

## **Jews of the World - Be Part of our Debates:**

### **See Also the Half Empty Glass**

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April 2008

When a state reaches a round-numbered birthday, we usually try to evaluate a balance of its achievements and failures and at the same time ask questions. The question that I would like to ask is: what should be the role of world Jewry in Israel's attempts to find its way to the future in view of the crises that it is experiencing? First let's explore the balance, as I see it.

### **The Half Full Glass**

There is no doubt that the state of Israel, with its over 7.2 million citizens, has great achievements. First of all, it is rare to find a state that has succeeded to make out of people, who were dispersed through centuries in different parts of the world, a renewed nation. In this process, it successfully absorbed through the years waves of immigrants (close to three million) who came to build a new life and many arrived after experiencing trauma.

From the beginning, the emerging society succeeded in developing a democratic structural system in a region where authoritarian regimes are the rule rather than exception. With the years, society developed a tradition of freedom of information and media openness, with daily newspapers, many other types of publications, TV channels and many radio stations all carrying vivid debates about Israel and the world. In addition, the Israeli public has had openings to various world channels of communication, including Arab ones, to absorb information and

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knowledge. During the last decades the society also witnessed the accelerated development of civil society that consists of hundreds of NGOs which raise many different issues and serve as a place for involvement and participation. These trends also indicate a positive ongoing process: the entrance of different excluded societal sectors to political and social arenas, with an expansion of the scope of issues that the society debates.

Influenced by socialistic ideas, many of the nation's founders saw the state as responsible for the weak, sick, elderly and the needy. Thus, Israel enacted already from the beginning a wide range of social legislations and set up extensive social programs for all Israeli citizens and especially for the needy to provide them with a broad range of benefits and assistance. In 1995, the National Health Insurance Law came into effect. This law assures a provision of a standardized basket of medical services, including hospitalization, for all residents of Israel. Israel's extensive medical network and high doctor-patient ratio are reflected in the low infant mortality rate (4 per 1,000 live births) and high life expectancy (82.2 years for women, 78.5 for men). This reflects a high standard of medicine in Israel and high-level training for medical professions, including a very advanced research level.

Similar achievements should be noted in education, in spite of recent setbacks. School attendance is mandatory from age 5 to 16 and free through age 18, though less than half of Israeli citizens complete high school matriculation -- which serves as a passport for higher education. With over 270,000 students, higher education is well regarded and plays a pivotal role in the development of the country. The universities are well known and developed; together with other R & D institutions, they serve as vehicles for scientific achievements and technological

development. Today, the percentage of Israelis engaged in scientific and technological inquiry and the amount spent on research and development (R&D) in relation to its GDP, are among the highest in the world.

These achievements are related to economic success. After having enjoyed for many years one of the fastest GDP growth rates of all world economies, Israel is now continuing the economic recovery that began in 2003. Israel's GDP has risen about 5% a year. Earning per capita reached about \$21,000 (in 1980 it was about \$5500 per capita). Unemployment steadily decreased to 6.6% in 2007. Inflation was under control, and foreign debt had been eliminated -- with Israel becoming a creditor in recent years and very attractive to international investors. This was achieved with very tight budget control and cuts in public expenditures.

Significant strides have been made in the fields of medical electronics, agro-technology, telecommunications, fine chemicals, computer hardware and software, food processing and solar energy. Hi-tech industries, which accounted for only 37% of industrial product in 1965, grew to 70% in 2006 (\$29 billion plus another \$5.9 billion of hi-tech services); almost 80% of hi-tech products are exported.

In reviewing the half-full glass, it is also important to look at cultural achievements. Israeli society successfully developed out of a dying language (Hebrew) a culture that can pride itself with many accomplishments: writers whose works are translated to many languages, films that earn awards in major festivals, theatrical plays that are performed on prestigious stages of the world. Some 2,500 titles are published annually; in addition to republications of classics and imported books, these new publications are found in many bookshops in every town and city.

All these achievements are taking place under conditions of continuous threats and dangers. Israel is coping with a conflict that broke out prior to its birth. Through the years of existence Israel has fought at least six major wars, suffered from ongoing hostile violent activities and especially from terrorism. To be successful in withstanding its enemies, Israel invested enormous efforts in satisfying security needs. At present, it has the strongest and best equipped army in the region, and is a regional power that has great influence over the events in the region.

