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American Jews and Israel at 50: A Time for Reassessment

by Allan C. Brownfeld

While many American Jews gathered to celebrate Israel's 50th anniversary, the event was marked less by revelry than by a reassessment of a complex relationship which, most observers believe, is undergoing fundamental change and may be at an all-time low point of connection.

The newspaper headlines reflected this reality. *USA Today* carried this headline in its May 1, 1998 issue: "U.S. Jews Look Beyond Israel." *The Washington Post* of April 28 declared: "Strong Ties Of '48 Have Yielded To Today's Ambiguity."

"For decades," wrote Daniela Deane in *USA Today*, "America's Jews equated Judaism with political and financial support for Israel. Today's Jews separate religion from Zionist commitment."

Dr. Jonathan Sarna, professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, declared: "There's been an enormous change in the American Jewish community. The Zionist era in American Jewish history is ended."

While Zionists continue to proclaim that Israel is "central" to Judaism and Jewish identity, the American reality seems to be that it is receding in importance and relevance.

Donations Down To Israel

Donations to Israel by American Jews total about $800 million a year. But the proportion of their total charitable giving that is donated to Israel has fallen from 50% in the early 1980s to about 40% today. At the same time, donations to Jewish causes in the U.S. have gone up.

San Francisco's Jewish community, for example, quietly slashed its support for traditional Israeli charities by $1 million. A past chairman of the American Zionist Movement, Seymour Reich, says that decreasing allocations to the Jewish Agency signal a weakening link between American Jews and Israel. The president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, Barry Shrage, says that with factors like the strength of Israel's economy, the increased focus on local needs and the "continuing crisis of Jews in the former Soviet Union" it is "hard to imagine a scenario where funding of the Jewish Agency will stay even or increase over the next few years."

One question which has led to the alienation from Israel of large numbers of American Jews is the question of Israel's theocratic Orthodox establishment which has denied equal rights to Reform and Conservative Jews and which has defined the question of "who is a Jew" in a way which excludes many American Jews.

Ninety per cent of American Jews are either Reform or Conservative, branches of Judaism not recognized by Israel's Chief Rabbinate. They are considered heretical or worse and have no right to perform weddings and funerals. Their conversions are not recognized. Rabbi Uri Regev, a native-born Israeli and the official representative of the Reform movement to the Ne'eman Committee, created by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to deal with the conversion controversy, declares: "Of all the free countries in the world today, only Israel denies Jews religious freedom."

The intensity of feeling on this issue is reflected in a letter distributed by Rabbi Ted Alexander of San Francisco's B'nai Emunah congregation. The letter tells Jews to curtail their donations to Israel. "If we are not recognized by the people in Israel, they have no right to recognize our money," said Alexander.

He urged those who want to donate to Israel to send the money to non-Orthodox institutions "so it does not end up in the hands of those who don't recognize us as Jews."

Professor Sarna notes that, "I've heard many people say, 'You don't even consider us Jewish, so why should I support you?'"

Jewish Comfort Level

Writing in *New York* magazine, Craig Horowitz points to the fact that, ". . . the comfort level of American Jews is such that they look less and less toward Israel — especially now when the Orthodox Establishment that controls religious life in Israel seems intent on demeaning the religious practices of most American Jews. The refusal by Israel's Chief Rabbinate to recognize the validity of Conservative and Reform Judaism — 90 per cent of affiliated American Jews — has opened a wound that may never be healed."

Dr. Steven Bayme of the American Jewish Committee points out that, "You can certainly see the specter of disengagement. American Jews feel our primary issue is Jewish continuity and Israel is to some extent damaging that. Because by delegitimizing the Reform and Conservative movements, it's delegitimizing the primary avenues by which we can get Jews to remain Jewish

Allan C. Brownfeld is a nationally syndicated columnist and serves as Associate Editor of *The Lincoln Review* and Editor of *Issues*. The author of five books, he has served on the staff of the U.S. Senate, House of Representatives and the Office of the Vice President. He is Executive Director of the American Council of Judaism.