In the years since 1948, however, Israel has become a substitute religion for many American Jews. In his book, *Faith Or Fear, How Jews Can Survive In Christian America*, Elliot Abrams, who heads the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., notes that, "It is not too much to say that support for Israel has become a key element of Jewish faith for most American Jews. Support for Israel became central to Jewish identity . . . To many American Jews, it became the essence of their lives as Jews . . ."

In recent years, many American Jewish leaders have expressed concern about the substitution of Israel for God as the "central" fact of Jewish life, which is precisely the configuration sought by Zionism.

In the Fall 1994 issue of *Reform Judaism*, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, then president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, declared that, "For many Jews, the Land of Israel remains the sole touchstone of their Jewish existence . . . They have for too long been plugged into Israel as if it were a dialysis machine . . . Equating Judaism with Israel does irreparable harm. We will never know who we are if we continue to use Israel as a fig leaf to cover our own nakedness."

Even religious advocates of Zionism have expressed dismay at the manner in which Judaism has been corrupted by its involvement with the political life of a sovereign state.

Jewish Terror Groups

Sir Immanuel Jakobovits, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, laments that, "Anti-religious feeling was . . . stirred up by Jewish religiously agitated terror groups operating against terror targets, and by ugly confrontations over Sabbath desecration, bones found in the archeological digs, the exhumation of a non-Jew buried in a Jewish cemetery . . . To me, even more disturbing were other by-products of this unholy partnership. The moral conscience of the Jewish people has been all but despiritualized, transferred from its traditional custodians, and virtually monopolized by the secularist masses and their spokesmen. When over 10 percent of Israel's Jews, aroused by moral qualms over the war in Lebanon, participated in what must have been proportionately one of the largest spontaneous demonstrations ever seen anywhere, there were few rabbis among the protestors, and certainly none of the better known religious leaders who constantly summoned mass demonstrations against some isolated desecration of the Sabbath or of some suspected graves."

Rabbi Jakobovits notes that, ". . . ideals such as peace, conciliation, tolerance, sympathy for the sufferings even of one's enemies, and simple faith in the eventual triumph of human understanding — all so deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition — were virtually obliterated from the religious vocabulary of virtues. This religious insensitivity to Jewish moral values continues to baffle and trouble me to no end."

This transformation of Jewish life into nationalism and the replacement of a spiritual vision with a political agenda has produced in many sensitive Jewish believers such as Rabbi Jakobovits what he describes as "my desolation over this disengagement of Judaism from its moral imperatives."

For some time, the Zionist establishment in both Israel and the U.S. promoted the idea that Israel is "central" to Judaism and to Jewish life. In 1968, the 27th World Zionist Congress adopted a resolution recognizing its "Jerusalem Program" as the official pronouncement of basic Zionist aims. The key element of this program is its first provision which affirms "the unity of the Jewish people and the centrality of Israel in Jewish life" as the Zionist aim. Even Reform Judaism, which previously opposed the Zionist concept of Jewish ethnicity and advanced a universal Judaism free of nationalism, adopted this policy.

Serious Reassessment

Now, with the celebration of Israel's 50th anniversary, there is serious reassessment in the American Jewish community. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, declared in a talk in Philadelphia in 1997 that, "The age of ethnicity is over . . . Jews will wish to be Jewish only if our people/religion can help us to find a transcendent meaning in our lives . . . Judaism must reach out for the spiritual, the transcendent, the holy. We need to fill the spiritual vacuum with serious Jewish reflection on God and on mitzvah and on the meaning of life."

The gap between Israel and American Jews is growing and it is clear that Israel is not "central" to Jewish concerns, writes Yosef Abramowitz, editor of the magazine *Jewish and Family Life*. He states: "In nearly every dimension of American Jewish life that has been associated with Israel — from advocacy to fund-raising to education — Israel has lost its centrality."

Dr. Sidney Schwartz, president of the Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, states: "You can no longer fund-raise on the back of Israel. Almost no one is interested. The annual campaigns are being supported by older Jews for whom Israel holds a special place, but not by the next generation of givers."

Daniel Cohen, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council in Dayton, Ohio notes that, "The intifada complicated Israel for a lot of Israel supporters. No longer was it possible to rehearse the same old lines that Israel was always right, Arabs always wrong. All those debating points were simply not enough to carry the argument in public or even in the minds of Israel's supporters. Many people simply disengaged from Israel."

In Israel itself, the 50th anniversary was dominated by a discussion of the rifts which are sharply dividing that society. Author A.B. Yehoshua declared that, "For 50 years, we had an external enemy who obliged us to lower the tenor of our internal tensions. But the external enemy doesn't unite us anymore."

Rabbinical Monopoly

The Orthodox rabbinical monopoly on marriage and burial has become increasingly controversial within Israel, particularly in the wake of the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union. Immigrants who are not officially "Jewish," usually meaning that their mothers are not Jewish or that they have not been converted by an Orthodox rabbi, cannot get married in Israel. There are few places for them to be buried. Menachem Friedman, a sociologist at Bar-Ilan University, declares that, "We are really near the edge of where people can tolerate one another."

