "freedom of choice." Those on one side applauded Russian Jews who chose to settle in Israel, but insisted that they not be forced to do so, while those on the other argued that Russian Jews only received exit visas so that they might emigrate to their Israeli "homeland," and that to treat them as stateless "refugees" was nothing less than dishonest. Notwithstanding strong efforts on the part of the Liaison Bureau and heavy pressure from the government of Israel, the majority of American Jewish leaders came down on the side of "freedom of choice." In so doing, they reprised what Ganin found to have taken place a generation earlier, and moved toward a more nuanced and independent role, acquiring a "sufficient self-confidence" to articulate their own concept of what American Jewry's responsibility was toward Russian Jews.

Ultimately, though, the bulk of Russia's emigrating Jews settled not in the United States, but in Israel. With the fall of Communism and the exodus of thousands of Jews per month, both American officials and Jewish communal leaders balked at the prospect of underwriting a tidal wave of immigrants that could rise into the millions. As a result, in 1989, Congress abandoned "freedom of choice" and imposed a quota of 40,000 Russian Jewish immigrants annually based on the principle of "family reunification." American Jews acquiesced to this, Lazin insists, not because of Israeli demands, which they had previously parried, but because of "pressure from their own government and . . . the enormous economic expense of resettlement in the United States." (p. 303)

Stuart Altshuler comes to an entirely different conclusion. A longtime Soviet Jewry activist who spent three decades with the "dissident" Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry and now teaches at Chapman University, he reviews some of the same history as Lazin, but utilizes previously unexamined documents from "anti-establishment" Soviet Jewry movement sources. Time and again, in his recounting, Israel looms as the villain, for from his perspective it cared much less about rescuing Soviet Jews than about promoting *aliyah*. The U.S. Congress's 1989 decision to limit Soviet Jewish immigration, he concludes, decided the issue in Israel's favor:

[T]he combination of Israel's strong-arm pressure working through the elite of the American Jewish establishment, the ambiguity that existed within the mainstream community in terms of dealing with any conflict with Israel, the fortuitous coming together of the elements in the Soviet Union and the

United States that led to the superpowers' support of a more direct transit route for the Soviet Jewish émigrés to Israel, and, finally, the financial realities that beleaguered American Jewish communities trying to pay for the sudden appearance of thousands of Soviet Jews all paved the way for an Israeli victory in securing substantial aliyah. . . . (p. 149)

Altshuler's is more a brief for the Union of Councils than a full-scale history, and some of its generalizations ("the establishment. . . continuously tried to stifle the voice of dispute, dissent and disagreement in the makings of American Jewish policy with regard to the emigration of Soviet Jews" [p. 70]) do not bear close scrutiny. As Lazin amply demonstrates, the "establishment" was far more internally divided on many issues than its dissident opponents imagined. No less exaggerated is Altshuler's central thesis, that "the American Jewish community, at each given stage of the history of the Soviet Jewry movement, made its policy and realized its objectives dependent upon the wishes of the state of Israel." (p.141) What Altshuler does capture is the Union of Councils' worldview—its stress on immediacy, its fear of a second Holocaust, its disdain for traditional communal leaders and methods and, most important of all, its fierce independence. Neither the Liaison Bureau in Israel nor mainstream Soviet Jewry organizations in the United States sufficiently appreciated its dedication, tenacity, and commitment.

From the perspective of Israel's relationship with American Jewry, the three books reviewed here all share a common theme. They demonstrate a persistent anxiety about Israel, an uneasy fear that its activities, self-interests, ideology, and commitment to *aliyah* threaten the independence and cherished values of the American Jewish community. At the same time, they also demonstrate that this anxiety, while not wholly without foundation, has time and again proved excessive. American Jewish leaders turn out to have been more independent, more creative, and more self-confident than their critics ever thought possible. As American Jewry drops from being the largest Jewish community in the world to only the second largest, and anxiety over Israel in American Jewish circles increases, this historical lesson merits recalling. Repeatedly, from Jacob Blaustein's day onward, American Jews have underestimated the capabilities and strength of their own leaders and overestimated the power of Israelis to run roughshod over them.

NOTES

1. Press Release, "Eve of 57th Independence Day: 6.9 Million Residents in the State of Israel" (Jerusalem, May 10, 2005) available at www.cbs.gov.il/press205-etrin. The development was noticed by *Arutz Sheva*, "After 1,000 Years, Israel is Largest Jewish Center," May 01, 05/22 Nisan 5765, available at www.israelnationalnews.com/news.php?id=81071

2. *AJYB* 104 (2004) 501–505.

3. Melvin I. Urofsky, *We Are One! American Jewry and Israel* (Garden City, NY, 1978) x.

4. Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences* (New Haven, CT, 1990); Deborah Dash Moore and S. Ilan Troen, *Divergent Jewish Cultures: Israel & America* (New Haven, CT, 2001) 6.

5. Steven T. Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences? The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel* (Hanover, NH, 2001) xii.

6. Ganin (p. 86) believes that the American Council for Judaism met "... its final demise after the 1967 Six-Day War," but in fact it lives on to this day, and claims to be experiencing "an exciting new chapter" in its history (www.acjna.org).

7. Nechemia Levanon, *Ha-Kod-Nativ* (Tel-Aviv, 1995) first revealed much of the story. See also his brief English account entitled, "Israel's Role in the Campaign," in Murray Friedman and Albert D. Chernin, *A Second Exodus: The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews* (Hanover, NH, 1999) 70–83.