

Time for a Global Jewish *Sanhedrin*? Toward a New Political Dialogue and Relationship between Israel and the Jewish Diaspora

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The authors acknowledge with gratitude the insights of Jeremy Newmark and Doug Krikler and the participants of a meeting convened by the UK UJIA in London in November. The positions herein however, only reflect those of the authors and no other institution.

A Sea Change in Jewish Diaspora Disposition to Israel

The generation of Diaspora Jews that witnessed the creation of the State of Israel and its first insecure decades were firm standard-bearers of Israel, seeing its unconditional support a near holy duty. Endowed by a robust sense of responsibility for the very existence and wellbeing of the vulnerable state, Jews hardly sought a role in dictating policy. While the Jewish establishment has openly disagreed with the Israeli establishment on issues relating to Judaism, such as the question of "Who is a Jew?" it mainly avoided any open debate and criticism on Israel's national politics and foreign policy. Although Jewish communities have always tended to have organizations of different political hues, they have tended to engage with the broader polity with a more unified voice.

However, Israel is no longer perceived a frail entity facing existential threats that desperately needs all the unconditional support it can muster. Successive generations of Diaspora Jews, particularly in the West, have been affected by a totally different global political culture which does not necessarily positively reflect upon Israel. Raised in liberal democracies that defend minority rights, a growing number of Jewish leaders, and even more so young Jews worldwide, find it increasingly difficult to unconditionally defend Israel's policies without their critical notes being registered. Studies have shown that young Jews in the Western world support a liberal type of Zionism, whereby values of an open debate, skepticism of military intervention, and human rights are fundamental. The alienation of younger Diaspora Jews is further reinforced by the perceived growingly less liberal Israeli body politic, unproportionally dominated by ultra-orthodox parties and right-of-center political positions.

Most of the "formal" Jewish communal organizations traditionally support Israel "right or wrong" and cannot easily adjust. Consequently, this is alienating a growing number of young Diaspora Jews. Whereas Jewish organizations such as AIPAC officially promote a liberal form of Zionism, in practice they unconditionally support Israel and try to avoid an open debate about Israel's policy and actions.

Whereas recent polls show that the younger Jewish generation in the North American (and probably throughout the Western world) is increasingly critical of Israel's actions, they also demonstrate that an overwhelming majority

feels very connected to Israel. This might also be related to the mushrooming Israeli experience programs – Taglit/Birthright Israel, MASA, and Lapid. Placed in this context, young Jews are in effect claiming the right to criticize Israel's action as part of their newfound Jewish identity and affinity. This means there is a potential for deepening the relationship and bond between the newer generation and Israel, but within a new and different context.

The gap between the traditional Jewish establishment and the younger generation can partly help explain the emergence of alternatives organizations such as J Street. Not only does J Street reflect the changed political orientation of younger Jews, it also illustrates the pluralist character of the Jewish communities and the greater diffusion of Jewish organizational life abroad, whereby membership of traditional Jewish organizations could be considered increasingly insufficient. More importantly, these trends serve to underscore the challenge facing both Israel and "formal" communal organizations.

From an Israeli perspective at least, the emergence of J Street and its more controversial actions (allegations that J Street officers suggested a moral equivalence of Hamas and IDF during "Operation Cast Lead" and provided political access in the US for Richard Goldstone) are a source of concern.

Furthermore, the disenchantment with Israeli policies is not only a matter of younger generations, but increasingly involving Jewish leaders in Western communities to the extent that some leading Jewish figures have not been entirely immune to the assault on Israel's legitimacy in the Western political mainstream. These positions demonstrate how prejudicial "double standard" discourse is setting the agenda even within Jewish communities throughout the Western world.

The mounting assault on Israel's legitimacy, a source of concern for most, if not all, Jewish leaders and Jews worldwide, compounds and accentuates the challenges facing both Israel and the Jewish Diaspora. Israel's international standing is in dire straits, as the legitimacy of its policies, positions, military operations, and even its very existence as a Jewish-Democratic state, are contested and questioned. Out of all proportion to its size or the objective significance of Israel in wider international affairs, the world's increasingly sharp focus and tight scrutiny are applied to all of Israel's actions.

Jewish communities around the world have found themselves on the frontline of the international obsession with Israel, either as proxy target for Israel itself or as (progressively more isolated) counter-advocates. This frontline position excessively burdens internal Jewish debates on the future of Israel, the logic and morality of its actions and the nature of Jewish society in general.

