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JUDAISM

The End Of Diaspora And The Rise Of A Global Jewish Community

By **David Shneer**

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Dear Gil,

As a professor of Jewish Studies and an avid reader of the Jewish Telegraph Agency's daily news reports, I keep up on global Jewish affairs. Lately, I have been struck by the number of stories about Jewish life thriving in places that might seem surprising: a new Jewish radio station and cultural center in Madrid, Indian Jews leaving Israel to go back to India, hip underground Jewish clubs in Moscow.

At the same time, study after study comes out documenting how American Jews in particular, and some parts of global Jewry in general, are becoming less connected to Israel and are less focused on anti-Semitism as a central element of their Jewish identity. What is going on?

[hidepost] For sixty years, Jews in Israel and the diaspora have organized themselves around the notion that the state of Israel — as opposed to the metaphoric Zion about which Jews have been yearning to return to for thousands of years — is the center of the Jewish people. Everything and everyone else is something we have called ‘the diaspora,’ an idea suggesting displacement, dispersion, and the inability to lead a full Jewish life.

In the past ten years, as my colleague Caryn Aviv and I write about in our book *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora*, we have entered a new post-assimilationist, post-Soviet, post-Zionist world in which individual Jewish identity has come to rival collective Jewish peoplehood, and a new map with multiple Jewish homes is replacing the Israel-diaspora model.

As sociologists Ari Kelman and Steven Cohen’s recent studies of American Jewry have shown, younger American Jews are deeply interested in Jewish culture and in cultural forms of Jewish expression, are less religious but possibly more spiritual than their parents, and are less and less interested in Israel and the Holocaust as constitutors of their Jewish identities. Research from the Institute for Jewish Policy Research shows how important the ‘European Jewish revival’ is to changing notions of Jewish identity.

As Europe becomes a vibrant social and economic home for global Jewry, many Russians have made Germany and Britain home, and some Israelis are even reclaiming old European identities and moving to places like Berlin and London. Israeli Jews themselves have become among the most mobile, global, and transnational people on the face of the earth as they trek in places like India, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, and study and settle in places like the United States and Europe. As Israelis leave the homeland, Jews everywhere are forced to ask, ‘Where is home for the Jewish people?’

Despite high rates of anti-Semitism in places like the former Soviet Union, the beginning of the twenty-first century shows that Jews — as a group — are a privileged global community. Global Jews have socio-economic privilege. At the national and transnational levels, they are wealthy enough to shuttle Jews, money, and ideas around the world in order to build global Jewish communities. Jews have cultural privilege. They have among the highest levels of education and culture in the world, and are among the most linguistically and culturally diverse groups of people in the world. Perhaps most important global Jews have political privilege in that they have a state to boast about, wrestle with, migrate to, or leave from. Rather than bemoaning cultural demise, the secularization of Jews, assimilation, rising multifaith relationships, and the inadequate interest in things Jewish among Russian immigrants, 20- and 30-something Jews, and others, I focus on innovations, revivals and renewals happening around the world. What I have found is a new Jewish map and an end of the Jewish diaspora. I found this not because all Jews have suddenly moved to Israel or because Jewish life is dead around the world, as others who lament the “end of diaspora” propose.

On the contrary, the majority of Jews in the U. S, Russia Germany and elsewhere no longer see themselves ‘in diaspora.’ Nor do all Israelis see Israel as the center of things Jewish. This new map emerges from the end of the idea of diaspora and the rise of an interconnected, interdependent group of global Jews.

As an example, if we look at the global Russian Jewish community, one would find excellent new Russian-language Jewish literature coming out of Berlin, Tel Aviv, Moscow, and New York, German, Hebrew, and English-language Russian immigrant literature, Jewish Studies programs springing up throughout the former Soviet Union, Israeli music in underground clubs in Moscow, and rabbinic training programs in

Russia educating the next generation of Jewish religious leadership. Or take Limmud UK, which built a new model of community and a new way of 'doing Jewish' and then exported it to places like the U.S., Russia, and Australia. Finally, the most successful global Jewish movement of the past fifty years — Chabad Lubavitch Hasidism — has its headquarters in Brooklyn and shuttles its shlichim around the world to places long thought dead to a Jewish future. In this kind of world, there is no center, and most Jews do not live as if in diaspora from the Jewish nation-state.

