

America and Israel: Decline of the Special Relationship?

Allon Gal and Alfred Gottschalk, eds., *Beyond Survival and Philanthropy: American Jewry and Israel*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2001.

Steven T. Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences? The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel*, Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2001.

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The relation of American Jewry to Israel has undergone enormous changes in the past two decades. Between the Six-Day War of June 1967 and the Israeli war in Lebanon of 1982-83, the American Jewish community was united in its support of Israel and its political and economic agenda. American Jews saw it as their aim to help Israel by offering the country as much political backing in America as they could with American Jewish organizations effectively serving as pro-Israel lobbyists. This reality was known only too well to American politicians who courted Jewish voters by expressing support for Israel. That Jews supported Israel was such a known fact of life that it became part of American folklore. In *All in the Family*, a popular television comedy of the mid-1970s, Archie Bunker, the major character in the show, donates a dollar for Israel in order to gain the trust of a Jewish secretary in his workplace. Very few American Jews raised serious doubts over Israel's policy during those golden years of the American Jewish-Israeli relationship. Outspoken American Jewish critics of Israel were rare and considered to be something of an aberration—a strange mutation.

The relationship between American Jews and Israel, however, was anything but one sided. In fact, American Jewish-Israeli relations during the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the early 1980s could be described as symbiotic. American Jews derived enormous benefits from their Israeli connection. Israel's victory in the Six-Day War filled Jews in America with pride. By association, they were heroes, too. Moreover, support for Israel served to unite American Jews and offered a common agenda and cohesion to an otherwise fragmented

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community. Israeli culture, including Israeli songs and dancing, often became American Jewish expressions, increasingly associated with "Jewishness" in America. With the exception of ultra-Orthodoxy, the different branches of Judaism in America embraced Israel and its culture, often turning it into a central component of their spiritual, cultural, and political being. For the Reform movement, for example, its connection to Israel served to redefine its position *vis á vis* its Jewish roots. Embracing Israel and its culture often served for Reform Jews (as for others) to signify their dedication and loyalty to the Jewish people and to Jewish national aspirations.

This reality began changing in the 1980s. The Israeli war in Lebanon (1982–83) was a turning point. While Jewish organizations supported Israel during the crisis, some American Jewish leaders began to openly voice criticism of Israel's policy. During the 1980s–90s, new Jewish groups came about that offered alternatives to organizations that have traditionally represented American Jews and continued to see their calling in offering the Israeli government as much backing as possible. Such groups as the New Israel Fund have begun collecting money on their own and distributing it in Israel among organizations that focus their activities on civil liberties, the peace movement, and the Jewish-Arab relationship. Contributions to the United Jewish Appeal, which for decades had been the major fund-raiser in America for Jewish and Israeli causes, decreased considerably.

The *Intifada*, the Palestinian uprising (1987–93), further raised doubts among American Jews over Israeli policies and agendas. Israel had ceased providing American Jews with pride. Instead, it has often become a source of worry and, for some, of embarrassment. The demographics of American Jewry have also contributed to the disenchantment. The generation of American Jews that backed Israel in 1967 consisted of people who had witnessed the perils of Jewish existence in the 1930s–40s and saw the Israeli-Arab conflict in terms of Jewish survival. The generation of American Jews of the 1980s–90s, on the other hand, has come of age in an era in which Israel was a self-understood reality and was often conceived of as a powerful nation. While many politicians and organizations have continued to act as if nothing has changed in the American Jewish-Israeli relationship, the new developments have not gone unnoticed.

The realities of the American Jewish-Israeli relationship are the

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subject of two recent books, *Beyond Survival and Philanthropy: American Jewry and Israel and Irreconcilable Differences? The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel*, both published in 2001. *Beyond Survival and Philanthropy* is a collection of essays based on a conference that took place in Israel in 1996. The conference and the volume are themselves an American Jewish-Israeli coproduction. The editors include Allon Gal, a distinguished scholar at Ben Gurion University, who has published books on American Zionism and American Jewish-Israeli relations. The second editor, Alfred Gottschalk, president emeritus of the Hebrew Union College, wrote a book on Ahad Ha-Am, whose ideas strongly influenced American Zionist ideology. In their biographies, location, and scholarly interest, the two editors represent the academic elite in each community that takes interest in the other community and is committed to preserving the ties between Israel and American Jewry. The same can also be said about the other Israeli and American Jewish scholars, as well as a number of political and community leaders on both sides of the Atlantic who have participated in the volume. Being themselves committed to a strong interaction between American Jews and Israel, the writers, while acknowledging changes, see a strong relationship between American Jews and Israel as an almost given reality. In the preface, the editors compare the situation in the 1990s to that of half a century earlier. "[T]he problems of assimilation, acculturation, intermarriage, and feelings of alienation, are...of significance and no less important today than they were in the 1940s," they assert, yet they claim "what was unique in that period, however, was a pervasive aura of Jewish solidarity, which is to be envied when one looks at the Jewish world today, where divisions are much more apparent and appear to be much more serious and irreconcilable."

Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman wrote the first and perhaps the most central essay in the collection. Their article serves as the starting point for the discussion. Both scholars are American Jews who have settled in Israel. Their personal decision to build their homes in Israel notwithstanding, they state their opinion that "the Jewish people is best served by the existence of a strong and vibrant American Jewish community" (3). Cohen and Liebman argue that the issue is not whether American Jews support Israeli policies, but rather "the level of interest the American Jews express about Israeli affairs." They lament that Jews in both Israel and the United States care about

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each other less than they did in the past, and they see erosion in the American Jewish willingness to mobilize in favor of Israel. The reason for this, they state, is that "Israel no longer requires the financial and political assistance it once did." On the financial level, they are certainly right. Ironically, the philanthropic relationship that North American Jewry developed toward Israel eroded considerably as Israel became more economically secure in the 1980s–90s.

