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People?**

Diaspora and Israel, Exile and Nation-State: Two Separate Families of the Jewish People?

Giorgio Gomel¹

Abstract

How did the Jewish condition change with the birth of the State of Israel? It changed profoundly because the Jews acquired a political and state dimension after two millennia of exile. Zionism, as a movement for Jewish political emancipation, arose precisely with the intent of removing the exceptionality of the Jewish condition—that of a dispersed and persecuted people—by ensuring Jews a place of refuge from persecution, where they would be the majority, masters of their own destiny, and could develop their identity in a "normal" way. Jews around the world today have an existential choice: either remain in the societies where they live in the diaspora or emigrate and integrate into the Land of Israel. Zionism was thus a radical revolution in Jewish existence, even if an independent Jewish state does not in itself mean physical security for its inhabitants, nor the removal of precarious conditions: Israel's right to a legitimate existence is still questioned today in Middle Eastern countries and by sections of Western public opinion.

There is thus a complex bifurcation of Judaism around the world, a separation between two families of the same people. This separation will likely deepen over time, if and when Israel truly becomes a "normal" state with equal rights for its citizens (Jewish and non-Jewish) and sufficiently integrated into a war-free Middle East. Indeed, the Jews of Israel and those of the diaspora live under two different regimes: the former live in a nation-state under a "Jewish" government that has at its disposal the classic instruments of a sovereign state: the police, the judiciary, and the army; the latter are citizens of other states whose laws they abide by and whose civil and political life they participate in.

This bifurcation is complicated by the fact that Israel's "normalcy" is still in doubt; thus, the emotional and identity-based bond between diaspora Jews and Israel remains very close. Israeli governments often presume to represent Judaism in its entirety, yet deem the opinions of diaspora Jews irrelevant, almost meaningless. However, Israel's actions objectively impact Jews worldwide. For example, after the anti-Semitic attacks in France in 2015-2016, Netanyahu's invitation to French Jews to seek refuge in Israel caused dismay. Ultimately, Israel's relations with diaspora Jews are undefined, imperfect, and sometimes contradictory. The diaspora, on the other hand, is not monolithic: it is united in defending Israel's right to exist in peace as a people and a state, but divided, dramatically divided, over the political choices of its governments.

And rightly so. It is right that Diaspora Jews have the right and, at times, the duty (with due composure and the necessary balance) to express their critical positions when they believe that the actions of Israeli governments are wrong or self-destructive for the future of the country.

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The inspiration for discussing such a compelling topic came from an essay by Yosef Yerushalmi, "Servants of Kings and Not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews," Florence, Giuntina, 2013. The essential thesis is that, in their diasporic history, Jews sought, to ensure protection in a hostile world, an alliance with the central sovereign power, avoiding horizontal alliances with local, diffuse, or marginal powers. At a conference held at the Pitigliani Institute in Rome some years ago and meant to discuss this thesis and its implications, examining several empirical cases of the relationship between the Jewish world and state power in the United States, Arab countries, Europe (especially France), and Italy, I addressed the issue of the radical transformation that Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel brought about in the long history of the Jews.

Zionism, a movement for Jewish national emancipation, was born with the intent of removing the exceptional nature of the Jewish condition, of a dispersed and persecuted people, of resolving—in nineteenth-century parlance—the "Jewish question." That is, to ensure Jews a refuge from persecution; to transform them into a normal nation, where they would be the majority and subjects of history; to offer the world's Jews a choice between remaining in the Diaspora, understood as exile, and a fully independent existence in *Eretz Israel*; finally, to achieve the normality of peace, security, and integration in the Middle East. In this sense, Zionism was a revolution in modern, post-emancipation Judaism; with the birth of the State of Israel, it assumed a collective political-national identity. Certainly, peace and integration in the region are far from being achieved; a sovereign Jewish state does not in itself mean physical security for its inhabitants or the removal of Jewish precariousness, as demonstrated by the fact that Israel's right to a legitimate and secure existence in the Middle East remains in doubt.

Therefore, today, the concrete existence of Jews in the world is a bipolarity: Diaspora and Israel, exile and nation-state. This duality is not free from conflict, but it offers Jews an alternative between integration into the Western societies in which they live, which are evolving, albeit with laborious contradictions, toward forms of democracy and multicultural coexistence,² and belonging to a nation-state. There is thus a bifurcation underway within Judaism, a separation between the two families of the Jewish people, which is destined to deepen over time if and when Israel truly becomes a normal state, with equal rights for its citizens, Jews and non-Jews, and sufficiently integrated into a war-free

² With the disappearance of the Jewish nucleus in the Middle East and North Africa, the Diaspora is now a Western phenomenon: the Americas and Europe.

