Israel and the Jews

Diaspora blues

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Jews around the world should join the debate about Israel, not just defend whatever it does

Polaris

WHAT is a Jewish state for, and what should it be like? Jews have been debating that for 200 years. Even today, with Israel already 58 years old and taken for granted by most of the rest of the world, they still cannot agree.

The early settlers came for a variety of reasons. Some wanted to escape the stifling constraints of religious dogma and east European village communities; others thought it would hasten the coming of the Messiah. As European anti-Semitism grew, the idea took hold that Jews needed their own land as a safe haven. After the Holocaust, saving Jewish lives became the fledgling state's first priority. Soon, it acquired another role: being a potential Israeli citizen became one of the anchor points of what it meant to be a Jew.

Since then, Jews have continued debating and reshaping their own relationships to the country. In Israel secular Jews found Israeliness a handy substitute for religious observance. Some religious Jews, for their part, revived the previously fringe creed of messianic Zionism, holding that to settle in all the biblical land—including the lands Israel captured after 1967—is a God-given duty. To others, the ultra-Orthodox, a Jewish state should spend as much as possible on subsidising Jewish learning and maintaining piety. And of these groups there are countless splinters and crossbreeds.

Meanwhile, diaspora Jews have developed an even more eclectic mix of Jewish culture and attitudes to Zionism (see article). And that is partly because, as the threat of genocide or of Israel's destruction has receded, a growing number of diaspora Jews neither feel comfortable with always standing up for Israel, nor feel a need to invoke Israel in defining what makes them Jewish.

Yet the big Jewish diaspora institutions have not caught up. Their relationship with Israel is still based mainly around supporting it in times of crisis and defending it from critics. This is true of the big umbrella groups for

Jewish communities, but especially so of the pro-Israel lobby groups in America, formed to influence American foreign policy in Israel's favour. Often these lobbies have ended up representing not Israel but its right-wing political establishment, with American defenders of Israel accusing critics of being "anti-Semitic" for saying things that are commonplace in Israel's own internal debate.

My country, but not right or wrong

Their attitude persists partly because Israel was indeed much more vulnerable when the lobbies were founded; partly because the lazy way to defend Israel is to suggest that its critics, even legitimate ones, are anti-Semites; and partly because the pro-Israel lobbies have formed an unholy alliance with evangelical Christian groups who believe, like the religious Zionists, that the ingathering of the Jewish exiles will bring forward Judgment Day. In their fervour, these evangelical Christians are more uncompromisingly Zionist than most Jews. That they also believe that Judgment Day will entail the destruction of Israel and the deaths of a great many Jews does not seem to bother the Jewish lobbies; that, after all, is the theology of the future, and their job is the politics of today.

This knee-jerk defensiveness of Israel does not help the Jewish diaspora, at least in terms of keeping young Jews from leaving the faith. Some find the uncritical attitude to Israel distasteful; others simply find Israel irrelevant. Some strike out on their own, finding new and creative ways to explore their Judaism. But many are simply drifting away.

The tendency to stand by Israel right or wrong brings a second problem. It locks diaspora Jews out of the fateful and often bitter debates that rage inside Israel itself. Israel is an increasingly divided society. Secular and religious Jews used to have more beliefs in common, albeit for different reasons (eg, holding on to the occupied territories, whether for security or for religious redemption), but for decades their interests have been diverging. They disagree on the most basic questions: borders, who is a Jew, the role of religion, the status of non-Jews. Lately the traditional political boundaries have been melting down too. Israeli Jews swim in a sea of conflicting ideas about who they should be. Unless they agree on that, they cannot ultimately resolve their relationship with the Palestinians, including the Palestinians who are Israeli citizens.

Helping Israel should no longer mean defending it uncritically. Israel is strong enough to cope with harsh words from its friends. So diaspora institutions should, for example, feel free to criticise Israeli politicians who preach racism and intolerance, such as a recently appointed cabinet minister, Avigdor Lieberman. They should encourage lively debate about Israeli policies. Perhaps more will then add their voices to those of the millions of Israelis who believe in leaving the occupied territories so that Palestinians can have a state of their own, allowing an Israel at peace to return to its original vocation of providing a safe and democratic haven for the world's Jews.