

Israel and the Diaspora

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As we approach Israel's independence day, the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora remains ambivalent. Israel is faced with constant existential threats and low-grade warfare. It is fiercely self-protective. On the other hand, American Jewry has the luxury of continuous peace and tends towards a more liberal world view. Attitudes towards Israel have always been a problem, but never more so than today.

The supposed mediator between Israel and the Diaspora is the World Zionist Organization. Did you know that, between January and March 11th this year, there were elections for the World Zionist Organization? And you could have voted? Probably not because frankly, the WZO doesn't really matter. But let me give you some background.

At the initiative of Theodore Herzl, The World Zionist Organization was founded in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland at the first Zionist Congress, to spearhead the campaign for a Jewish homeland. It faced opposition from throughout the Jewish world on political and religious grounds. But it came to incorporate a very wide range of Ashkenazi and Sephardi organizations and saw itself as representing Jews throughout the world.

The *Sochnut*, The Jewish Agency for Israel, was established in 1929 as the operative branch of the WZO. In fact, it was the government in waiting for the dreamed-of Jewish State and was run along political lines. But dominated by secular Ashkenazi, Eastern European socialists of various degrees. In 1948, when Israel was established with all the powers of an independent nation, you would have thought that the Jewish Agency would disappear. But, as is typical of bureaucracies, rarely do they willingly disband – especially if political patronage is involved.

After Independence, Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister, had hoped that most Jews in the Diaspora would come to live in Israel. He was disposed to terminate the role of the WZO. But together with Nahum Goldman's World Jewish Congress, they refused to lie down. The Jewish Agency continued as a semi-state organization mirroring the political parties of the State for allocation and personnel. But it concentrated on relations between Israel and the Diaspora.

The head of the Jewish Agency was regarded as the unofficial Minister for the Diaspora. It was always a political appointment (as opposed to a meritocratic one). The result was that the Jewish Agency soon stood for inefficiency, corruption, political maneuvering, and incompetence. It became the butt of jokes. *Shlichim*, representatives of Israel were sent around the world to help local communities and forge connections with Israel.

When I was a student in England in the 1960s, the local Inter University Jewish Federation (of which I was an officer) was subsidized by the Jewish Agency and was part of the World Union of Jewish Students. As a British delegate, I attended several conferences in Jerusalem and we found the Agency people to be insufferably arrogant with little understanding of any point of view other than their own. They subjected us to long, boring harangues about how important they were and how we should be grateful and shut up and put up and not criticize or demand.

Years later, as Principal of a Jewish School, we always needed teachers from Israel to help with both Ivrit and Jewish studies. We were grateful that we could turn to the Jewish Agency for help. They would send *shlichim* on two-yearly rotations. But few of them were capable, committed, or prepared. Most saw this as a free junket abroad and reward for party loyalty. To make matters worse, the Jewish Agency had two rival departments of education sending staff to the Diaspora. A secular one mainly for Ivrit and Israel studies and a religious one for Torah education. Schools had to juggle and calculate the best conditions from where to get their staff.

Over the years, there have been changes both in Israeli society and the Agency. Different leaders and different programs. But it is still the same anomaly. Anyone in the Diaspora can set up a party, club, synagogue or association, pay membership dues and vote for their favored candidates. Then they have a say as to how the money raised in the Diaspora is spent in Israel. So, quite randomly, a leadership of the self-important emerges to dispense funds raised for Israel from the outside.

Jewish life in Israel is heavily politicized. It has absorbed so many Jews from traditional eastern and African communities. These communities, even if not always religiously strict, had no record of Reform Judaism's quite different customs, liturgies, and attitudes so the Reform's footprint in Israel is small. On the other hand, the largest recent wave of immigrants has come from the predominantly secular ex USSR. So that Israeli religious life is a morass of conflicting standards and attitudes. And only it can find a solution or accommodation. Which it does as noisily and often aggressively as all its political activities.

There is much in Israeli religious life (indeed in Diaspora life) that I strongly dislike and cannot identify with. I can see both the good and the terrible in extremes on both sides. But I do not accept that any Diaspora Jewry has any right to interfere in Israel's religious affairs. Of course, it can (and should) express its disapproval. Individuals can (and should) support their preferred religious wings as they see fit. I have long argued for the separation of State and Religion. I believe this would strengthen religious life in Israel rather than weaken it. But if a significant body of Israeli opinion wants an extreme (or any) brand of religious influence, that is its political choice.

Which is why the WZO is increasingly redundant and counterproductive. The WZO has always delighted in grandiose declarations about Zionism, Israel and what they think it means to be a good Jews. They use empty phrases such as "unbreakable bonds", "the centrality of country and capital", "strengthening Israel as a Jewish, Zionist and democratic state" etc. etc. Even if I agree in spirit, I strongly dislike these pompous statements which were cobbled together by committees redolent of Marxist dogma and political correctness. People will feel what they feel not what they are exhorted to.

Hitherto, in the USA the Reform and Left-wing have been dominant in WZO and used their power to try to influence Israeli politics through financial pressure. However, in each of the past three elections, Reform and allied parties have continued to lose numbers. At the same time, those of more orthodox and rightwing attitudes, have been gaining. And remember almost all Charedi parties do not get involved in the WZO of the Sochnut altogether and they too are a growing constituency. I do not see the point of one extra layer of interference.

Why keep WZO alive? Why give the opportunity for sectarian rivalry to play out within Jewish life? We should minimize such fractious encounters rather than encourage them. Let diaspora communities run their affairs as they do on the basis of survival of the fittest and Israel as its democratic system sees fit. The amount of money wasted on the WZO and the Sochnut could better help the Israeli poor. Their only value is to offer employment to hacks and to hold endless, pointless conferences on how to save the Jewish world. Israel and the Jewish world are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. Or perhaps I should say no more or less incapable.

As with repeated elections, Israel will eventually sort out its own political and religious messes in its own way. And isn't that what we want? Or are we saying we only approve of Democracy when it agrees with our views? In that sense, Israel and the USA have more in common than WZO can possibly imagine.