

If Israel Ceased to Exist
The Jewish state, the Jewish Diaspora, and the Jewish future—a meditation.

By HILLEL HALKIN / Commentary Magazine / JUNE 1, 2007

Can Israel, as the prime minister of Iran has bluntly put it, be wiped from the map? Of course it can be. The Iranian nuclear-weapons program has only added to the ways in which this can happen. Any small country whose larger neighbors, including those formally at peace with it, would be delighted, with the concurrence of a significant part of the human race, to see it vanish must reckon on its possible mortality. It has never been anything but foolish for Israelis, American Jews, or anyone else to deny this.

If Iran has made a difference, it is that an intermittent anxiety has now become a chronic one. In the past, acute concern over Israel's survival has arisen in times of war—1948, 1967, 1973—and abated once the military threat was over. But the Iranian threat is indeterminate. It has developed slowly and may be slow to go away, if ever it does.

And yet a successful Iranian nuclear attack, although it might effectively obliterate Israel in a matter of seconds, is not the most likely way in which Israel's destruction might take place. In fact, given Israel's technologically advanced anti-missile systems and its own nuclear deterrent, which could inflict calamitous retaliation, it is probably the least likely. Shiite eschatology notwithstanding, Iran's leaders would surely think more than twice before turning their own country into a giant suicide bomb. If Israel needs to fear nuclear suicide bombs, there is probably more to fear from terrorists—who, surreptitiously supplied with them by Iran or others, might attempt to detonate several simultaneously, al-Qaeda-style, in Israel's major cities. Once initial radiation levels dropped, the numbers of dead, badly injured, and fatally or seriously ill, added to the general havoc, might enable Arab armies to overrun a country too crippled to defend itself.

But Arab armies, should they at some not un-imaginable future time attain conventional military superiority over Israel, could also destroy it without a single nuclear shot being fired. All they would need would be to possess, or to be allied with the possessor of, atomic weapons capable of neutralizing Israel's nuclear arsenal and preventing its deployment as a last-ditch measure were a conventional war about to be lost. Nor, once a beaten Israel surrendered, would widespread carnage have to be inflicted to finish the job. It would be enough for the occupying forces to encourage the "return" of millions of the descendants of the 1948 Palestinian refugees seeking to reclaim their families' properties. In such circumstances, Israel's conquered and demographically swamped Jews would wish only to flee. Presumably, the United States, the European Union, and other sympathetic countries would atone for the sins of the Holocaust by taking them in.

These are the envisionable cataclysms. But Israel's demise as a Jewish state could also take place less apocalyptically, by means of demographic swamping alone. There is a faster and a slower way for this to happen.

In the former, an Israel unable or unwilling to withdraw from all or most of the Palestinian West Bank would gradually turn into a bi-national state. Far from being a utopian solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem, as it has been touted on the hallucinatory anti-Zionist Left, such a state, whose initial Jewish majority would be progressively eroded by a higher Arab birthrate, would be a dystopic horror. Everything we know about countries in which religiously and culturally heterogeneous populations with a long history of enmity are made to cohabit together without the clear dominance of one of them, or of a stronger third party, tells us that permanent and frequently violent conflict is the inevitable result. A bi-national Israel/Palestine would in all likelihood quickly degenerate into another Lebanon, with a demoralized and contracting population of Israeli Jews, steadily depleted by emigration, taking the place of Lebanese Christians.

This is the worst-case demographic scenario. But even if Israel withdraws to, or nearly to, its 1967 borders, with or without a peace settlement with the Palestinians, its demographic future will be precarious. In the absence of large-scale Jewish immigration, and even assuming a steady drop in Israeli Arab birthrates as the Arab standard of living rises, Israel's Jewish majority, whose ratio to its Arab minority was 10-to-1 in the 1950's and now stands at 4-to-1, will continue to shrink, almost certainly to 3-to-1 and possibly well beyond that before some sort of stasis is achieved.

The greater this shrinkage, the more Arab-Jewish tensions will grow, with Arab demands to do away with Israel's expressly Jewish character becoming more clamorous. At some point the situation could spiral out of control, again leading to endemic violence accompanied by Jewish emigration and irredentist calls for the *anschluss* of heavily Arab areas (like the Galilee) to a Palestinian state next-door. Even without the intervention of Arab armies from neighboring countries, such an Israel, too, could end in dismemberment. Just as the enemies of Zionism predicted, Israel would have turned out to be a foreign beachhead in the Middle East that could not hold out forever against the sheer weight of the Arab multitudes ranged against it.

Not even peace with the Palestinians and the Arab world, then, will necessarily ensure Israel's long-term survival. Nor, as desirable as it is for Israel to treat its Arab citizens equably, is there any reason to believe that, thus treated, they would accept living in a Jewish state once a demographic tipping point were reached. As long as Palestinian and Arab nationalism and Islamic religious militancy persist, Israel will never be like Belgium, in which roughly equal numbers of Walloons and Flemings co-exist peacefully despite ethnic tensions between them—and Belgium, too, may one day break apart. Israel's only hope is to stay clear of the tipping point.

