

Diaspora Judaism

Earlier this year, at the American Jewish Committee Centennial Symposium, Israeli author A. B. Yehoshua shocked his audience by saying, “Judaism cannot exist outside Israel. Those who do not live in Israel and do not participate in the daily decisions that are made there and that are entirely Jewish, do not have a Jewish identity of any significance.” While some applauded his statement, others angrily attacked him.

No one can deny that Israel has always been the homeland of the Jews. We pray eastward and for centuries have yearned for the days when we could return to Zion. There will soon be more Jews living in Israel than in the rest of the world combined. Yes, the creation of the State of Israel has fundamentally changed Jewish identity. But to say Jewish life outside of Israel has become meaningless is not only a misstatement but trivializes much of the Jewish experience.

Judaism and the Jewish people have survived and thrived for thousands of years. And as Leon Wieseltier (correctly) responded to the Israeli writer, Judaism is larger and bigger than the State of Israel. While Israel is the Jewish state, Jewish values know no boundaries. *Tikkun Olam*, or repairing the world, is a fundamental tenet of Judaism. Whether leading the call for action in Darfur or building latrines in Honduras (see *Me llamo Sarah* 21), Jews have traditionally been at the forefront of social change.

But it is not only a material comfort. Jews have integrated (some charge assimilated) into American society, and feel “at home” in America. There are now Jewish heads of universities, Jewish CEO’s of Fortune 500 companies, and large established law firms headed by Jews. All of this would have been impossible to imagine 50 years ago. Writers like Bellow, Malamud, and Roth

are considered pillars of the American literary canon. We can point to the level of Jewish political confidence as evidenced by groups such as AIPAC. In 2002, an Orthodox Jew, Joe Lieberman, almost succeeded in becoming vice-president of the United States.

In America, Jewish culture has thrived—both high culture and popular culture. In the early years of Jewish immigration, Yiddish language and literature flourished, while Jewish singer/songwriters gained a strong following among American audiences (the cantorial craze is described in *Cantors and Classic Rock*, see page 55). Today, books of Jewish content are widely published by Jewish and general publishers. Jewish Studies programs, including our own at Penn, have achieved world-wide reputations.

And even religious life has thrived in all streams of Judaism, despite the dire predictions of the past. There has been a vast growth in the number of Jewish day schools for all Jewish denominations. There is an active diversity and pluralism which is unparalleled, even in Israel. Does a Reform rabbi who wants to perform marriages and remain in America have less of a Jewish identity than a dancer in Tel Aviv? We think not.

And while, admittedly, assimilation and intermarriage are pressing issues facing Diaspora Judaism today, life in the Diaspora is also a place where many Jews feel a strong secular Jewish identity (see interview, *The New Jew*, page 64). Indeed, it is in the Diaspora that Jews have made some of the largest contributions to the world. Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein were all secular European Jews, Jews whose lives were not defined by ritual practice and whose achievements were non-religious.

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 after the Holocaust was a transformational event for Jews everywhere; it was the fulfillment of the Zionist dream, for many “*Reishit Zemichat Ge’ulateinu*”—the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. But this does not negate the vibrancy and richness of Diaspora Jewish life. Jews living outside Israel need not (and likely do not) think of themselves as living in exile, but rather as proud Diaspora Jews.

Of course, this is not to say that Diaspora Jews should not have an ever closer relationship with Israel. Can you be a Zionist while living in Philadelphia? We believe you can.

The Jewish people are charged with the task “*li’hiyot ohr la’goyim*,” to be a light unto the nations. This is a communal task, for Jews in Israel and outside of it, secular and religious, to work hand in hand to ensure a collective Jewish future.

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