Middle East. The Jews of Israel and the Diaspora, in fact, live under two different regimes: the former live a national existence under a "Jewish" government that has at its disposal the classic instruments of a sovereign state—the police, the judiciary, the army; the latter are citizens of other states, whose laws they abide by and whose civil and political life they participate in. A century ago, in October 1917, C.G. Montefiore, then President of the Anglo-Jewish Association, questioned by the British government about the text that would later give rise to the Balfour Declaration, observed:

I deprecate the expression "a national home". For it assumes that the Jewish race constitutes a "nation" or might profitably become a nation, both of which propositions I deny. The phrase "a national home for the Jewish race" appears to assume that the Jews constitute a nationality. Such an implication is prejudicial to Jewish interest as it is obnoxious to an enormous number of Jews. There can be no objection to Jews who want to form themselves into a nation going to Palestine but it must be effected without any prejudice to the character and position of the Jews as nationals of other countries.³

Two elements complicate this process of separation.

The first concerns Israel's normalcy, still dubious and distant, its legitimacy still denied, in a Middle East shaken by violence and the threat of state disintegration. The bond between Diaspora Jews and Israel therefore remains very close; Israel's centrality in the lives of global Jews remains, beyond rhetorical proclamations, a concrete phenomenon. Israel is unique in international relations in terms of the way a homeland establishes its relationship with its Diaspora. Israel claims to represent Jews as a whole and largely deems the Diaspora's opinions irrelevant. Yet Israel's actions objectively impact, directly or indirectly, Jews worldwide. It should therefore not ignore these effects when shaping its political action. The actions of Israeli governments are often perceived as being decided for and on behalf of the Jewish people as a whole (Israel itself openly proclaims this, as in recent cases after the anti-Semitic attacks in France or in its opposition to the agreements with Iran). Yet, they are flawed in keeping with the imperfect, undefined, complex, and contradictory nature of the relationships, ties, and mutual obligations between the Diaspora and Israel itself.

The Jewish world of the Diaspora, on the other hand, is certainly not monolithic. In their relations with Israel, Jews are united—except for a small, dogmatically anti-Zionist minority—on its right to exist as a

³ Cited in David Vital, *The future of the Jews*, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1990, p.48.

people and a state, but divided and often agonizingly critical of its political actions. Pluralism of opinion is an essential value to be preserved. It is important to rid ourselves of the false idea that defending Israel or fighting anti-Semitism always requires unbiased support for the decisions of its governments, and that Diaspora Jews have a duty to align themselves with this precept, under penalty of exclusion and accusations of treason. On the contrary, they have the right and sometimes the duty—with the due composure of people who are neither citizens nor voters of that state—to express their dissent when they believe the actions of Israeli governments are wrong or self-destructive for the very future of the country as a Jewish and democratic state.

The second question concerns precisely the nature of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and how to ensure that Israel remains "the state of the Jews" in the sense of classical Zionism—both Herzl's liberal and socialist—but also a democracy for all its citizens. Some consider this an oxymoron, an impossibility. The problem is how to reconcile the Jewish people's right to self-determination, enshrined in the 1948 Declaration of Independence and the Partition Plan for Palestine approved by the United Nations in November 1947, which envisioned a Jewish and an Arab state, with the rights of the other inhabitants—Arabs (today approximately 20% of Israel's population) and immigrants, especially from developing countries, who suffer from disparities and discrimination in education, land allocation for housing, infrastructure, and the labor market.

The dualism between "Jewish" and "democratic" has existed since the very beginning of the state; just think of the Law of Return. It is legitimate that Israel is a "Jewish" state, not only because it is a place of refuge from persecution for a dispersed people, but also because Jewish history and values are a significant part of the country's collective identity and shape the public sphere (language, holidays, public symbols). Michael Walzer, the eminent American political philosopher, states this with subtle acumen:

The State of Israel, as a liberal state, fosters a rich, vibrant, and quarrelsome civil society that is largely made up of Jews who quarrel among themselves [...]. A Jewish state today cannot impose a single, uniform Judaism. It can, however, express in the public space and on public occasions—the official calendar, evocative symbols, formal ceremonies, historical celebrations, the school curriculum—a version of Judaism common to the many varieties of Jews [...]. Israel's common

Judaism should be a distillation of Jewish history and values in which all or almost all Jews recognize themselves. Its content will then depend on the creativity of Israel's Jews—the work of poets, philosophers, artists, historians, and writers.⁴

But it is unacceptable for the state to favor the Jewish group over other ethnic groups. What is new today is that the so-called "law of the nation," proposed by right-wing parties and approved in 2018, codifies this discrimination. In the event of a conflict between the two, Jewishness would take precedence over democracy.

