

Loss of Precious Faith: The Deep Rift between the State of Israel and American Jewry

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Background

In June 2017, the Ministerial Committee for Legislation approved the National Conversion Law, which legally anchors the exclusivity of the Chief Rabbinate's control over religious conversions in Israel and prevents any future recognition of Reform and Conservative Jewish conversions conducted within Israel. In tandem, the Western Wall plan was frozen. This plan sought to establish a prayer area for Reform and Conservative Jews at the Western Wall that would be managed by a new public council not subordinate to the Chief Rabbinate. Although the decision regarding the enactment of the Conversion Law was frozen a few days after it was approved, many media items in the United States reported that these decisions substantially widened the rift between the State of Israel and the American Jewish community, which totals about 5.3 million people and comprises mainly Reform Jews (35 percent), Conservative Jews (18 percent), and Jews who do not affiliate with any denomination, but are generally characterized as having liberal values (36 percent). Only about 10 percent of America's Jews identify as Orthodox.¹

This demographic picture of the American Jewish community relies on a traditional research definition, which divides the Jewish population in the United States into two groups: Jews who identify themselves by the Jewish religion (4.2 million people), and secular Jews, who do not identify themselves as having any affiliation with the Jewish religion, but were

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raised as Jews by at least one Jewish parent. In other words, these Jews identify themselves as Jews, but are not religiously observant (1.1 million).

²According to the various reports and based on the demographics, this new-old rift might cause a significant percentage of American Jews to change their feelings of identification with Israel and challenge their continued political and economic support of the state.³

Overall, the governmental approach reflected in the National Conversion Law and the freeze of the Western Wall plan is rooted in the official policy set by the State of Israel when it was established as part of the status quo arrangement that granted preferential institutional status to Orthodoxy, over other Jewish denominations. This policy – which is implemented, inter alia, with the Chief Rabbinate's monopoly over the kosher dietary laws and all marital affairs – has been preserved over the years as a result of the political clout of the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) and national religious political parties in the Knesset. However, although the relations between the State of Israel and the American Jewish community have remained close and amicable over the years despite this policy, a number of developments suggest that political shifts over the past year might constitute a turning point in the relations between the communities.

First, a few days after the National Conversion Law was approved, the heads of the pro-Israeli lobby AIPAC flew to Israel and met with the Prime Minister in an urgent meeting to advise him of what they consider to be grave repercussions of the law. Second, Israeli diplomats in the United States report that since the freezing of the Western Wall plan, Israeli consulates have been inundated with letters of protest from Jewish communities. In this context, the Israeli Foreign Ministry even instructed the consulates to prepare for the possibility of escalation in the form of demonstrations outside of the buildings. Third, in recent months, the American media has reported many statements by American Jews announcing that they no longer intend to contribute to the State of Israel.⁴ Fourth, in an exceptional show of protest, the director general of the Jewish Federation of Chicago announced that Israeli Knesset members who supported the National Conversion Law would no longer be welcome in Chicago.

The deepening of the rift with American Jewry has two key repercussions for the State of Israel – at both a strategic level and at the level of identity. Regarding identity, due to the fact that the American Jewish community constitutes the highest concentration of Jews outside of the State of Israel and about one third of the global Jewish population, a deep rift with a major

part of it may pose serious questions about Israel's ability to constitute a unifying element in the Jewish world or even to serve as the Jewish homeland, as it was declared to be, *inter alia*, in the declaration of independence. At the strategic level, and due to the fact that Israel's bilateral relations with the United States rely on and are influenced by the nature and quality of Israel's relations with the American Jewish community, deepening the rift is liable to harm Israel's relations with its most important strategic ally: this rift might impel American Jews to refrain from using their influence on the American administration to continue providing aid to Israel in the various spheres.