David Shneer

University of Colorado at Boulder

Dear David,

How refreshing to hear a report about modern Jewry that is not all gloom and doom! I am thrilled to hear about the vitality of the New Jewish identities you track. And I agree that anti-Semitism is not and cannot be the core of modern Jewish identity. But I do not understand why you feel compelled to downgrade Israel's centrality as the Jewish homeland and touchstone, both historically and today. Most Israelis and Zionists have evolved beyond shililat hagalat negating the Diaspora. Diaspora Jews, er, those-Jews-who-don't-live-in-Israel-yet-nevertheless-have-vibrant-Jewish-lives, should not engage in shililat zion negating Israel and Zionism.

As a historian, I find your discomfort with the benign, descriptive term 'Diaspora' fascinating. Early Zionists — and Jews for most of the preceding two millennia — spoke of galut, exile. This term emphasized the pain of displacement caused when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Thirty years ago in May 1978, Israel opened Bet Hatefutsoth, the Diaspora Museum, using the less judgmental term, celebrating Diaspora creativity. This milestone marked Zionism's acceptance of our post-1948 reality.

'Diaspora' reinforces the historical truth that Judaism is not just a religion but that Jews are a people, a nation, with a common past, a common language, a common fate and a common homeland, Israel. The neutral term Diaspora acknowledges Jews' dispersion beyond the homeland without implying that Jews are anguished, oppressed, incomplete.

One more clarification, before I offer my vision from my book *Why I Am a Zionist of a modern Jewish world with a vital Diaspora energized by and energizing Israel at its center*. What you call 'the metaphoric Zion' Jews traditionally yearned for strikes me as too restrictive a reading. The Jewish people have had a passionate relationship with the real Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel, for millennia. The absurdity — and beauty — of Polish Jews in snowbound shtetls living life according to Israel's agricultural calendar, of Jerusalemites living off kopeks poor Jews donated from around the world, of so many Jews who would never reach Palestine mastering details about the country's seven species or geography suggests this connection was more than merely metaphoric. One secret to Judaism's longevity is that it is vivid, sensual, detail-driven. The Zionist movement built on that intensity and specificity, creating today's marvelous mix of the old and the new, of the metaphoric and the real, in Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel.

The great Zionist thinker Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg, 1856–1927) was right. When we described his Cultural Zionism in my Zionist youth movement, we uttered the Zen statement, 'the Jewish people are a wheel.' Ahad Ha'am imagined each Diaspora community as a spoke on the wheel, with Israel the hub, but with ideas, inspiration, and energy flowing back, forth and through. In this win-win vision, a Jewish and

Hebraic spiritual revival centered on Zion would help build the state of Israel. Cultural Zionism anticipated and legitimated today's thriving Israeli and Diaspora communities.

My Zionism — my embrace of modern Jewish nationalism — is thus rooted in a historical understanding of the Jewish people as a nation attached to the land of Israel and enlivened by this romantic association. Yet, ultimately, my Zionism is utilitarian. In a world where most Jews no longer believe in God, a sense of peoplehood and bonds with Israel serve as useful anchors.

I fear an 'I'm OK you're OK, anything goes' global Judaism that replicates modern society's anarchy, individualism, and selfishness of modern society. Ideology by survey does not work; Judaism has survived by taking stands, not taking polls. I want to build my community around common values, symbols, associations, aesthetics, ideals, ambitions, bedrocks. Around the world, the Hebrew language, Israeli songs, Israeli foods, Israeli heroes, and yes, Israel's challenges, unite us as a people, creating a common vocabulary, solidifying our bonds. I am grateful I can anchor my kids in the rich, heroic 4,000-year-old story of the Jewish people's love affair with Israel as an alternative to the me-me-me, my-my-my, more-more-more, now-now-now, rush of modern life — offering a compelling portal into a meaningful Judaism. I am not arrogant enough to claim this is the only way to go. But this is a grand, historically-consecrated, spiritually fulfilling, and still extraordinarily popular way to live and build a thriving Jewish future, worldwide.

Gil Troy
McGill University

Gil,

We agree on our love of Ahad Ha'am, but perhaps come to different conclusions. I love that Ahad Ha'am reminded Jews that Zionism needed to be not just about the preservation of Jews, but also about revitalizing Jewish life, culture, society, and spirituality. We also agree on a positive vision of Jewish life that is thriving, not dying, around the world. I am also compelled by your personal connection to Zionism as a way to theoretically mobilize Jews as a people.

