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POSTS

Day 1 (David Shneer): Is Zionism Still Relevant to the American Jew?

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By [David Shneer](#) / November 29, 2006

As we prepared to launch Jewcy, a slew of well-respected journalists, editors, and even Jewish educators offered us the same advice: your demographic does not want to read about Israel. They don't care. They're not interested. What's so compelling, after all, about an alternative homeland when you're content with the one you have? As British journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft writes in *The Controversy of Zion*, "Jewry as a whole was converted to Zionism not by arguments but by events." The Shoah converted Western Jewry to Zionism en masse after decades of passionate argument had failed to do so. But today's young American Jews no longer feel the sting of antisemitism and find it difficult to contemplate a world in which the Holocaust is possible. Is Zionism still relevant to the American Jew? Debating that question for Jewcy are University of Denver history professor David Shneer and Stefan Kanfer, a former editor at *Time* and a contributing editor at the conservative quarterly *City Journal*. For the next four days we will post one e-mail per day from each.

From: David Shneer To: Stefan Kanfer Subject: The Jewish Map Has No Center

Dear Stefan,

I'm excited to start a conversation with you about Zionism's relevance (or lack of relevance) to American Jews, or "the American Jew" as the question was posed. I have issues with talking as a prototypical American Jew, however, so I'll go with American Jews.

I write this first letter to you sitting in a rented apartment in Jerusalem—ironic, given that I'm the one saying that Zionism is less relevant than we might think. I presume you're in New York, a place that I call "a center of global Jewry" in my new book, *New Jews*, and a place that I find to be Jewishly much more interesting, exciting, and vibrant than Israel.

Is Zionism still relevant to American Jews? Well, there wouldn't be a Jewish state in the Middle East without Zionism, and I wouldn't be sitting here in Jerusalem working at the Yad Vashem archives. The Jewish world lives in the reality of Zionism all the time. Just as it lives with the reality of many other isms that have shaped the world.

But in the year 2006, Zionism, like other isms, simply does not resonate for many younger American Jews (and in the Jewish community, under 40 counts as younger). Most American Jews are individual Jews first, communal Jews second. Their Jewishness is on their own terms, not on the terms set by institutions. And Zionism—an ideology that speaks almost exclusively from the "we" not the "I"—isn't attractive.

What's more, in its classic form, Zionism tells American Jews that they are fools living in exile, always searching for elusive safety that can only come when Jews have a state (or a monopoly on violence in their own land, as Max Weber defined a state). Who wants an

ideology that tells you that your life, your home, your very being is not right? Not many people I know. Even the middle-aged American Jews who put Israel-centered philanthropy, Israel-centered travel, and Israel-centered mythology at the core of their identities would likely say "no" if asked "Is Zionism relevant to you?"

As an ideology Zionism has some basic assumptions that do not resonate with most American Jews that I know:

Assumption 1: American Jews do not live at home. Rather they live in exile.

Most Jews feel at home in America, as their institutions and communities demonstrate. This is not the overly idealistic, turn-of-the-century Reform Jewish way of understanding America as the new Zion and all remnants of Jewish difference as retrograde relics of the old world. No, this is an American Jewry that sees the tension between sameness and difference, between being of the nation and apart from it, as the defining feature of being at home in America. It is this exciting tension that has made American Jews the primary generators of new Jewish culture and ideas over the past fifty years.

Assumption 2: Israel will save Judaism from its perpetual demise.

This was the cultural Zionist Ahad Ha'am's basic idea—that a Jewish state would protect Jews from assimilation. Anyone who has spent any time in Israel knows that most Israelis don't spend much time thinking about Judaism, nor about its vitality and reinvigoration. Happily this is changing as Israeli society becomes less nationalistic and more pluralistic, allowing for innovation within Judaism in Israel. American Jews recognize that the U.S. is the source of the intellectual, financial, institutional, and human resources driving global Jewish change.

Assumption 3: Israel is the center of the Jewish map.

In a global world, maps with single centers do not make sense. When more Israelis leave Israel to study abroad, when Israel is so overwhelmingly influenced by American and Russian culture, when Jews move relatively freely between the many places that Jews call home, it doesn't make sense to call any one place "the center."

I'll add that because most younger American Jews relate to Jewishness individually, rather than communally, they have a hard time seeing why they should connect with a place thousands of miles away that causes as much grief for Jews as it does *naches*. Many of my students are more interested in their connections to other places on the Jewish map, like Eastern Europe, New York, and Latin America.

Here's an irony: Birthright Israel, which sends thousands of American students to Israel each summer, is proof that Zionism is not relevant for American Jews. Birthright Israel's primary purpose in America is to make better American Jews. Not to foster Zionism, not to encourage aliyah, and, God forbid, not to have them fall in love with an Israeli. Most American Jewish parents would be upset if a birthright trip led their child to make aliyah. The trips are about using Israel as a backdrop for creating better American Jews. (What does Israel get out of it? Huge numbers of tourists, economic development, and—they hope—future financial and political supporters of the state.)

Israelis think the trips are a big joke. On at least three occasions when I've mentioned Birthright here, the other person has responded, "Oh, the group that just wants a free party trip in Israel." When I send students to Israel, I do not send them here with the hopes that they will pray at the Western Wall, scoop up mud at the Dead Sea, and fall in love with a nice American Jew (obviously the preference is a Jew of the opposite sex, but as gay and lesbian issues penetrate the Jewish world, that assumption too is happily waning).

I encourage my students to study in Israel so they can experience one of the most vibrant, culturally rich, challenging, and politically engaged societies I have lived in. I want them to learn Hebrew, Russian, and Arabic, so they can engage with the diversity of Israel. I want them to see how Israel is bifurcated along secular and religious lines. I want them to see Israel, not as the "right place for Jews to live," as Zionism teaches, but as an amazing place which they can engage as global citizens.

Next E-Mail: Sleepwalking in a minefield

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