Apart from relations with the American Jewish community, the ties between the State of Israel and the United States rely on two additional support pillars. First, they rely on the strategic interests shared by both countries. However, and despite the fact that these interests are sometimes a key factor in the varied assistance that the United States provides to Israel, US interests may change over time, depending upon the reality on the ground and upon political changes. Second, the ties rely on the sense of solidarity between the two nations based on shared values, primarily the liberal values of individual liberty and a free market. However, the enactment of the National Conversion Law, the freeze on the Western Wall plan, and additional conservative processes launched recently in the State of Israel, coupled with attempts by pro-Palestinian forces to influence American public opinion, may diminish these feelings of solidarity. To be sure, some say that these processes may actually enhance the support of Israel by American Evangelical Christians, who wield considerable influence over the American administration. However, various studies show that this religious denomination has experienced a dramatic loss in standing and power in recent years, mainly due to accelerated secularization processes underway in American society.⁵

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Consequently, the relations between the State of Israel and the American Jewish community may sooner or later become the only supporting pillar of the countries' bilateral relations. If so, a rift between the two communities could potentially have far reaching negative repercussions for the State of Israel.

Causes for the Decline in Support for Israel by American Jewry

In recent years, there has been a steady decline in American Jews' support for Israel; this is particularly evident among the younger generations. A new study performed by the Brand Israel Group found that in 2016, only about 57 percent of Jewish students at American universities and colleges expressed support for Israel within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, compared to 84 percent in 2010. Concurrently, the ratio of support for the Palestinians has risen among these students, from 2 percent in 2010 to 13 percent in 2016. Coupled with this, while in 2010 about 95 percent of the Jewish students in the United States held favorable opinions of Israel, by 2016, this ratio had dropped by more than 13 percent, with a vast majority of the Jewish students in the United States believing that the State of Israel is guilty of human rights violations.⁶

The decline in support for Israel by young American Jews derives from a number of factors. First, and contrary to the consensus that prevailed among the older Jewish-American generation, which was considerably influenced by memories of the Holocaust and the Six Day War and by the positive image

that Israel enjoyed in the 1970s, the young generation is not driven by the idea that the State of Israel is critical in the event that the Jewish people might again need a safe haven. These young Jews entrust their safe haven to their American identity, which is often prioritized over their Jewish identity, and they are highly influenced by the negative international criticism that is voiced against the State of Israel.

Second, the growing number of Muslims on campuses in the United States has triggered an increase in public activities against Jewish students who are automatically perceived as identifying with Israel and with Zionism. Concurrently, there has been an increase in the number of lecturers who oppose the current American foreign policy in general and support for Israel in particular. The study by Brand Israel Group found that 62 percent of the Jewish

students on American college and university campuses have encountered anti-Israeli activities during their studies, and another 31 percent have encountered anti-Semitism.⁷ These developments push Jewish students into a corner and prompt some of them to conceal their support of Israel,

Repairing the relations between the State of Israel and American Jewry involves inculcating a fundamental change in the mindset of the Israeli population and its representatives, so that they fully recognize the importance of the Jewish community in the United States to the Jewish people and to the State of Israel.

and in extreme cases, even to join anti-Israeli activities. Ironically, these activities are frequently organized by a variety of Jewish organizations, such as Jewish Voice for Peace, which began leading the BDS campaign against Israel in recent years. These organizations argue that Israel's policy in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip is what causes young American Jews to become alienated from Israel.⁸

Third, a significant percentage of younger American Jews are children of mixed marriages, and a Pew survey found that this ratio can be expected to rise significantly, considering that 58 percent of married American Jews have a non-Jewish spouse.⁹ The survey found that the children of mixed marriages are increasingly devoid of Jewish childhood memories and of the natural urge to prefer Jewish organizations and Jewish affairs over others, and their support of Israel is correspondingly lower.