What I find fascinating is that when I write descriptively about what people are actually doing, people like you hear me speaking or writing prescriptively about what people should be doing. Like you, I am not arrogant enough to prescribe how Jews should live their lives. As a scholar I try to describe what they have done and are doing. So when you say that I'm 'compelled to downgrade Israel's centrality as the Jewish homeland and touchstone,' I want to say, 'Don't blame me that Zionism is not compelling people to think about peoplehood as it once did. Blame the Jews who are living their lives more globally than diasporically.' My prescriptive point is that, as you write, 'Diaspora Jews, er, those-Jews-who-don't-live-in-Israel-yet-nevertheless-have-vibrant-Jewish-lives, should not engage in shililat zion, negating Israel and Zionism.' You ask what's the problem with the word 'diaspora,' and answer your own question in the above statement. And by the way, there are many Israeli Jews who do not live vibrant Jewish lives. The irony of Zionism was that Herzl's vision of a secular homeland for Jews collided with Ahad Ha'am's vision of a Jewish cultural and spiritual center so that the nation-state of Israel actually unmade Jews in order to make Israelis.

In my understanding, the word 'diaspora,' as it relates to Jews, has two problems. I'll get to the first by

describing a discussion I had with one of my students. On the first day of a class I teach on Zionism and nationalism, and a student asked me, 'Where's the diaspora? And when writing my papers, should I capitalize it or not? Do you say that Jews in the United States are in diaspora or are the diaspora?' I explained that the class would address these questions, but it was the first day of class. So I asked her where she learned the term.

'In Hebrew school and from my parents. We're diaspora Jews.'

'Well, then you have an answer to the question "Where is the diaspora?"' I responded

'Yeah, any place but Israel...Well, at least for Jews.'

'So it must be a place, or a lack of a place. But what about before Israel existed? Was there a diaspora?'

'Oh, that's a good point.'

'How about Israelis who don't live in Israel? Do they become diaspora Jews?'

'No, it's about where you're born.'

'So if you move to Israel and make aliyah, you're still really a diaspora Jew?'

'Well, no, because by moving to Israel and making aliyah I'm becoming Israeli.'

As I see it, this conversation highlights problem number one with the word diaspora: it lacks any stable meaning. Is anyone dispersed from a homeland living in a diaspora or is it more about one's relationship to a place and her/his notion of homeland? We'd presumably agree the second, which means that, in my research, most American Jews are not diaspora Jews.

The second problem with the term is that it turns everyone not presumably living within the borders of the state of Israel (if that's the working definition of the diaspora) into one lumpen-diaspora people, flattening any distinction and masking diversity. An American Jew's outlook on Judaism and Jewish identity is as different as an Israeli's is from a Russian's (who could even be one and the same person). I have a hard time understanding the utility of a term that lacks any descriptive power. So my prescription is to stop using a word that has no meaning and replace it with one that does.

But the problem is that diaspora is, as you state, still connected with a presumption of Zionism, of Israel as the Jewish homeland. This means that it is not a neutral term. I agree with you that most Jews no longer believe in God or that their belief or lack thereof has little to do with their Jewish identity. In such a world, a sense of peoplehood is useful, if use value is what we are after. But the equation you make between 'sense of peoplehood' and 'bonds with Israel' is where your vision looks backward rather than forward.

Can peoplehood still be central if Jews don't have a center, if we shift our emphasis from Jewish unity — the Jewish people — to Jewish diversity — the Jewish peoples — who inhabit a dynamic, global map? I believe the answer is yes, and here I differ from my more radical colleagues, who are proclaiming the end of Jewish peoplehood. At the 2007 United Jewish Communities General Assembly in Nashville, Tennessee, Aaron Bisman, founder of New York-based JDub Records, said, 'The age of peoplehood is over. If peoplehood means that we feel a connection to all Jews, we are all stuck, because young people feel responsibility to all people, and some might feel that the idea of peoplehood might be racist ... Pushing peoplehood is the wrong value, because it is not going to draw us in.'

I agree with Bisman that the decline in interest in Israel has much to do with a move toward universal values, especially among younger Jews. But his approach fails to explain why groups of diverse Jews create new kinds of networks and relationships to connect with one another. It's hard to say peoplehood is over

when American gay and lesbian Jews are drawn to support their Israeli, Argentinian and German counterparts, when Russian Jews see themselves operating in their own global network, whose primary point of interaction is the website livejournal. It doesn't explain why new forms of religious communities like independent minyanim, havurot or Jewish renewal communities are springing up throughout the world outside the traditional synagogue network.

But Bisman correctly points to the decline in the notion of peoplehood as it is currently understood. You say: 'Ultimately, my Zionism is utilitarian. In a world where most Jews no longer believe in God, a sense of peoplehood and bonds with Israel serve as useful anchors. I fear an "I'm OK you're OK" anything-goes-global Judaism that replicates modern society's anarchy, individualism, and selfishness of modern society.' I hear your fears, but think they are your fears, not an expression of the reality of the vibrant, dynamic, do-it-yourself, Limmud UK-style 'anything goes' Judaism. For you Zionism is utilitarian, because it preserves the Jewish people. And here, you reveal the limits of your optimism. You still operate in a model of community that fears experimentation, creativity, and diversity and labels them 'anarchy, individualism, and selfishness.' This is judgment, Gil. This is prescriptive, Gil. It looks at reality and says, 'I don't like it,' and suggests a prescription to the problem — Zionism as a useful anchor. What you call selfishness, I call individual ownership over Jewish expression.

