

Jewish Continuity and American Neozionism

By [Amir Afsai](#)

From its inception, the Zionist movement has championed a vision of an ingathering of the exiles to the Land of Israel. In 1880 Eliezer Ben-Yehuda prophesied, “As in the days of Egypt and as in the days of Babylonia, we will look upon the Jews converging on their land from every corner of their dispersal.”¹ Zeev Jabotinsky wrote in 1905, “There is in my mind no room for argument that from the confluence of mighty processes, which no force can stop, Israel will gather to be reborn in its patrimony, and my children or my grandchildren will there submit their voices to the representative assembly.”² Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs today calls the “ingathering of the exiles to the ancestral homeland” “the *raison d’être* of the State of Israel.”³ Increasingly in recent years, however, this vision has come under attack for being passé, for failing to take into consideration both Israel’s emerging needs and those of the Diaspora in the 21st century.

In a November 2007 *Haaretz* editorial Yoni Goldstein of Montreal criticized Israel’s approach to aliyah as suffering from a misunderstanding of contemporary North American Diaspora and consequently misdefining its goals.

Perhaps the time has come for Israel in general to reevaluate its relationship with Diaspora Jewry and acknowledge that there are other places in the world perfectly suited to Jewish living. Once it takes that first step, the next job would be to recognize that the overall relationship between Israel and the Diaspora must change. Instead of looking at the Diaspora as a temporary home for those Jews who can’t or aren’t ready yet to make aliyah, Israel should invest in forming bonds with Jewish communities around the globe.⁴

More than half a century since the conclusion of World War II and the United Nations vote to accept the Jewish state into its ranks, dramatic changes have taken place in the world, specifically in the Western Hemisphere where the majority of world Jewry resides. The dream of emancipation, nominally realized in France with the Revolution but promptly relapsing into nightmare with the Dreyfus Affair, has in our time become a basic reality throughout the liberal democracies of the West.

But the situation of Diaspora Jewry is not quite so sanguine as Goldstein presents it. Surely his choice of the words “perfectly suited” to describe the climate in North America vis-à-vis its Jews is too rosy an idealization to accept literally. Already in 1987, in an address before the Washington Seminar for Zionist Thought, Bruce Terris warned that “American Jewry is in the early stages of a deep crisis which threatens its existence as a vital, creative, and self-sustaining community.”⁵ In the two decades since, assimilation, intermarriage and declining birth rate figures confirm that the situation is worsening. American Jews are finding it increasingly difficult to retain their Jewish identity in the face of America’s radically individualistic society that is inimical to communal association along ethno-cultural lines.

The Diaspora Jew is in a perpetual tug-of-war. He feels, on the one hand, a persistent external pressure to become similar to those around him, to conceal or eliminate those features that distinguish and set him apart from everyone else, to conform. On the other hand, a deeply ingrained impulse urges him to remain anchored to his people, to orient himself within their frame of reference, to preserve the unique heritage he shares with them. These two opposing attitudes, roughly corresponding to *assimilation* and *segregation*, respectively, were once perceived as the only alternatives available to the Diaspora Jew.

We believe now, however, that there is a third option. At the midpoint between assimilation and segregation lies *integration*, a model wherein distinct sectors of society coexist and interact out of mutual tolerance of, even appreciation for, each other's differences. The challenge for Jews since the Haskalah and on up to this day has been to find that delicate formula that will allow them to integrate with the Gentile world as Jews without there being any inherent friction between the two.

Zionism is this formula. As Shlomo Avineri observes, it was not antisemitism that engendered and spread the Zionist movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it was modernity.⁶ Zionism was born of a need to redefine the Jews' self-identity in a climate where the old definitions were fast becoming obsolete. The walls of the shtetl crumbling, and the walls between nations soaring to ever greater heights, Zionism posited a society where the Jew could live a life that was both meaningfully Jewish and modern.⁷ Israel's self-definition as a Jewish and democratic state can be construed as a variation on the same theme.