In order to contend with these processes, the Israeli government, together with global Jewish institutions, invests huge budgets in stationing Israeli delegates on American campuses, summer camps, and Jewish communities in the United States, as well as in programs such as Birthright and Masa (approximately NIS 200 million and NIS 125 million in 2016, respectively). The objective of these activities is to expose as many young American Jews as possible to the Israeli experience and to cultivate their cognitive identification with Israel.¹⁰ However, and notwithstanding the relative success of these projects, a recent survey conducted by the *Jerusalem Post* (in conjunction with the American Jewish Committee) found that most American Jews believe that there is another major reason for the decline in the support of Israel by American Jewry, namely, the official and intensifying monopoly that Israel's official institutions grant to Orthodox Judaism at the expense of the other Jewish denominations, with which the majority of America's Jews are affiliated.¹¹

In addition to the National Conversion Law and the freeze on the Western Wall Plan, the criticism voiced by American Jewry against these policies relates to the fact that Reform and Conservative rabbis are prevented from serving on religious councils and in the institutions that appoint neighborhood rabbis, municipal rabbis, and chief rabbis, and they are blocked from any possibility of filling these roles or any other public rabbinic role. This ban, which makes it extremely difficult for these rabbis to perform wedding ceremonies in Israel, derives from the fact that the Chief Rabbinate is the only institution empowered to issue the rabbinical ordination certificates needed for the purpose of serving in these positions.

Accordingly, and notwithstanding the fact that the State of Israel recognizes Reform and Conservative conversions for the purposes of the Law of Return or registration as a “Jew” in the population registry, converted Jews who are members of these religious denominations and most of their offspring cannot marry in Israel, since Orthodox rabbis, who do not recognize Conservative and Reform conversions, have a monopoly over marriage rites in Israel. American Jewry’s criticism is also directed to the substantially lower budgets that Israel allocates to develop the domestic educational, cultural, and religious services of the Conservative and Reform denominations, compared to the budgets allocated to their Orthodox counterparts, and to the fact that the state does not officially make room for their customs, such as non-segregated prayers at Jewish holy sites.

Various studies and the public discourse in the United States attest to the fact that this policy has a substantial negative impact on the perception of the State of Israel by many young American Jews, who hold pluralistic and liberal views. Media reports also claim that this institutional policy has begun to infiltrate Israel’s domestic arena.¹² For example, a story on Channel News 10 reported that many hoteliers in Israel tend to prevent American Jewish tourists who identify with Conservative and Reform Judaism from praying women alongside men in hotel lobbies, and from using the hotel’s Torah scrolls – out of fear that the kashrut supervisors, who are employed by the Chief Rabbinate, will revoke the hotel’s kosher certificate. In this reality, the story reports, many American Jews who visit Israel feel like they are being treated like second-class Jews, and consequently, return home with negative opinions about the State of Israel.

Repercussions of the Deepening Rift

Economic Influence

If the National Conversion Law and the freeze on the Western Wall plan indeed constitute a watershed and deepen the rift between the State of Israel and American Jewry, this will have a direct economic impact. This can be expected to be reflected, first and foremost, in a drop in the donations by American Jews to the State of Israel and Israeli organizations. Historically, contributions by American Jewry constituted a substantial portion of the State of Israel’s budget during its initial years, and were a key facilitator of its establishment. These contributions, which focused over the years on absorbing Jewish communities in Israel, were collected until the late

1990s by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint), the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), and the Jewish Federations, and were transferred to Israel through the Jewish Agency.

A research study conducted by the Cohen Institute at Brandeis University found that between 1975 and 1994, the estimated average annual volume of contributions by American Jewry to the Israeli government, its educational and medical institutions, and Israeli companies and organizations totaled about \$1.08 billion.¹³ The study also found that this sum has doubled over the last two decades, and since 2007, is estimated at about \$2.1 billion per annum. Furthermore, a change occurred in the nature of donations during these years, since due to a decline in contributions from the Jewish Federations of North America, about 90 percent of the contributions from American Jewry are donated directly to the aforesaid organizations through private individuals and some 650 NGOs and friendship organizations.

Notwithstanding these enormous sums, and unlike the situation during Israel's initial years, the Israeli government is no longer dependent upon American Jewry's contributions, which now constitute only about 2.6 percent of its annual budget. Nevertheless, the economic impacts of the dwindling support of Israel by American Jewry are not expected to relate merely to contributions.