Rabbi Irwin Kula, the president of the American-based organization CLAL: The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, recently echoed Bisman at a Young Jewish Leadership conference. He stated that the post-WWII generation successfully achieved its main goals of the twentieth century — security, wealth, power, and control over one's destiny. For the first time in history, the majority of the world's Jews do not have to worry about day-to-day anti-Semitism nor about poverty, even as these remain concerns in some parts of the Jewish world. This means, according to Kula, that the era of worrying about 'the Jewish people' is over. In its place, he says that it is time to stop thinking so much about peoplehood and time to start thinking about, in his words, 'the purpose of the people.'

Whether we like it or not, Gil, twenty-first century Jewish peoplehood is about centers, not a center; it's about individual Jews and not 'the Jews'. It's about Judaism capturing hearts and minds in a spiritual marketplace, not about Judaism as a filial obligation. This notion of peoplehood starts from a global, not diasporic, vision that sees Israel, as the above examples show, as part of a creative dynamic diverse Jewish map. Shifting the lens to 'centres' does not spell the end of klal yisrael, nor does it diminish the importance of Israel as a key Jewish center. It allows us to see individuality as the fount of creativity envisioning the Jewish future, and it allows us to see how Jews and Jewish life flourish in all sorts of places without creating a hierarchy of value based on where people call home.

David Shneer

David,

Let me begin saying yes, I am prescriptive, and I am even willing to be judgmental. I know the sociologist Alan Wolfe's eleventh commandment for modern America: 'Thou Shalt Not Judge Thy Neighbor.' Nevertheless, the serious questions regarding the Jewish future require judgments — and some clear lines (aren't Jews for Jesus beyond the pale?). Moreover, I invite you to reread your first letter. I do not doubt

your scholarly integrity but your tone seemed to celebrate the developments you track.

And yes, I'll risk being accused of being fearful if that is the price of calling on modern Jews to maintain some standards, some common values, some consensual Jewish boundaries. The writer Leon Wieseltier calls this new generation 'the spoiled brats of Jewish history,' taking all our good fortune for granted and committing the great crime against Judaism of ignorance (not intermarriage). I, like you, want all of us, young and old, to embrace our Judaism voluntarily as smart, edgy, creative individuals and as proud, constructive members of a historic community. And I do worry that too many Jews today don't really want to be Jewish; they want to be Jew-ish, just a little bit Jewy. That entails picking and choosing a few Jewish cultural accents as personal props rather than appreciating Judaism's seriousness as a system, as a way of life. I will not insult students' intelligence by suggesting that Judaism is as malleable as Play-Doh. I always tell Birthright Israel participants that Judaism involves heavy lifting, spiritually, historically, theologically, culturally, ideologically.

Our correspondence — which I am enjoying — pivots around definitions of Diaspora, diaspora Jew, peoplehood, Zionism, and ultimately Judaism.

I don't think this Diaspora definition question is as complicated as you make it — or as your dialogue with your students suggests. African-Americans, learning from Jews, speak of the African Diaspora too. It means the dispersal from Africa — both willing and unwilling. One website — www.niica.on.ca/Diaspora defines it as 'the dispersion and spreading of African people originally belonging to one nation and having a common culture. From the word 'diaspeirein' Latin for disperse, From the word 'Dia + speirein' Greek for scatter or sow and from the word 'spora' Greek for sowing or reproduction and spreading.' The Jewish Diaspora acknowledges that once we mostly concentrated in Eretz Yisrael, then scattered after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple (I know I am simplifying). To the question 'What about before Israel existed,' I wouldn't answer 'That's a good point,' as you did; I would say Judaism was born with Israel. The land of Israel and the concept of nationhood are both central to Judaism. Wherever you start the story of the Jews historically, Israel stands front and centre

The US or the UK may welcome Jews; but only Israel is the homeland. If you follow the Bible, Abram does not become Abraham until he goes to the Promised Land. If you follow archaeology, there is evidence of Israelite villages that left many bones piled up but not pig bones — meaning kashrut has longstanding roots in Eretz Yisrael. The Jewish story started with Israel as the homeland. Israel was the main stage for David and Solomon, the Maccabees and the Pharisees, the First Temple and the Second — then we were dispersed. Those who live in Israel are not in the Diaspora. Those who do not live in Israel are dispersed, meaning in the Diaspora. Does that mean all Jews outside Israel are the same? Of course not — nor are all Israeli Jews the same. But just as we may speak of Jews and non-Jews or Westerners and non-Westerners, it is sometimes useful distinguishing between Jews living in Israel and those who don't. Diaspora is a valid category of analysis, especially given the historically powerful symbolism of Israel as the Jewish people's homeland.