### **The Half-Empty Glass**

However, precisely from the recognition of the impressive achievements of the state of Israel I have chosen to focus on the empty half of the glass, which is related to a number of important areas. I take this direction in order to engage Jews around the world in the ongoing public debates and civil struggles in which current Israeli society is engaged. These debates and struggles are of crucial importance because many inside and outside of Israel feel that Israel is losing its way and its soul -- and faces a grave crisis. Moreover, when you talk with many Israelis, irrespective of their personal political orientation, it is possible to observe despair and feelings of helplessness and even hopelessness in their assessment of the situation - though they focus on different problems because they differ in values, ideology, goals and concerns. Still, they spotlight the half empty glass that is important to them because it appears in public debates in various channels of mass media and is relevant to various aspects of their personal and collective life. The choice to focus on the half empty glass *as I see it* derives from my concern and desire to awaken Jews around the world and involve them in the public debates that take place in the Israeli society – because I deeply believe that it is their responsibility and duty to be part of these debates.

In the discussion about the half-empty glass, I would like first to explore two colossal failures of Israeli society, and then to elaborate on other specific major problems.

The first failure consists of the fact that since the establishment of the state, many hundred thousands of its citizens (it is estimated about 800,000, but no one can provide a validated figure) emigrated to various countries in the world, mainly to United States, Canada, Germany, Australia and even to Russia. Although the emigration was done in different periods and for different reasons, this number is staggering and indicates that the state did not succeed in creating satisfactory conditions for its citizens.

The second colossal failure relates to the continuation of the occupation of the territories conquered in the Six Day War in 1967. This occupation underlies many of the problems that Israel is facing and has many negative implications on the life in Israel. The continuation of the occupation of the territories touches on both the security problems and on the moral soul of the state. The fact that the occupied territories were settled by Jews adds special folly. This act not only negates the international law but also constitutes one of the biggest barriers to solving the Israeli-Arab conflict peacefully. In addition, it is estimated that directly and indirectly Israel has spent through the years at least 100 billion shekel to build the infrastructure, settlements and roads, and to maintain their security – all of which violates the Fourth Geneva Convention and also Israeli laws. This act will either bring an end to the nature of the state that the founding father dreamt about, or Israel will have to spend almost a similar amount of money to pay compensation to those settlers who will have to leave their homes, feeling alienation, frustration and anger.

Looking deeper into the crises that the society is going through, I will identify the most serious problems that in my view and in light of my values pose a challenge to the state of Israel today.

### **The Dominance of Neo-Liberal Policies**

At a time when neo-liberalism was questioned for its severe consequences in various parts of the world, Israeli society accelerated its attempts to institute this economic-social policy – a move that began already in the 1980s. With the celebration of Israel's 60th birthday, the outcomes of this policy are evident. The state is diminishing its role in the life of its citizens, abandoning social responsibility towards them and favoring the business sector. Through the past few years, the Israeli government has decreased its expenditures in education, health and welfare; as a result, these systems are constantly deteriorating and require increased personal spending, which still does not provide a solution to the destructive policies. Economic growth is not equally beneficial to all classes. Over the past 20 years, income inequality has been rising and social disparities have grown to the extent that Israel is now ranked second in the Western world (after the U.S.) in terms of growing gaps between rich and poor: at present, 1% of the citizens accounts for 60% of the wealth in Israel. This widening gap between rich and poor has also coincided with the significant narrowing of the middle class in Israel and a dramatic increase in poverty, even among working families. In 2007 24.7% of the Israelis in general and 35.8% of children were found to live below the poverty line (in 1998 only 22.8% of children lived below this line).

## **The Dysfunction of Liberal Democracy**

Although the state of Israel succeeded in establishing a well-functioning structural democracy, it still suffers from many deficiencies -- especially in implementing democracy's spirit and its values (human and civil rights, respect for the law, equality, treatment of minorities, and preserving basic freedoms). One of the major problems is the disregard of laws and ethics practiced by the public at large and even by state institutions and leaders. A diagnosis of the situation is presented by jurist Moshe Negbi, who describes the process being undergone by the Israeli political culture in recent years as "a slope leading from a government of laws to a Banana Republic".

One specific example is the report by attorney Talya Sasson, appointed by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, to investigate the functioning of the state institutions with regard to building outposts in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. She concluded that public authorities such as ministries, the Israeli army, the settlement division of the World Zionist Organization, as well as municipalities, used their authority illegally to actively assist, and/or avoid prevention of, the establishment of these unlawful enterprises. A recent report shows that about one third of the settlements were built illegally *according to Israeli law itself*. In addition, according to the reports of Israel's state comptroller, governmental institutions are plagued by protectionism, politicization of the public service, and use of public resources to advance personal-political interests. In this vein of special danger, we can observe close connections between the government, capital and mass media, as well as penetration of criminal groups into party centers and the extensive economic and political power wielded by several dozen very wealthy families. A recent study determined that Israel ranks 6th among developed countries around the globe in terms of the scope of its black market.