The book consists of articles and responses by a number of authors centering around various issues. At times, the responses are more relevant to the theme of the book than the articles. Such is the case with Jonathan D. Sarna's very fine response to Yoseph Gorny's article on *Shililat Hagolah*, the negation of the Diaspora in Zionist thinking. (59–63) Sarna examines the idea of *Shililat Hagolah* in American Zionist thinking. Americans, he claims, have never taken this idea seriously. For Jews since the nineteenth century, America has been "the promised land," holding a great hope for an ideal Jewish future. Both Israel and America are not utopias, Sarna contends, and "the reality in both communities has turned out to be more sobering than starry-eyed advocates of 'promised lands' expected." (62) Sarna not only rejects the idea of *Shililat Hagolah* but sees competition between different Jewish centers as desirable for the survival of the Jewish people.

Another important article in the book is that of Leonard Fein, who discusses the effect of Jewish cultural wars on the relationship of American Jews to Israel. Written in the aftermath of Rabin's assassination, Fein calls upon organized American Jewry to disassociate themselves from the official government of Israel and from partisan Israeli politics in general. (85) Fein's article is followed by that of Aviezer Ravitzky, who discusses the cultural wars that take place within Israeli society. Ravitzky offers an excellent analysis but his article has little relevance to the general theme of the book: the changing relationship between American Jewry and Israel.

Other articles offering relevant information and insights are those of Samuel Norich and Shoshana S. Cardin, who examine the reaction of Jewish organizations to the recent changes. Jewish federations have been allocating a smaller percentage of their income to the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) and its overseas beneficiaries, including the Jewish Agency and the Joint Distribution Committee. (190) The numbers have declined from 52.3 percent in 1985 to 41.8 percent in

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1994, signifying a rift in the focus and agenda of the current Jewish leadership in America. "The federations and UJA recognize that the challenges of assimilation, alienation, and non-affiliation are serious enough... and are now focusing on what can be done at home to strengthen the American Jewish community," Cardin concludes.

Recognizing major changes in the interaction between American Jewry and Israel, *Beyond Survival and Philanthropy's* basic assumption is that American Jewish organizations and Israeli leaders must do their best to keep a close relationship between the two communities alive. A more pessimistic outlook on this subject is offered by Steven T. Rosenthal. His book, *Irreconcilable Differences? The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel*, aims at exploring what brought about the dramatic changes in American Jewry's relation to Israel. Rosenthal begins by contrasting the situation during the 1960s and 1970s with what came afterwards. As Rosenthal points out, during the 1980s–90s sharp criticism of Israel came to characterize even members of the American Jewish establishment who were in principle supportive of the Jewish state. (Introduction, xiii-xiv) Rosenthal believes that there is a historical logic to the drastic changes that have taken place in American Jewish attitudes toward Israel. "From the 1890s to the present, American Jews' response to Zionism and Israel has been circumscribed by American priorities and needs," Rosenthal claims. "From their early indifference to Zionism, through a quarter century of unequivocal support for Israel, to the breakdown of consensus in the 1970s and 1980s and the present fragmentation, American Jews have related to Israel primarily through their identity as Americans." Rosenthal sees the first break of the era of consensus in American Jewish support for Israel in the defeat of the Labour Party, which had ruled Israel since its inception, and the rise to power of the Likud Party in 1977. Paradoxically, the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1978 brought about a breakdown in unity both inside Jewish-Israeli society and ultimately in America. Israel was no longer conceived of as a besieged hapless nation; its diplomatic options grew, and so inner criticism of its decisions grew accordingly.

The war in Lebanon in 1982–83 and the massacres committed by Lebanese forces while Israeli troops were situated in the area brought about organized American Jewish protests against the Israeli policy. One might argue with Rosenthal, who claims that "the criticism unleashed by the war in Lebanon paled in comparison to the Pollard

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spy case.” (76) In light of the historical fear that support for Israel might bring about accusations of disloyalty to America, it is amazing how little trauma the Pollard case has initiated. Rosenthal quotes a poll in which 57 percent of American Jews said they had no opinion on Pollard’s life sentence. (84) Be that as it may, one cannot argue with Rosenthal when he raises more issues for American Jewish disillusionment with Israel and the waning of the “love affair.” The first *Intifada* (1987–93) is one example; the preferred status of the Orthodox in Israel is another.

Rosenthal sees the diminishing love affair as harmful to both communities, but especially for American Jews. “If they continue to distance themselves from Israel, they will then have lost one of their last supports of communal identity,” he warns. “It would render all the more plausible the jeremiads of those who predict the ultimate demise of the non-Orthodox Jewish community in America.” (194) Rosenthal’s analysis touches on a most important question facing American Jewry today—how the relationship with Israel might contribute to the survival of a vibrant Jewish community. In this it does not differ much from Gal and Gottschalk’s collection of essays, but its conclusions are sharper, more pessimistic. Both books are highly recommended to all American Jews and Israelis who are concerned with the relationship between the two communities. The issues the books raise touch on some of the most sensitive cords facing Jewish existence in the twenty-first century, and they cannot be ignored.

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