Nor is Zionism to be conceived as a unidirectional phenomenon alone, of Jews seeking spiritual and material self-preservation and fulfillment in their ancestral homeland. For Zionism is at the same time a placental movement nurturing the vital continuity of Jewish communities in the Diaspora. The bridge linking Jewish continuity in the Diaspora to a vibrant, inspiring Israel à la Ahad Ha'am is aliyah – the Judaism superhighway. On this highway, traffic flows into Israel in the form of Diaspora Jews establishing their roots there, whereby Israeli society is continually injected with fresh, revitalizing energy; and traffic flows out of Israel in the form of a rich, invigorating Hebraic civilization that is exported to Jewish communities throughout the world – including instances of Israeli emigration.

Paraphrasing the words of one Jewish Agency envoy to Ukraine, the charge today is not only to bring Jews to Israel but also to bring Israel to the Jews.⁸ A vector originates from every Jew in the Diaspora directed towards Jerusalem, the spiritual center of gravity of the Jewish world. But another, inverse vector, originating in Jerusalem, reaches out to each Jew wherever he or she may be. Jerusalem turns to world Jewry for bodily support and solidarity, and world Jewry looks to Jerusalem for nourishment and inspiration. This bidirectional paradigm, in which aliyah is the central component, is the model toward which the Jewish world ought to aspire.

And Zionism has still broader implications for Diaspora Jewry. Those Jewish Americans who uphold as an ideal a pluralistic, culturally diverse America must undertake the effort to cultivate in themselves their Jewish cultural identity. In neglecting to do so they effectively abet the forces of conformity and homogenization in their country, for which "assimilation" is just a more palatable term. When it is understood that a collective Jewish experience is only possible within the framework of the community, that communities are themselves prerequisites to a multicultural society, and that Jewish communities in the Diaspora depend on Israel for their continued vitality, it becomes clear that Jewish communities, multiculturalism and Zionism are fundamentally interrelated as essential ingredients in ensuring the meaningful continuity of the Jewish nation.

This ongoing, cyclical dynamic is the essence of Neozionism, and its absence from the discourse of the recent post-Zionist movements is their fatal flaw. Israeli political scientist Menachem Brinker, for example, sees Zionism as a completed mission when Israel is home to the majority of the world's Jews.⁹ But more than its being a state of *Jews*, Israel is the state of *Judaism*. Thus defined, a Jewish state that is indifferent toward the Diaspora is not only condemning Diaspora Jewry to eventual dissolution – or, alternatively, ghettoization – but is also encouraging the erosion of

Israel's own Jewish character. Only when each side recognizes the indispensableness of the other, and both cooperate toward establishing a candid, constructive dialog, in words and in deeds, will Zionism's vision be realized. This realization does not imply conclusion; on the contrary, it is the foundation for a long, prosperous and exciting future.

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- ¹ Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, "The Flag of Nationalism," *Hamagid* (1880), as cited in Shmuel Yavnieli, ed., *The Book of Zionism: The Hibat Tzion Period*, I (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1961), 84.
 - ² Zeev Jabotinsky, "Zionism and Palestine" (1905), as cited in *Zeev Jabotinsky: Writings*, VIII (Jerusalem: 'Ari Jabotinsky, 1958), 129.
 - ³ "Aliyah and Absorption," *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (29 October, 2002), <http://www.israel.org/MFA/History/Modern%20History/Centenary%20of%20Zionism/Aliya%20and%20Absorption>
 - ⁴ Yoni Goldstein, "Montreal's Jews Aren't Going Anywhere," *Haaretz* (11 November, 2007).
 - ⁵ Bruce Terris, "A Program for Mass Aliyah from the United States," *Zionist Ideas*, XV (1987), 85.
 - ⁶ Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 4-7.
 - ⁷ Chaim Weizmann, "Zionism – Alive and Triumphant" (1924), as cited in Barnet Litvinoff, ed., *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann*, B:I (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1983), 415-420.
 - ⁸ "Changing Direction: Focusing on Strengthening the Connection to Israel Instead of on Aliyah," *Haaretz* (13 February, 2008), p. 6.
 - ⁹ Menachem Brinker, "After Zionism," *Siman Kria*, XIX (1986), 21.