This failure is related to the deterioration of the Israeli leadership in the last decade. These leaders have been accused of corruption, lack of accountability, lack of vision, and manipulation of the public; as a result, they have been losing the trust of society. A recent survey found that 86% of Israeli citizens stated that the government is not dealing adequately with the country's problems, and 68% believed that the people running the country are motivated by personal interests rather than the public good.

Another deficiency with which Israeli democracy must cope is the growing political power and influence of anti-democratic groups. The centers of these groups within the Jewish society are found mostly in the ultra-religious sector, which rejects democracy both as a value and as a mechanism for governing. This view is expanding, as about half of the public reject the democratic system. On another level, the trend of undermining the democracy is reflected in steady and continuous attempts to undercut the legal system and especially the Supreme Court (even by the present Minister of Justice) by trying to limit its functioning and by politicizing its control.

### **Moral Deterioration**

The problem of democratic deficiencies is related to the deterioration of moral values and standards in the state of Israel. Beginning with the internal problems, corruption increased dramatically through the years. While in 2001 Israel was in 16<sup>th</sup> place among world states in the Transparency International Corruption Perception, in 2007 it fell down to 30<sup>th</sup> place. In the last decade, every prime minister, some other national ministers, and over a dozen lawmakers were accused in various affairs of corruption. In addition, trafficking by migrant workers became an industry with a staggering annual turnover, officially estimated at no less than \$300,000,000 annually. This includes illegal trafficking of women, as Israel became one of the major sex

industry trade centers in the world. Moreover, various practices of the mediators, employers and even the government indicate a consistent violation of human rights.

### **Institutionalized Discrimination of Arab Minority**

Problems of democratic dysfunction are also reflected in the way Israel is treating its Arab citizens, who are an indigenous minority. Israel is probably the only current state among the developed countries that practices institutionalized and cultural discrimination of the Arab minority, including legal discrimination. This discrimination has created, in essence, an *ethnic* democracy and not a liberal democracy — a reality in which structural preference is accorded to the dominant Jewish majority.

Formal discrimination of Arabs by Israeli law and practices is not restricted to symbolic areas; it is inseparably linked to continuous discrimination in every aspect of life. As a result there are continuously growing gaps between Arabs and Jews in socio-economic and living conditions in all major areas of life, including: housing, health, education, land, welfare, employment, and more.

The governmental Orr Commission Report, published in 2003, presented for the first time an official recognition of the depth of discrimination and institutional exclusion experienced by Israel's Arab citizens since the establishment of the state.

The report stated that

the state and all of its governments have failed to cope deeply and with the difficult challenges posed by the existence of a large Arab minority within the Jewish state. The governmental handling of the Arab sector is mostly characterized by neglect and deprivation. The establishment has not demonstrated enough sensitivity to the needs of the Arab sector and has not done enough to assure equal allocation of state resources also to this sector. The state has not done enough, and has not tried enough, to grant equality to

its Arab citizens and remove manifestations of discrimination and deprivation".

Of special failure is the substantial support of discriminative practices by Jews in Israel, and a growing "normative" discourse of Arab delegitimization. For example, in 2007 it was found that about 45% of Israeli Jews denied existence of Arab discrimination in Israel. About 56% of them supported full equal rights between Jews and Arabs as citizens of the state, but only 22% supported political equality for the Arab minority; about 55% supported governmental encouragement of Arab emigration out of Israel.

### **The Ruthless Outcomes of Occupation**

In my view, the most salient sign of the democratic and moral deterioration of the Israeli Jewish society is the lasting occupation. During the years of the Israeli occupation, a deep-rooted system of dual sets of legal norms developed in the West Bank: One for the Jewish settlers and one for the Palestinian population. These dual sets enabled the establishment of a system of segregation, discrimination and control on ethnic grounds in the occupied territories -- with all its negative implications.

Through the years, many thousands of Palestinians, including civilians and children who were not engaged in any violent activity against Israel, have been killed or injured by Israeli military forces. More than 700,000 Palestinians were arrested through the years of occupation. Many thousands spent years in prisons and as administrative detainees, and many were tortured. Some were expelled and their houses demolished. Many aspects of Palestinian collective and individual lives are controlled by the Israelis and through the years this control has had an immensely negative effect on the development of their economic, societal and political infrastructure. According to as United Nations report in 2007, 57% of households in

the territories live in poverty. This occupied population lives without basic human and civil rights under continuous humiliation and discrimination that cannot be accounted for by threats to the security of Israel. One example is the 100 checkpoints and several hundred roadblocks that turn the lives of Palestinians into a miserable experience. A second example is the fact that many of Jewish settlements and outposts were built on private Palestinian land confiscated under false pretexts. A third example is the ongoing project to expand the security fence well beyond the Green Line in order to take hold of more Palestinian land.