Jewish leaderships and their communities are often called upon to defend Israel. They are directly affected by Israel's decision-making, to which they are neither privy nor partner. This inevitably creates a fundamental tension between a perceived duty to defend whatever policies of the Government of Israel ("Israel right or wrong"), and a perceived obligation for "*tikun olam*" of Israel – to criticize certain policies and advocate specific positions (without being necessarily labeled as 'self-hating Jews'). This tension extends beyond the personal to the communal level – the expectation for a "unified" Jewish communal voice inevitably leads to the stifling of a vibrant pluralistic debate. Attempts to suppress intra-communal debates stem from the fear that internal debate themselves undermine a united front for defending and advocating for Israel by playing into the hands of the enemies.

These debates are ongoing, practical and urgent. Jewish and pro-Israel groups with explicitly left- and right-wing agendas are organizing and seeking to lobby and campaign directly to Governments and wider society, and are prepared to be publicly critical of Israeli government policy, posing a challenge to the position traditionally held by the formal Jewish communal organizations. Within Jewish communities, those holding differing views on the issues are increasingly failing to listen to each other. However, many Jewish leaders are averse to claiming a role in determining Israel's strategic choices and recognize that at the end of the day Israel is a sovereign democratic country and only its citizenry can determine those choices.

These trends are a reflection of a growing body politic of Jewish Diaspora seeking a voice, if not a role, in the course of Israel's strategic direction. This is also reflected in the growing dissatisfaction of leading Jewish individuals with their perceived condition of "taxation with no representation". This sentiment does not only refer to philanthropic endeavors, but also, perhaps even more acutely, to their position vis-à-vis the challenges posed by the growing delegitimization of Israel.

Addressing these untenable trends and challenges is not only a matter of the Jewish Diaspora establishment, but also of the State of Israel.

The View From Zion: Israel's Attitude to the Diaspora

Israel has been slowly but steadily modifying its approach towards the Diaspora over the past 60 years. The Zionist movement considered a Jewish homeland in Palestine the sole viable solution for the Jewish people. This conception would be at the core of the identity of the newborn state, Israel. The notion of *shelilat ha-golah* (negation of the Diaspora)

envisioned the goal of diminishing the Diaspora as a form of Jewish life by bringing all Jews to Israel. Encouraging *Aliyah* (immigration to Israel) was embedded in Israel's national security and strategy. Migration from Israel, *yerida* (literally going down), had a negative connotation. More than three decades later, Late Prime Minister Rabin's quip (during his first term in that position) branding Israelis abroad as "fallout of weaklings" may seem anachronistic, but at the time was considered consensual.

However, the days of massive Jewish immigration to Israel are over and Israel is starting to rethink its position vis-à-vis the world and the Jewish communities worldwide. Israel's integration into the global marketplace seems to have facilitated a new approach to the Diaspora.

To be clear, and as opposed to the vibrant debate in the Diaspora, Israel-Diaspora relations are simply not on the Israeli agenda. At best, one can detect a changing attitude in Israel towards the Diaspora, but most of the leadership and the establishment are not engaged in this debate. An exception to this observation is Opposition Leader Tzipi's recent call for "a new Jewish conversation" and dedicated part of a recent visit to the United States to learn more about the attitude of the young Jewish generation to Israel.

However, a certain 'Israel-centrality' remains in the minds of the Israeli public and decision makers. The concerns of Diaspora Jews have been low on Israel's list of national priorities. Classical Zionist theory would contend that Israel will act in the interest of the Jewish people as a whole, but in practice it predominantly acts on the basis of national interests. There seems to be a broad, although implicit, belief that Israel is no longer strategically dependent upon financial or political support of the Diaspora.

The mushrooming experiential programs of the Diaspora in Israel has however, led to a broad Israeli acknowledgement of the need to reinforce the bonds and attachment of the young generation Jews to Israel. This acknowledgement has led to substantial allocation of government funds to Taglit-birthright Israel and to other programs.

Furthermore, the new strategic direction of the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) is also indicative of a new understanding of Israel-Diaspora relations. JAFI is reorienting its focus of activities in Jewish communities around the world from promoting and facilitating *Aliya* to instilling and reinforcing Jewish identity in Diaspora communities. JAFI's change of course is an important step in Israeli recognition that the bipolarity of Diaspora communities and Israel is permanent and that the two poles are equally important for the future of the Jewish People and the State of Israel.

There is also a growing appreciation in the Israeli establishment of the vital role of the Jewish communities around the world in countering the assault on Israel's legitimacy. Dozens of Jewish organizations around the world have assumed different approaches and different agendas to countering the assault. Recent efforts by the Government of Israel and leading Jewish organization to coordinate these activities are initial, but vital.