As the harsh rhetoric of Israeli rabbinical leaders escalates, so does the negative response among American Jews.

Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron — who has initiated a dialogue with the fundamentalist Islamic Hamas — dismisses Reform Judaism as "a fabricated religion." Referring to Reform Judaism as "a joke," he states that, "The Reform have no future. They're bankrupt." Former Sephardi Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu compared Reform Jews to "Karaites," members of a medieval Jewish sect which rejected rabbinic law and was considered by the rabbis as virtually a separate faith.

Another prominent Orthodox rabbi, former Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of the Shas Party, told thousands of supporters at a Jerusalem rally in October that the Reform and Conservative movements to which most American Jews belong have abandoned Judaism. Also in October, Jerusalem's Harel Reform Synagogue was covered with swastikas and the words "Damned Wicked Ones" were written on the glass-enclosed billboard at the entrance to the temple. On August 31, a firebomb was thrown through the window of a kindergarten operated by the Reform movement in Mevasseret Zion, a suburb of Jerusalem. The private school was almost completely destroyed.

An Israel in the grip of a militant' Orthodox establishment which is intolerant of other streams of religious thought is not the kind of Jewish state most American Jews thought they were supporting. Similarly, an Israel dominated by fundamentalist political parties which believe that any compromise with Palestinian aspirations for statehood is a violation of biblical commandments, is at odds with the thinking of the vast majority of American Jews.

Distance From Israel

One result of this changing attitude, reports J.J. Goldberg, author of the book *Jewish Power*, is that, "What we're seeing is a much greater willingness by mainstream Jews and Jewish groups to distance themselves from Israeli policy . . ."

What will the future hold? This, of course, is impossible to say. Michael Lerner believes that, "By the middle of the 21st century . . . the chauvinistic consciousness that today predominates in some sections of the American Jewish community and in the government and religious communities of Israel will be viewed in the same way that we today view those who supported slavery or who opposed the right of women to vote."

By substituting support for Israel for the religion of Judaism, it can be argued, both Israel and Judaism have suffered. Israel has suffered because it has become dependent upon support by the American Jewish community and its influence in Washington. It has relied on Washington's aid and support and, perhaps, has not made the difficult decisions needed for a compromise peace agreement with its Middle Eastern neighbors. Judaism, of course, has been denigrated by its association with the interests of a particular sovereign state and its transformation from a universal religion to one tied to a nation-state.

In the meantime, many American Jews have viewed their overwhelming success in the free and open American society as, somehow, a cause for concern rather than celebration. Professor Gary Tobin of Brandeis University points to this strange anomaly: "So have we stood back and enjoyed this wonderful American success? No. We've turned it into the intermarriage crisis. We don't know how to deal with normality. As American Jews, we should take the next twenty years to get our house in order; that's the most important aspect of relating to Israel. Because right now the American Jewish community is behaving in ways that are insecure, confused, backward—looking and neurotic."

Normal Lives

Zionist leaders once said that their goal was for Jews to live "normal" lives. There is no place in which such "normality" can be said to exist more than in the United States, where every citizen is free to practice or not practice religion as he or she sees fit. It is in America, not Israel, where Jews are free to follow their consciences and beliefs in matters of faith Yet, this reality, which should be celebrated, is turned on its head by those who repeatedly speak of a "continuity" crisis. Normality, it seems, is hard for some people to accept.

Fortunately, Israel's 50th anniversary has provided an occasion for the introspection which has been needed for so long within the American Jewish community. Sadly, American Jews have spent many years substituting nationalism and politics for religion. Perhaps the vision of a universal faith of ethical values for men and women of every race and nation which the Prophets preached and generations of Jews believed will once again become the real "center" of Judaism, and God, not the State of Israel, will once again become the object of worship. •

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE BECOME A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

(Continued from page 4)

While the prophets bring God's message to the Israelites, the Israelites bring that same message to other peoples:

"The ultimate purpose of a prophet is not to be inspired, but to inspire the people; not to be filled with a passion, but to impassion the people with understanding for God."

Servant of God

The term "servant of the Lord," in reference to the prophets, recurs in the Bible. In Second Isaiah it is applied to Israel. Israel describes its status to the world:

"The Lord called me from the womb, and from the body of my mother he named my name . . . And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'" Isaiah 49: 1-3.

The concepts of chosenness and servitude are closely linked:

"But you, Israel, my servant Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off.'" Isaiah 41: 8-9.

Heschel explains this concept of the suffering servant as it is applied to Israel: "In Israel's agony, all nations are involved. Israel's suffering is not a penalty, but a privilege, a sacrifice; its endurance is a ritual, its meaning is to be disclosed to all men in the hour of Israel's redemption."

God has in mind deliverance or redemption for Israel and, through Israel, for all men. Israel will suffer on behalf of others in the same manner that the prophets did. This is suffering as redemption because God has chosen Israel as His servant. It is part of Israel's role as a light to the nations. Second Isaiah expresses an understanding of the difficulty of Israel's position:

"Hearken to me, you who know righ-