Some argue that this behavior is a result of the threats that Israeli Jews experience because of Palestinian goals and violent behaviors. Others claim that it is a necessary component of occupation, and that Israel does not differ from other occupying states through the ages -- and even is more restrained. These arguments, even if they are partially valid, cannot account in my view for the scope and extent of the violations of the Palestinian human and civil rights.

### **Militarization of the Israeli Society**

Another major problem for Israeli society is the dominance of the military echelon. Compared to other democratic states, the security forces in Israel and especially the military have a powerful determinative influence on policies, decision-making, and the execution of actions -- starting with the policies of peace and war and including policies dealing with the allocation of resources and the development of infrastructure. Because of this influence, military thinking has been adopted by the political echelon, as the military serves not only as source for intelligence but also as national evaluator and chief source of strategic plans. The domination of public discourse by the IDF's aggressive worldview, and its status as epistemic authority, has created a degradation of moral values within Israeli society. Universal values of

human rights and the sacredness of human life came to be reserved only for the Jewish population.

This fact has severely limited the ability to carry out basic democratic processes such as criticism of the military branch by the political branch, or inquiry into military operations or 'mishaps' by those who are not in uniform. Comparative studies of the relations between Israel's political and democratic echelons have shown that Israel ranks 36th and last on measures of military involvement in political and social affairs.

### **The Influence of Religion**

Israel is a state which does not separate itself from religion. This has an immense effect on the personal lives of its citizens, and violates both basic human and civil rights. For example, matters of marriage and divorce as well as matters of conversion to Judaism are under the monopolized authority of Orthodox Jewry. This monopoly creates tremendous problems for many of the citizens of Israel and especially for those who came in the last wave of immigration from the former USSR.

Of special importance is the fact the ultra-religious sector is growing -- with at least two serious implications. The majority of this sector does not serve in the army, removing over 11% of the potential conscripts; and a substantial portion of this sector (over half of the men) does not work, relying on external government financial assistance.

### **Objectionism to Peace**

In contrast to the well accepted and shared belief among Jews that Israel never missed an opportunity to embark on the road to peace, the accumulated evidence

indicates that Israel has missed multiple opportunities to solve the Israeli-Arab conflict peacefully and has repeatedly carried out intransigent policies. Examples range from the refusal of Golda Meir to engage in negotiations with Egypt about the cease fire, or to accept the Rogers Plan; Israel's refusal to try to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict along lines proposed by various security institutions in 1967; the rejection of the London agreement with Jordan in 1987 by Itzhak Shamir; the decision to declare and treat Arafat as non-partner after the failure of the Camp David meeting in 2000; ignoring the Saudi plan initiated in 2002; and most recently, the rejection of the Syrian attempts to begin negotiations. As the militarily stronger side in the conflict, Israel has much more power to move the conflict towards its peaceful resolution, but this supremacy is rarely translated into actions.

## **Conclusion**

This essay aims to present the problems that Israel faces, to encourage world Jewry to be aware of the challenges that preoccupy the great majority of their brothers and sisters in Israel, to get involved in these debates, and to be part of the struggle about the direction Israel should take in view of these current crises. Active involvement should be of great importance for Jews around the world who would like to see Israel as a center for world Jewry, as an example to other nations, and as a place where in moments of emergency they will be able to find their refuge.

World Jewry cannot blindly observe Israel and disregard the problems that it faces. On the other hand, Israel should stop the unacceptable and detrimental practice of demanding blind support for Israel --implied by the phrase "I support Israel" -- and stop viewing any criticism as being anti-Israeli or anti-Semitic. This relates also to the frequent practice of hiding and omitting these problems when hosting Jewish visitors -

- especially the thousands of youth who come every year to Israel. On the contrary, I believe that supporting Israel means seeing Israel with all its achievements and deficiencies—and then engaging in the ongoing debates and striving to create a better society, which is the best indication of love and care. This is the true, most constructive, nature of patriotism. The clash over the future of Israel is a crucial struggle. Jews of the world should be passive bystanders; they must engage in shaping the nature of the place where our (Israeli) children and grandchildren will live and where your children and grandchildren may live in the future.