

ROUND TABLE

ISRAEL'S JEWISH IDENTITY

Too Little, Too Much?

****The summary was written by Dr. Dov Maimon, Senior Fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI)****

Moderated by Professor Moshe Halbertal (NYU School of Law, Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

Participants: Mr. Mordechai Bar-Or (Executive Director, Kolot), Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich (Chief Rabbi of Kiev, Ukraine), Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum (Founder, ZION), Ms. Jane Eisner (Editor-in-Chief, The Jewish Daily Forward), Mr. Abraham Foxman (National Director, ADL), Prof. Ruth Gavison (Founding President, Metzilah), Rabbi Richard 'Rick' Jacobs (President, Union of Reform Judaism), Rabbi Elie Kaunfer (Executive Director, Mechon Hadar), Dr. Danny Lamm (President, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry), Dr. Dov Maimon (Senior Fellow, JPPI), Mr. Natan Sharansky (Chairman of the Executive, JAFI) ¹.

This Round Table facilitated a lively and profound encounter between representatives of different geographical areas and denominational streams.

Geographical affiliations appeared to have a critical impact on the conversation. Israeli participants highlighted the necessary political implications of Israel's Jewishness while the Diaspora Jews emphasized the drawbacks of the connection between religion and State. Denominational affiliations were also relevant. Clearly, the "ethno-religious" expressions of the Jewish state perturbed the secular and liberal participants.

Three main issues were addressed:

1. The fundamental discrepancy between the way Jews in Israel and the Diaspora view their Jewishness.
2. The expression of Israel's Jewish identity.
3. A common agenda for Israeli and Diaspora Jews.

The fundamental discrepancy between the ways Jews in Israel and the Diaspora view their Jewishness: "the WHO and the WHAT"

Jews live their Jewishness in different ways in Israel and the US. In Israel, being a Jew is a national, political and ethnic belonging. Even if the content is diverse, Israeli Jews define themselves as Jews because Jewishness is the primordial frame of reference of their collective identity. But as long as Israelis live in Israel, their Jewishness is transmitted to their offspring largely by default. For all its advantages, this framing has a darker side. It is an assigned identity, one that is imposed, not chosen, and it is often affected by bureaucratic and political considerations. The key criteria according to which Israel's bureaucrats determine citizenship is therefore critical, and the issue of boundaries of the collective takes precedence over the issue of content. The opposite is true in the Diaspora, where being Jewish and engaged in Jewish life is a matter of parental or personal choice. Competing in a rich marketplace of identities, Jewish communities must offer positive, enriching content and an inviting environment if people are to opt in. Jewish belonging cannot be taken for granted and therefore Judaism must, as a matter of survival, respond to global, cultural and societal challenges.

This fundamental gap between the Israeli and Diaspora understanding of Jewishness was expressed in a variety of ways. One interesting issue, which was discussed many times before, debated the questions "who is a Jew?" and "what is a Jew?" As one participant pointed out: "If the 'who' dimension relates predominantly to the past, the 'what' dimension relates predominantly to the future." Questions of what it means to be Jewish are much more pressing in the Diaspora than in Israel. Those who face these questions must resolve the tensions between particularist Jewish concerns versus universalist, general concerns, which highlight the issue of Judaism's contribution to humanity – *Tikkun Olam* – as well as others related to Jewish meaning in today's world. One participant said "Jewish identity is definitely a uniting factor throughout the Diaspora, and ironically in Israel, it becomes a dividing factor," indicating that in the Diaspora, Jewish identity rings

Jews closer, while in Israel, such issues separate them. Boundaries of the collective are the critical issue in Israel, while the content of that collective takes precedence in the Diaspora.

The expression of Israel's Jewish identity

Is there a drawback to Israel's Jewish dimensions being reduced to technical, bureaucratic, or even political terms? Israel is obsessed with surviving and by its physical and economic development. Several participants were concerned that Judaism in Israel is more about definitions, than about actual living and meaning of life. They believe that the State of Israel must serve as a platform for a more important endeavor than simply achieving a high standard of living, brain research and economic prosperity. One participant contended, "I think that we have to talk about what values we really share at the core, what's unique about the Jewish approach."

This ongoing discomfort with Judaism being reduced to norms and definitions in modern Israeli society was singled out. All over the Western world the influence of materialism seems to be growing. "People tend to accumulate things. It doesn't really matter what it is... People tend to accumulate whatever they can and they look at religion and at the State of Israel the very same way."

How serious is this disorder? Relating to the demographic shifts inside communities between secular and ultra-Orthodox Jews, and especially to the fast-growing Israeli *Haredi* population, a participant highlighted the urgency to focus on content: "The new Jew is *Haredi* and we have ten years to make sure we take all those people who have not yet become *Haredim* and create a life in which they practice and choose for themselves a Jewish identity and give them the permission to be creative about being Jewish in the 21st Century."