In sum, there is a growing understanding in Israel – among political elites, government and the broader public – that there is a need to engage Jewish communities. There is, however, no evidence that the debate in the Diaspora concerning its role in Israeli political decision has been put to any consideration. Notions such as "taxation without representation" are likely to be met with broad nonpartisan opposition in Israel. There might be, however, room for institutionalizing informal political dialogue. If Israel wants to stay the center and homeland of the Jewish people, it must also consider the interests, positions and opinions of Diaspora Jews. Israel is currently losing its centrality in the Jewish world, and if it wants to retain this position, it needs to start a strategic dialogue with the Diaspora Jews.

A New *Sanhedrin*: Institutionalizing Political Dialogue between Israel and the Jewish Diaspora

Placed in a comparative context one can easily appreciate the challenges of reformulating Israel-Jewish Diaspora relations. These relations are *sui generis* – Israel is predominantly a settler society (like the US, Canada and Australia), but a religious-based one with a large Diaspora abroad of fellow Jews that chose not to immigrate and settle. Most Diasporas in the world are based on ethnic and/or national identity and composed of individuals who emigrated from their shared territories to foreign lands. In the Israeli case, one could therefore argue that the direction of immigration has been largely opposite, bearing in mind that after more than 60 years there is a growing "Israeli" Diaspora abroad.

In the past few years, there has been increasing attention in the Diaspora to the role and influence Diaspora Jewry should have on Israel's foreign policy and legislative initiatives directly bearing upon the Diaspora (Jewish conversion, etc.). Diaspora Jewry has had limited influence on Israeli policy. Notwithstanding, one less noticeable area of influence is through partnerships between major Jewish organizations and selected Israel townships and geographical regions. Through funds and expertise, Jewish organizations are working with the Israeli civil society, and their impact has been locally and on the ground considerable.

However, Diaspora Jews, despite their tremendous support for Israel and Israeli projects, are not Israeli citizens. Granting formal political influence to non-citizens is unacceptable in democratic nations. That being said, Israeli policies need to take into account the repercussions they could have on Jews in the Diaspora.

The increasing need felt by Jews in the Diaspora to be heard on issues that directly and indirectly influence them as Jews, together with the need for Israel to keep the Diaspora involved but not formally so, offers the rationale for a possible course of action: the establishment of a joint framework of Jewish leaders from the Diaspora and Israel to deliberate issues relevant for the Jewish people as a whole (including the question of who is a Jew, conversion, and Jewish education), as well as the more political issues of Israel's domestic and foreign policies (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and security issues).

A new *Sanhedrin* could be recognized as a consultative body to Israeli decision makers, to the Prime Minister, the President, and the Knesset. This institution should represent the diversity of opinions that exist in the Israeli society and in the Diaspora and should transmit those visions to the senior decision-makers in the only Jewish state in the world.

The appointment of members that are representative of the diverse Jewish communities around the world is crucial, and this in itself will be a challenging task that needs to be thought through. One of the problematic aspects of this debate is the insufficiently acknowledged "democratic deficit" of many Jewish Diaspora organizations. The question of how to represent the different Jewish communities – an equal number of representatives for every country or the number of representatives depending on the size of the community – is yet to be determined and goes beyond the remits of this policy paper. One should however consider a broad, inclusive "big tent" approach in the composition of such a body.

Past proposals, such as the proposal for a 'Second House' by the President's Office in 2003, or the proposal for a World Jewish Forum by the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute in 2005, suggested similar consultative frameworks, but remained focused on issues of Jewish identity, Jewish education, and anti-Semitism. Letting national issues of security or economy being influenced by non-citizens holds serious dilemmas, but ignoring the impact Israel's security has on Jews abroad is irresponsible at best. It is the conflict with the Palestinians and Israel's security in the context of the broader Middle East that occupies the Jewish public opinion in Israel and abroad, and it is on these issues that dialogue is essential. The fact that young Jews say that criticizing Israel's actions is important for their Jewish identity means that there is room for enhancing their Jewish affiliation by giving those concerns a real platform.

There might be indeed additional or alternative options to be considered. The establishment of such a *Sanhedrin* is only one way of setting a new course in Israel-Jewish Diaspora relations, strengthening the two pillars of Jewish Peoplehood. Yet it would be utterly naïve to expect that such a new framework with a problematic composition at best, and dealing with sensitive issues will constitute a silver bullet, a solution and remedy to the gap among Jewish generations and between Israel and the Diaspora. The idea for such a new *Sanhedrin* is tabled not necessarily as a solution to a problem, but rather as a point of departure for a new dialogue.

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