Placing Jewishness before and above democracy, granting Jewish law (which one?) a privileged status as the inspiration for the legal system, and downgrading the status of Arabic from the country's second official language amounts to limiting the rights of non-Jews to individual rights, failing to recognize the collective rights of a national minority. This means ignoring the fact that there is another nation or ethnic group in Israel that can have no say in the character of the state of which its members—the Arabs—are citizens with equal rights. To affirm, as in Article 11, Article 3 of the bill, which states that Israel "shall be founded on the principles of justice, freedom, and peace in the light of the vision of Israel's prophets and shall guarantee the individual rights of all citizens in accordance with the law," means something different from the 1948 Declaration, which mandates "[...] complete equality of social and political rights for all its inhabitants without distinction of religion, race, or sex[...]."

With respect to Yerushalmi's thesis regarding the relationship of Jews to sovereign power, it can be argued that Zionism and Israel also sought alliances with the imperial superpower of the time: first Great Britain until decolonization, then France until 1967, and then, for a long time and firmly, the United States, with which they established a client or servant relationship in their search for protection in a world full of enemies.

Israel's situation today is complex: it is strong thanks to its military supremacy and the protection offered by America, but also weak due to the anguishing sense of physical and psychological insecurity that the ongoing conflict and the terrorist threat instill in the country, impeding the normalcy of daily life for an entire nation. It is a nation with enormous military power, yet with an underlying sense of fragility and loneliness: a nation of refugees and immigrants, born of a history of persecution and exile, whose right to existence has been rejected for years by the Arab world.

⁴ Michael Walzer, *What kind of state is a Jewish state*, Tikkun, vol.4, n.4, pp.36-37.

However, Israel, like the Diaspora, fundamentally belongs to the world of the "victors" – a transitory, perhaps precarious, but today prevalent condition: Israel because of its political and military power and ties to the West; the Jews of the Diaspora because they belong to the middle and upper social classes and tend to conform to class interests, conservative values, and behaviors.

This state of being on the side of the "victors" raises two questions.

The first concerns the ability to assume the responsibility of force and to reconcile the exercise of power with the dictates of morality. This is especially true in Israel, where Jewish existence has taken the form of a nation-state under a "Jewish" government. But it is also true in the Diaspora, in countries such as the United States, France, Russia, and Great Britain, where Jewish communities tend to have a significant influence on civil society and the internal political process.

The creation of a sovereign state has united Jews, but it has also created profound new divisions. Conflicts between different types of Jews and between Jews and non-Jews raise complex questions [...]:

How can a unified Jewish state allow the variety of Jews and the varieties of Judaisms to thrive, without destroying it? [...] The task of Jews today—perhaps as difficult as that of their biblical ancestors—is to reconcile the desire for state power with the limitations of modern sovereignty. If Jewish sovereignty is to endure, Jews will have to find a way to navigate a middle course between the dream of boundless power and the nightmare of historical powerlessness.⁵

The second question concerns how to resolve the antinomy between our objective status as the "victors" and our subjective experience and self-representation as vanquished and victims. We Jews must use force, all the force we have—political (and also military), cultural, and educational—against anti-Semites, against those who deny our right to exist as individuals, communities, and peoples. We must oppose anti-Semitism as Jews, not just as citizens of the world, aware of the full weight of identity inherent in this belonging, following in this the teachings of Hannah Arendt.

⁵ David Biale, *Power and powerlessness in Jewish history*, New York, Schocken Books, 1986, pp.175-176.

After the Holocaust, and with Israel's right to exist still in doubt, an emphasis on the particularistic defense of our interests seems more than justified. But within certain limits. It is futile and self-destructive for the future of the Jews to seek the protection of inappropriate, opportunistic, and temporary allies, which is what American neoconservatives and some of their domestic imitators have been since the early 2000s, a doctrine to which they remain faithful despite repeated failures: a "holy alliance" between right-wing Jews, the political right, and fundamentalist Christians, in the name of uncritical defense of Israel's actions and shared hostility to Islam.⁶

I believe it is more effective to defend the Jews and their future by appealing to universalistic values, the dignity of the foreigner, and the defense of the rights of the most vulnerable. These are horizontal alliances, in Yerushalmi's vocabulary. Among the lessons to be learned from the Holocaust, as well as from the long history of the Jews, is the awareness of the objective interest of Jews to combat forms of discrimination, even when they do not directly or immediately affect Jews, and live in multicultural societies where different identities are respected, legitimized in coexistence, and seen as a benefit for all. The history of the Jewish people is concrete proof of this, as many forms of racism, social exclusion, or religious discrimination have subsequently resulted in anti-Jewish hatred.

⁶ I wrote about this issue in "Leo Strauss e I neoconservatives", *Aspenia*, n.32, 2006.

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