Other speakers shared a similar sense of urgency regarding the lack of Jewish religious pluralism in Israel: "I don't suggest that we have an absolute American-style separation, but if we don't disentangle the Jewish tradition from the modern State of Israel, the corrupting influence of political power and religious ideology is potentially going to be the undoing of a most remarkable and miraculous occurrence in Jewish history, which is the modern State of Israel. We're at a breaking point, the State of Israel should be the most beautiful and powerful garden for all of those different expressions of Jewishness to grow and to find expression, and Orthodoxy should be one of the many

flowers to grow in that garden. But right now we are killing the other flowers, and we are limiting what can grow, and for the wellbeing of the Jewish people and for the sanctity of the Jewish tradition, the current reality is untenable."

A common agenda for Israeli and Diaspora Jews

The participants addressed the session's core issue: "A Jewish, democratic state. That's what the State was created to be and 65 years down the road we're trying to see how we put the two worlds together, the Jewish and the democratic"... "Can they work together? Can there be a Jewish state that's also a democratic state and can there be a democratic state that's also a Jewish state?" Several approaches to this issue were discussed.

Some questioned the very possibility of a Jewish and democratic state. Could a Jewish state fully ensure equality to its all citizens and ensure religious pluralism and freedom? They proposed to engage toward a separation between state and religion inspired by the American political model. "The Jewish state is causing harm to the natural growth and evolution of Jewish identity, and what we have is a coercive, and at times simply oppressive, imposition of Jewishness on its citizens in ways that causes harm both to Israeli identity and Jewish identity."

Another speaker described the tension as a delicate but mandatory balance: an Israeliness stripped of its Jewish identity is not robust enough to sustain the Zionist idea, and not deep enough to provide a real alternative to a Jewish culture that evolved over thousands of years. Yet any attempt to reinforce the Jewish component of the Israeli Jewish community carries a high social price – tribal isolationism against the modern world, and friction among various population groups. Therefore democratic/universalist aspirations are necessary to mitigate Jewish political aspirations.

Several speakers conceptualized this tension as a fundamental dimension of Jewishness, either in Israel or in the Diaspora. Particularism and universalism are not opposed but complementary: Jews' universalism draws on their very particularity: "Some of our supporters claim we're not Jewish enough, others say that we're too Jewish. My answer is that we have to have the right balance, that we're strong Jews but work to fight prejudice against all. They key is that first, we are proud Jews and that allows us to do the rest." Similarly, the advocate of this approach suggested Israeli democracy should be nurtured by its anchor in Judaism: "First, Israel must maintain a strong

Jewish identity. Why should a State of Israel exist if it's not an expression of Jewish history, Jewish culture and the precepts of the Jewish religion? That however, is only the beginning of the story, for Israel is a democracy for all its citizens, Jewish or not. And democracy involves fundamental rights and obligations that are unique to democracy, but not unique to Jewishness. Elections, free press, the right to free speech, minority rights and an independent judiciary.” Regarding the degree of Jewish attachment of Israel to Jewish values, speakers were not in agreement: “Are we doing enough along the lines of Jewish identity to ensure that the primary purpose of the state, a Jewish homeland, is sustained? Overall, I believe the answer is yes, but I sometimes worry that many secular Israelis, especially as Israel gets more and more involved in the wider world, don't have enough education and particularly emotional education about the content of Judaism to sustain that identity in the modern world of technological change.”

Others claimed that protecting minority rights and other democratic values are fundamental Jewish values that must be safeguarded in both the Jewish and the democratic dimensions of the State.

Three directives for intervention

It was suggested that one way to maintain Jewish tradition in a bureaucratic state was to garner inspiration from Diaspora Jewish communities. One speaker concluded and said that “Israel is missing communities. Communities are not bureaucratic. They're human. They're people-to-people, a place where people talk to people.”

There was agreement for the need to resume the conversation: “The challenges that we face in America are mirrored by the very challenges that you're talking about here and if we're going to solve them, then I think that we really can learn from each other.” Diaspora and Israeli Jews are linked together whether they like it or not, their futures are interdependent.

Finally as expected, the issue of religious pluralism and the need to accept non-Orthodox streams of Judaism in Israeli society received wide support among the participants. The refusal of non-Orthodox conversions by the Israeli rabbinate harms the Israel-Diaspora relationship. For the sake of the Jewish state, there is a need for the voice of Diaspora Jews to be heard by Israeli political decision-makers, especially regarding the need to accept non-Orthodox streams. This issue is of utmost urgency in the shadow of the fast growing *Haredi* demographic.

Regarding the debate's leading question, it was agreed across the board that Israel should aspire to be more Jewish, but should refrain from becoming 'tribal', with reference to both Diaspora Jews and non-Jewish citizens of the State.

¹ For further information please see **List of Speakers**