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THE ZIONIST EQUILIBRIUM

BY JACK S. COHEN

One of the central tenets of Zionism as it was originally formulated was that once Jewish sovereignty was established in *Eretz Israel*, there would be no reason for Jews to continue to suffer the Diaspora. It is my contention that in addition to the traditional Zionist concept of the ingathering of the exiles, which still continues from countries of Jewish persecution, another form of Zionism has developed. This is a Zionism that depends on three facts: the existence of the state itself, the freedom of Jewish life in the West, and the ease of modern travel. Taken separately, each of these facts is trivial; yet such is the power of established dogma that for a true Zionist to accept that a new form of Zionism short of actual *aliyah* exists, would be revolutionary.

While the actual numbers are in dispute, there are now reported to be between 100,000-300,000 Israelis living in North America, as well as significant numbers in Western Europe. Further, more than half of the Jewish emigrants from the Soviet Union choose to "drop out" in Europe rather than settle in Israel. To state these facts is not to condone, them. But Zionism has always been a movement of realism. At first, Zionism was the realization by a minority of the Jewish people that there was no practical future in the Diaspora as it then existed, and that Jewish sovereignty was necessary. We now know that the early Zionists were the realists, not romantic dreamers as they were often called. Now a majority of the world's Jews consider themselves Zionist; yet while the Jewish state continues to grow and thrive, they choose to stay where they are.

Contemporary Zionism must come to terms with these facts.

It is not difficult to find the origins of this latter-day Exodus; it has little to do with war' or terror but is basically economic. During the Mandate period when the British controlled Palestine, they developed the concept of "economic absorptive capacity." This was largely a stratagem to control the numbers of Jews allowed to enter Palestine (it was never really applied to the Arabs). However, it was based on a fundamental realism, that a given area of land has a limited capacity to maintain a population. Apart from their deliberate misuse of the concept the British, and everyone else, underestimated the capacity of Palestine to absorb immigrants, since they regarded the area to be technically primitive and without natural resources. Contrary to expectations, Israel was able to absorb over a million Jewish refugees, and the total population of the land is now somewhat over four million.

Nevertheless, Israel does have limited resources. The level of salinity in the water table is rising due to almost total use of available water resources. All the water from the Jordan is now diverted for irrigation or consumption; The Dead Sea is drying up in the southern shallow region, and the Med-Dead Sea canal project, which might have slowed this process and provided hydroelectric power has been shelved. Funds are simply not available at the levels required for such massive rescue projects. If a million Jews were to arrive tomorrow, how would Israel cope? Of course, if the situation were one of total peace, then the resources might be better available. But that is as much wishful thinking as the expectation of this *aliyah*. Given the economic facts of life, Israel cannot absorb all its trained and many untrained citizens. Just as they do from many relatively underdeveloped countries, they move to Western Europe

and North America. At the same time, a number of American and West European Jews continue to emigrate to Israel. Very often they are motivated by religious or ideological views. It is not uncommon, indeed it seems to be prevalent, that many young Jews with Zionist leanings, often from youth groups, live in Israel for a period, and then return to the United States. The periods may be extensive; often the person returns and again tries *aliyah* several times. While some stay and are successfully absorbed, many are not. The precise ratios of the two groups of successful and unsuccessful *olim* are not important for this thesis; only that in every Jewish community in the West there is a minority of Jews who have actually lived in Israel as well as a group of former Israelis.

Among the ordinary Jewish population the vast majority generally support Israel strongly, and about 30 percent have visited Israel as tourists. It does not need to be assumed that Jewish life will die out in North America; on the contrary, it currently shows signs of remarkable vitality. Whether the numbers of Jews are increasing or decreasing, and how intermarriage and assimilation will affect the eventual outcome, are not in dispute here. Stable populations of Jews have been established in both Israel and the Western democratic Diaspora, and both show no signs of altering significantly. However, with modern means of travel an equilibrium has now been setup between them.

One origin of this fact has to do with the difference between the countries of the origin of Zionism and the current Diaspora. Throughout most of Central and Eastern Europe and the Arab countries where Zionism received its initial impetus, the Diaspora was despotic and Jewish massacres were the norm. By contrast, the Jews who fled West did so for obvious reasons. And by

and large they were not wrong. It was the Holocaust and the immigration of refugees, as well as the continuing persecution of Jews in Arab countries, that led to the critical mass of Jews that Israel needed to survive. The Jews who fled West helped to change the societies they encountered in the more tolerant and accepting societies. This is not to say that violent racism does not still exist in Britain and the United States for example. But in recent times it has been considered a fringe phenomenon. I have always found the harangues of *aliyah* representatives comparing the United States with a budding Nazi Germany to be particularly devoid of realism. As if they could frighten Jews to emigrate, when they could hardly do that when the fears were real, as in Argentina and Iran, as well as in Europe before WW II.

So the difference between a despotic Diaspora, now largely gone except for Russia and some Arab countries, and a tolerant Diaspora in the West presents a new reality that the early orthodox Zionists did not have to confront. A tension has developed between popular Jewish support for an independent and sovereign Jewish state and the social and economic acceptance Jews enjoy "at home." In some cases this equilibrium may not last. For example, the situation in Italy at one point looked as if democratic norms were dissolving; by contrast, the situation for Jews in Argentina has improved immeasurably. In any case no one expects a significant change in the near future in the United States, where the majority of Diaspora Jews continue to live.

The support that Jews in the Western Diaspora give Israel is natural and fairly straightforward. With the vast improvement in international travel since the first and second *aliyot*, to be a Zionist may now mean a visit or multiple visits to the ancient homeland. (One should not underestimate the difficulties

of travel even until recent times.) This form of Zionism may be weaker than orthodox Zionism, which presumes *aliyah* or nothing, but it is a stronger form than the so called "pocketbook" Zionism, where the only contact is a passive giving. This new form of Diaspora Zionism results in a bridge or *kesher* between the Diaspora and Israel. This is a physical bridge, with people - Jews and Israelis - travelling back and forth, moving back and forth, retiring to Israel, working in both countries, having roots in each.

In this definition of Zionism there is no contradiction between being a Zionist and living in the Diaspora, as long as the physical contact is maintained. While the present climate of tolerance remains in the western democracies, this is the foreseeable pattern of Zionism in our times.

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