For example, data from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics show that in 2017, the United States was Israel's second most important trade partner (after the European Union), with about 28 percent of the total exports of Israeli goods reaching their final destination in the United States and totaling about \$21.9 billion.¹⁴ Although the empirical data cannot corroborate this, the Jewish community likely purchases a significant ratio of these goods, inter alia, out of the ideological motivation of growing closer to Israel and strengthening its economy. An indication may lie in the correlation between the size of a Jewish community in a particular state and the volume of goods imported from Israel by the residents of that state. For example, about 55 percent of the American Jewish population reside in four US states that import about 63.2 percent of the total Israeli exports to the United States (table 1).

Table 1. Israeli exports to the United States, by state and percentage of total Jewish population in the US

State	Percentage of the total Jewish population in the United States ¹⁵	Percentage of total Israeli exports to the United States ¹⁶
New York	25.5 % (1,759,570)	35.2 % (USD 7,726,000,000)
California	17.5 % (1,230,500)	7.5 % (USD 1,658,259,770)
New Jersey	8 % (545,450)	4.3 % (USD 959,846,533)
Pennsylvania	4.5 % (291,140)	16.2 % (USD 3,575,000,000)

Consequently, American Jewry's dwindling support of Israel may lead to a reduction in their purchases of Israeli goods for purely ideological motivations, certainly considering that many of these products are far more expensive than the local products. This dwindling support may also prompt a loss of motivation among American Jewry to use their significant influence in opening doors to local markets for Israeli exports and Israeli companies. These two factors may have a negative impact on the volume of Israeli exports to the United States, which will lead to a loss of billions of dollars of income to the Israeli economy.

The dwindling support may also adversely affect the volume of investments in the Israeli economy by American Jewry. Data from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics show that the balances of the direct investments in Israel by residents of the United States in late 2015 were higher than investments by residents of all other countries worldwide (15.8 percent of the total balance of direct investments in Israel by foreign residents), and were estimated to total about \$16.5 billion. In 2015 alone, residents of the United States invested more than \$1.5 billion in Israel, constituting 13.5 percent of the total movements of direct investments into Israel by foreign residents in 2015.¹⁷ Although official data cannot corroborate this, according to various assessments, American Jews account for a significant share of these investments.

American Jewry's dwindling support of Israel may also have a negative impact on the Israeli tourism industry. Data from the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and from the Ministry of Tourism show that in 2016, about 648,300 American tourists visited Israel, which constituted about 23 percent of the total incoming tourists to Israel, with Jews accounting for one third of American tourists.¹⁸ Given that the average expenditure per tourist in Israel is about \$1,565, about 150,000 American Jewish tourists, a large ratio

of whom are Reform and Conservative Jews, spent about \$235 million in Israel in 2016. Consequently, a deepening of the rift between the State of Israel and American Jewry, which is also gradually seeping into the public arena, can be expected to lead to a significant drop in the number of American Jewish tourists visiting Israel, which will cause the Israeli economy to lose tens of millions of dollars in income.

Political and Security Impact

In addition to economic impacts, a deepening of the rift between the State of Israel and American Jewry may be reflected in a reduction of the political and security support that the United States provides to Israel. These repercussions may derive from a significant percentage of American Jews losing their motivation to use their local influence to apply pressure on the American government to continue providing aid to Israel.