And yet here we encounter a curious fact. The same American Jewish community that is so worried about Israel's survival has consistently failed to do the one thing in its power that could have most helped to assure it.

The statistics speak for themselves. In 2005, for example, 3,005 Jews from France, a country with a Jewish population of a half-million, immigrated to Israel; the United States and Canada combined, with roughly twelve times as many Jews, provided 2,987 immigrants. And should it be objected that this comparison is unfair, inasmuch as French Jews have had to live in recent years with a degree of anti-Semitism unknown in America, the objection is borne out only slightly. In the 60 years of its existence, during most of which anti-Semitism was no problem for the Jews of France, Israel was chosen by 75,000 of them. The figure for North American Jews for the same period is 118,000, seven times smaller proportionally—or approximately one Jew in 3,000 per annum.

What would have happened had American Jewish immigration to Israel since 1948 been proportional to that from France, which has not been dramatically high itself? Nearly a million more American Jews would have gone to live in Israel. Had this happened, Israel's Jewish population would be six-and-a-half million today. The Jewish-Arab ratio would be 5-to-1 rather than 4-to-1. The tipping point would be significantly farther away, and the prospect of still more American Jewish immigrants in the future might have put an Israel within sensible borders out of the demographic danger zone.

The effect on Israel of negligible American Jewish immigration has been more than merely demographic. It has been more than merely socio-cultural and socio-economic, too, though one cannot but think wistfully of the contribution that a million more American Jews, with their education, talents, values, and dynamism, might have made to Israeli life. It has also been psychological. It has been part of the way in which Israel and

American Jewry, although they have been obvious sources of strength to each other, have also been great mutual disappointments. These disappointments go to the core; they strike at the heart of Jewish identity.

Historically, few things have been more basic to this identity than the great narrative of exile and return that is a leitmotif of Judaism—the story of a people, like none other, repeatedly driven from its land and repeatedly dreaming of regaining it, since there alone could it be its true self. Well before the advent of political Zionism, it is true, there were Jewish thinkers who suspected that the true Jewish self was the false self, so to speak, of the Diaspora. Already in the 12th century we find Yehuda Halevi writing scathingly in his philosophical polemic, the *Book of the Kuzari*:

All our prayers [to return to Jerusalem and the land of Israel], such as “Let us bow to His sacred mount” and “He who restoreth His presence to Zion” and the like, are merely the prattle of parrots and the caw of starlings, since we do not mean what we say.

Yet not even Halevi was ever shaken in his conviction that the inner striving of Jewish history was homeward. And while even after the inception of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century the number of Jews actively seeking to settle in Palestine comprised, prior to the rise of Nazism, a small minority of Diaspora Jews, Zionism could justly claim that it was a revolutionary movement in Jewish life, and that all revolutions, however genuine the aspirations they represent, begin with small, dedicated cadres. These succeed because their founders correctly assess the popular support for them that can be mobilized even if it does not originally exist.

Still, the fact remains that, even after the establishment of a Jewish state, the overwhelming majority of Diaspora Jews have chosen, in the absence of internal pressures to emigrate, to remain where they are—and nowhere more so than in the United States. Considering that there has never been in the Diaspora a better place than the United States for Jews to live, this may be no cause for surprise. Surprising or not, however, 99 percent of American Jews have not thought, and do not think today, that the benefits of living in a sovereign Jewish state outweigh the advantages of life in America.

This has delivered a message, however surreptitious, to Israelis. As much as we American Jews are prepared to exert ourselves on Israel’s behalf, it has said to them, there is a limit beyond which we will not go. The Jewish narrative of exile and return is a heroic myth; in practice, however, our ordinary lives are good enough for us. Indeed, if we were honest with you we would admit that, while we sometimes complain about Israeli cynicism, no one has done more to make you cynical than we have. Zionism told you that you were the vanguard of a people, and that if you went first and made a home for it, the people would follow. But Zionism lied to you, because we never intended to follow. And since we can read the figures as well as you can, and understand that it would be in our vital interest to reinforce you if we believed that our survival depended on yours, you are right to conclude that we do not believe it. If Israel goes under, we will grieve and get over it, just as Jews have gotten over their grief so many times before in their history.

This statement has been made, as it were, sotto voce. It has not been meant for the ears of American Jews themselves, let alone for those of Israelis. But Israelis have heard it loud and clear. More than that: they have been convinced by it. Not only did they long ago cease to hope that American Jews might join them, they long ago ceased criticizing their fellow countrymen for joining American Jews. There are today an estimated half-million Israelis living in the United States—many times the number of American Jewish immigrants in Israel. And why shouldn’t there be? If America is the best place for an American Jew to live, why isn’t it the best place for an Israeli Jew? And if Jewish life in America will survive Israel’s destruction, why shouldn’t a prudent Israeli seek a safe haven there now? American Jews should be the last to complain when Israelis forsake Israel for America. It is they who have issued the invitation.

