



PERSPECTIVES

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Rethinking Israel-World Jewry Relations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Much is being written against the ultra-orthodox fiat over prayer and conversion in Israel, emphasizing the potential consequences if the US “diaspora” were to take offense and become irreversibly alienated. But the US is not Israel’s periphery. American Jewry is not Israel’s diaspora, and no Jew in the US lives in exile. Israel must adapt to modern times – in faith, as it does in technology – first and foremost, for the sake of its own citizenry. It must take a firm, fair, and inclusive position on who is and is not a Jew, who is and is not an Israeli, and how the two attributes can reconcile in a modern pluralistic democracy.

Religion in enlightened democracies should not fall within the state’s purview. It is not a privilege granted, withheld, or withdrawn by some self-arrogating moral authority. Religion is a basic human right, the tenor, tone, and boundaries of which acquire form in the strictest intimacy between individual and deity. What the state says you are, because you ticked a box, does not say who you really are.

In his “Defining ‘Evangelical’” (*The Atlantic*, December 7, 2015), Jonathan Merritt [reported](#) that the meaning of a religious identification in the US differed depending on whom you asked. It would therefore not be wrong to conclude that “evangelicals comprise between 7-47% of the US population.”

[According to](#) “A Portrait of Jewish Americans” (*Pew Report*, October 1, 2013), data typifying the religious vs. secular affiliation of US Jewry have shifted from generation to generation. In 2013, 78% of the responding adult US Jews said they were Jewish by religion, but steady annual increases in the yearly figure of Jews self-identifying as non-religious continue to occur at the expense of Jews self-identifying as religious. Also, age groups correlate differently. In 2013, non-religious Jews born between 1914 and 1927 made up 7% of the

respondents sampled; 14% were from the 1928-1945 cohort; 19% from those born between 1946-1964; 26% from the 1965-1980 group; and 32% of those born after 1980. In 2013, 55% of US Jews who self-identified as religious said “ancestry & culture” were causal. The corresponding figure for Jews registering as non-religious was 83%.

In ways reminiscent of Weimar Europe, many cultivated, well-off, well-connected Western Jews, almost all of them assimilated, continue to distance themselves and their families from religion. They do this through intermarriage; self-imposed “ethical duties” vis-à-vis “mixed” offspring; or in reaction to the moral/material impositions of strict rules of orthodox religious observance.

When anti-Semitic peaks fuel fears, those most targeted, and those who in consequence elect to migrate to Israel, more often than not are Jews identifiable by garb, not those with the highest prestige in their societies. The most severely affected tend to belong to the socioeconomically suboptimal and ethnopolitically over-vulnerable strata in their country of origin. If they or their offspring have planted roots in the land of their birth (through intermarriage, mores, culture, fatalism, convenience, addiction, language, whatnot), they may in the last recourse migrate to Israel, where they would hope to be taken care of once they master the Hebrew they parrot to pray. In contrast, non-religious Israeli sabras, unable or unwilling to adapt to strict orthodoxy, may choose to move abroad, with diploma in hand or adventure in mind.

These counter-directional flows produce mixed results: a contingent abroad populated by estranged Israeli expatriates; but also a contingent inhabited by indigenous Jews unable or unwilling to leave their countries, much less to settle in Israel. Israel, an increasingly conservative orthodox dominion, thus self-reinforces and expands by default, owing to the influx of less skilled, more religious new citizens with good reason to pray. Put differently, whereas *immigration* provides positive feedback for religiosity in Israel; *emigration* by default deepens and broadens that effect by inadvertently relieving the country of non-religious “misfits”.

If this scenario were allowed to dominate, Israel could become increasingly orthodox in mentality and practice. Faraway lands would continue to be havens for “liberal” Israeli exiles, if not so for the lesser endowed, lesser skilled, more religious, indigenous Jews, who live in the lowest but also the highest quintiles of their societies.

What to do? Create an internal environment that integrates a sense of belonging, and an external environment that fosters migrating or returning out of affectionate self-identification. Bonds of solidarity between these two spheres must be compassionately reinforced. There do exist ministries for that, after all.

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