The local influence of American Jewry, which accounts for about 2 percent of the entire American population, derives from a number of factors. First, American Jews have the highest average income according to religious affiliation in the US, with about 46 percent earning more than \$100,000 per annum.¹⁹ This statistic is supported, *inter alia*, by the fact that 59 percent of American Jews have B.A. or M.A. degrees, compared to 27 percent of the total American population. Furthermore, American Jews are considered to have considerable political clout. A recent study found that during the last presidential race in the United States, local Jews contributed about 50 percent of the total funds donated to the Democratic Party, and about 25 percent of the funds donated to the Republican Party.²⁰ Furthermore, in addition to the fact that the voter turnout among the Jewish community is about 35 percent higher than the general voter turnout, there is a high concentration of Jews in key swing states that can decide the outcome of the elections. Finally, a considerable number of Conservative and Reform Jews may be found in the American political landscape, whereby beyond their involvement in presidential candidates' campaigns and their prominent positions in the economic sector, American Jewry is represented by 10 senators, 19 congressmen, and three Supreme Court justices. This representation affords American Jewry diverse forms of leverage, both direct and indirect, on the US government, so that it will continue providing a wide spectrum of assistance to the State of Israel in nearly every field.

In the field of security, for example, the assistance that the United States provides to Israel is reflected in an agreement signed in August 2016, which

ensures that nearly \$3.8 billion will be transferred to Israel per annum over the decade between 2019 and 2028 (\$3.3 billion per annum in military assistance and another \$330 million in assistance in the development of anti-missile defense systems). This sum constitutes 16 percent of Israel's defense budget and 2.6 percent of the state budget. According to assessments, the total American security assistance, which also includes indirect assistance such as intelligence cooperation and investment in research, saves Israeli taxpayers more than \$14 billion per annum.²¹ Within this context, and despite the fact that the dwindling support of Israel by American Jewry is not expected to affect the volume of American assistance by virtue of the agreement, the question is to what extent this trend will affect the willingness of the President of the United States to renew this agreement ten years from now, let alone to increase it. Furthermore, the dwindling support by American Jewry may have a direct, immediate adverse impact on the United States' commitment to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge over its neighbors and not sell more advanced weapon systems to neighboring countries, mainly considering the demand by Gulf states and Saudi Arabia to receive advanced weapon systems to counter Iran's weaponization.

Over the years, the overall volume of foreign aid that the United States provided to Israel, which included civilian assistance (to purchase food and absorb immigrants), exceeded a total of \$130 billion, the highest volume of foreign aid that the United States has ever provided to any country.²²

The dwindling support of Israel by American Jewry may also have an immediate impact on the volume of political assistance that the United States provides to Israel in the international arena. Historically, the United States has used its veto power more than fifty times in the United Nations Security Council to veto resolutions attacking Israel, and it has taken Israel's side in all of the international forums and tribunals. In 2016, for example, the United States voted five times against anti-Israeli resolutions in the United Nations Human Rights Council and opposed 18 resolutions against Israel in the United Nations Plenary Sessions. Consequently, any decline in the extent of the political assistance that the United States provides to Israel, particularly through the use of its veto power, may result in resolutions, such as sanctions, that could cause billions of dollars of damage to the Israeli economy.

Within the context of the local political arena, the influence of the Jewish community in the United States constitutes a key component of

the battle against the BDS campaign, which calls for the imposition of economic, cultural, and academic boycotts on Israel. In recent years, the Jewish community used its influence in the political arena such that more than 20 states in the United States passed anti-boycott legislation that prohibits engaging with and investing in entities calling for a boycott on Israel. Any decline in the American Jewish community's support of Israel may therefore lower the intensity of the battle against BDS and provide it an opportunity to gain power in the local arena. This will have long range repercussions that might also adversely affect Israeli exports to the United States, Israeli academic institutions, and Israeli culture.

What Can be Done?

Repairing the relations between the State of Israel and American Jewry requires a fundamental change in approach. First of all, it involves inculcating a fundamental change in the mindset of the Israeli population and its representatives, so that they fully recognize the importance of the Jewish community in the United States to the Jewish people and to the State of Israel, and listen sincerely to the American Jewish community's needs and sensitivities.