That leads to the prescriptive dimension. I called 'Diaspora' more neutral than exile, galut, I did not say it was value free. As a Jewish Studies professor I am sure you could outdo me in quoting the many sources over the millennia celebrating Israel's centrality in Jewish life. The Jewish calendar itself revolves around the Israeli agricultural calendar. Having celebrated Tu B'Shvat in snowbound Montreal for twenty years, or

prayed for rain in Israel even during stormy nor'easters all my life, I don't think it is controversial to say that for millennia Jews have placed Israel at the center of Judaism, from near or from far. Traditional Judaism views Eretz Yisrael as the best place to live a fully integrated Jewish life. Just this Shabbat, in Jerusalem; my 8-year-old son, playing cops and robbers, brandished an imaginary knife. His buddy warned in Hebrew: 'Don't forget the Commandment, Thou Shalt Not Kill.' Yes, two kids could have said the same thing in Miami, Montreal, or Melbourne. But there was something lovely, complete, integrated about hearing the exchange in the Jewish people's language (and I don't mean Yiddish!): Hebrew.

Does this mean that Jews living in the Diaspora are bad Jews? Of course not. Does it mean that living in Israel is not just one of many Jewish values but a biggie? I believe it does.

While I use the term Diaspora freely, I am wary — and would caution your students — regarding that loaded term 'Diaspora Jew'. Diaspora Jew takes us from the romance of Theodor Herzl to the pathologies of Philip Roth. A Diaspora Jew is a broken, oppressed European Jew or an insecure, neurotic American Jew. Fortunately, many modern Jews in the Diaspora have escaped those shackles (although not all are wholly freed). Moreover, to show I am not simply a starry-eyed Zionist, I believe one of Israel's great shortcomings is that too many Israeli Jews still have too much of the anti-Semite-obsessed Diaspora Jew in them.

My approach to peoplehood is similar. Judaism is not just a religion. The traditional triangle of God, people (am) and Land; the Jewish people's compelling history; and Judaism's extra-religious, cultural, ethnic, aesthetic, linguistic dimensions, all affirm our peoplehood. We share a common past, some contemporary bonds, and certain hopes for the future. Since 2000, we have witnessed powerful negative examples of that peoplehood-thing. Terrorists targeted Jews not just in Israel. Jews throughout the Diaspora felt the suffering of their Israeli brothers and sisters more intensely than did most others. True, not every Jew took terrorism against Israelis as personally as every non-Jew did. Still, we saw powerful evidence that the Jewish people's nerve endings are intertwined.

The JDub rejection of peoplehood is paradoxical because most of these hipster Jews are more peoplehood-oriented than religiously-inclined. They may call it cultural or ethnic or even spiritual. But a lot of what I have observed among these young Jews is that non-theological elements of their Jewish identities unite them. I analyze their identity through the peoplehood prism. Yes, we must explain why peoplehood or any nationalism is not racism. And you are correct that the younger generation's universalism challenges modern Judaism — especially the defensive, provincial, narrow-minded Judaism too many of us endure in too many synagogues and schools.

My Zionism is a reaction to all that. True, many consider Zionism part of the problem today. Done right, Zionism solves the universalist-particularist conundrum while liberating us from the Jewish alienation too many failing institutions generate.

Allow me to end emphasizing where we agree. I agree with Rabbi Kula's diagnosis that we should stop worrying about the Jewish people and clarify 'the purpose of the people.' I agree with you that today Judaism thrives in many places (ken yirbu) and that Judaism can help individuals blossom amid the extraordinary freedom and prosperity (even post-crash) most Jews enjoy. We are blessed to live in a world where Judaism can flourish in so many places in so many ways. And all those blessings stimulate new challenges.

I know that wherever I have lived, recognizing Israel as the Jewish center has always been a powerful, useful

touchstone. I hope that soon we will see the Zionist revival Judaism so desperately needs triggering a broader Jewish revival that would help Jews all over the world find greater meaning in their lives through an ever deeper and more constructive engagement with our rich civilization, our glorious past, our serious system, our compelling, complicated and sometimes confounding way.

I thank you for your time, your insight, and your spirit of openness.

Gil

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