Within this framework, and as stated by the Israeli Prime Minister himself, it would be advisable for Israeli government officials to be careful not to disparage American Jewry. Rather, it is important that these officials serve as a bridge to deepen the understanding and the reciprocal guarantees between the parties, contribute to stirring pluralistic discourse with leaders of the American Jewish community, and take action to highlight the common denominators, such as the fight against anti-Semitism and the BDS campaign. Domestically, it is advisable that these officials leverage their influence in order to convey the unique characteristics of American Jewry to the Israeli public and ensure nationwide internalization of American Jewry's diverse perceptions and viewpoints, and the importance of the American Jewish community to the State of Israel, the national homeland of the Jewish people.

This solidarity needs to be inculcated already at an early age in Israeli elementary and junior high schools, through workshops, interactive lessons, and the creation of interpersonal relations between Israeli and American Jewish students. Today, Israeli students learn about Diaspora Jews mainly in civics classes during high school matriculation studies.

There are those who are calling for enabling American Jewry to express their positions with regard to Israel's domestic affairs, and suggest that

these positions should be considered seriously during decision making. One of the proposals raised in this context, mainly by the former president of the European Jewish Congress, is to give Diaspora Jews the right to vote during Knesset elections or, at the very least, to give them the right to vote on issues of a clearly Jewish nature, such as issues pertaining to the status of Jerusalem and the Western Wall.²³ However, the likelihood of passing this proposal is very low, due to a theoretical opposition by various political factions based on arguments about the extent of Diaspora Jews' familiarity with the social and political system in Israel, and due to the desire to avoid arousing any volatile discussion once again about the question of "who is a Jew." Therefore, Israel should consider developing another type of mechanism of influence, which might be more limited but will allow Jews from all over the world to influence the decision making processes in Israel, or, at the very least, voice their opinions to Israeli officials. Such a platform could include an official advisory body to the Israeli government that would be composed of representatives of Diaspora Jewry and would hold regularly scheduled meetings with it (possibly in the form of a permanent Knesset committee).

Furthermore, there are those who argue that in the final analysis the State of Israel will have to formally consider some demands by American Jewry for Israeli constitutional amendments relating to particular aspects of religion and state, which do not involve intolerable concessions on the part of the Orthodox denomination. Such concessions can relate to issues having mainly symbolic meaning for this denomination and that do not constitute a violation of Jewish law, such as men and women praying together at the Western Wall, recognition of non-Orthodox *mikvaot* (ritual baths), and allocation of government budgets to non-Orthodox Jewish religious activities.

In addition, American Jews and Israelis living in the United States have frequently urged the State of Israel to resume its active involvement in Jewish and Zionist education in the United States, including in Jewish pre-school and elementary schools and in informal education, as it used to do. In the past, for example, many schoolbooks used in the American Jewish educational system were published by the Israeli Ministry of Education. Within the scope of this involvement, they expect the Israeli Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs to work together to impart personal and professional tools to Jewish youth in the United States that will focus on developing their personal and collective Jewish identity and

deep solidarity with the people of Israel and the State of Israel. In the reality that has been created, it is highly advisable that Israel not allow the relative vacuum that has opened up to be filled by players having opposing and more complicated interests.

Repairing the relations between Israel and American Jewry also requires a significant change in approach by the American Jewish community. Within this framework, it must be attentive to the changes occurring in Israel and find middle ground between their desire to change and influence processes underway in Israel, and their willingness to understand the complexities in Israel's demographic makeup. Coupled with this, American Jewry might need to be more decisive in its measures and even condition its continued cooperation with the State of Israel in projects such as Birthright and Masa on Israel's official change of approach toward Conservative and Reform Judaism. In the final analysis, just as the State of Israel does not have the luxury of losing its linkage with half of the world's Jewish population, so too the American Jewish community does not have the luxury of waiving its deep affiliation with the only Jewish state. Thus despite the long road ahead in repairing the relations between the State of Israel and American Jewry, initial steps should be taken by both sides. It is important that these steps include dialogue and an attempt to emphasize the unifying common denominators, and promote acceptance of the differences and diversity among the Jewish communities, based on the understanding that the relations between the parties are critical to the continued existence of the Jewish people wherever they live.

Notes

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