But the disappointment cuts both ways. If the Jews of Israel feel let down, so do American Jews, including many who count themselves among its supporters.

Israel is not the Jewish state these American Jews hoped for. Interminably at war with its neighbors, ridden by internal tensions and political corruption, lacking leaders of stature, out of favor with enlightened opinion everywhere, its people fearful for the future—not only is such a country not, as David Ben-Gurion proclaimed it would be in 1948, a light unto the nations, it is not even a light unto the Jews.

If the Jews of America were like other hyphenated Americans, this might be of little consequence. But the Jews of America are different. Not only are many of them more emotionally involved with Israel than other Americans are with other countries; and not only are they therefore more identified with Israel by other Americans than other Americans are with other countries; they also have a different image of themselves than do other Americans from other countries—and Israel, in recent years, has given this image a beating. It has delivered to the Jews of America a message of its own. It goes like this:

Although we may prefer not to acknowledge it in the presence of Gentiles, we Jews, whether because we have prided ourselves on being chosen by God or on having chosen Him, have always considered ourselves to be more advanced, more rational, and more morally refined than others. Throughout our worst periods in the Diaspora, we have comforted ourselves with the thought that the world's rejection of us was proof, not of our faults, but of its foolishness—the same foolishness that caused it to create the cruel and unjust societies we were forced to inhabit. This is what happens, we told ourselves, when Gentiles run the world. How much better a place it would be if Jews could run it. How much better a place it would be in religious or secular messianic times, when it was run by Jewish principles!

And yet—so this message continues—we have for the past 60 years run a tiny part of the world, and look what we have made of it. Although we may produce more than our share of Nobel Prize winners and hi-tech wizards, when given the full responsibility for managing our own affairs that we never had in the Diaspora, we have shown ourselves to be no more competent than the Gentiles. Clearly, we have deceived ourselves, our belief in Jewish superiority having been possible only so long as others were in charge. While we thought of exile as a misfortune, it alone enabled us to nurture grandiose notions about ourselves that had no basis in reality.

It can be cogently argued, I believe, that on both a conscious and an unconscious level, the fear of losing the sense of Jewish specialness explains a great deal of Jewish anti-Zionism, that of the “progressive” Jewish Left no less than that of the “reactionary” ultra-Orthodox Jewish Right. Behind their principled affirmation of the Diaspora, whether as a human opportunity to interact with the world and improve it or as a God-imposed chastisement that must be borne patiently, has lain the understanding that Jews in a Jewish state must of necessity become many things that in the Diaspora were left to the Gentile: strutting generals, crooked politicians, mindless bureaucrats, hypocritical diplomats, flag-waving jingoists, provincial intellectuals, parasitic clergymen, bribable policemen, brawling football fans, and above all, millions of ordinary people who stopped dreaming Jewish dreams because they were living the plebeian fulfillment of one of the greatest of them.

If, then, despite all that American Jews have done for Israel, they have not done what Israel needed most, the reverse is equally true. In fighting Jewish assimilation in America, after all, Israel can offer only limited practical aid. Evenings of Israeli folk dancing and Israel Independence Day parades will not prevent millions of American Jews from marrying out or losing their Jewish identity; neither will bringing them by the chartered planeload to tour Israel, no matter how reassuring its normality may seem to them. On the contrary: the only Israel that could change the self-image of the marginal American Jew would be one that gave him a sense of Jewish

uniqueness. In the years immediately following its brilliant victory of 1967, this was indeed what Israel did; the luster of those years, however, wore off long ago.

Today, if Israel has any effect on marginal Jews in America, it is more likely a negative one. Universalist in outlook, liberal in politics, such Jews ask themselves: if this is who the Jewish people turn out to be when left to their own devices, why be part of them? And why cause myself, by living as a Jew, to be associated by other Americans with a country that—at least in the circles I move in—is not esteemed, even if it has not yet become, as it now is in Europe, one of the most certifiably disliked places on earth?

Israel, contrary to conventional wisdom in the organized American Jewish community, may today be more of a spur to assimilation than a bulwark against it. One thinks of the Roman Empire after the bloody suppression of the two great Jewish revolts against Rome in the years 67 and 132 c.e. Although this is not stressed in internal Jewish sources, it is a commonplace for historians today to observe that many people in this period left Judaism for Christianity, or chose Christianity over Judaism, because of the stigma of being associated with a failed and unpopular Jewish nationalism. It may well be that historians of the future will say something similar about Jewish life in our own times.

Of course, deeply religious Jews, who have a transcendent rationale for being Jewish, will not be influenced by such considerations. Such Jews will go on existing in the United States with or without Israel; let it be destroyed and—global weather permitting—they will still be praying and studying a thousand years from now. Although assimilation and intermarriage will run their course, and the descendants of most American Jews alive today will disappear from the ranks of the Jewish people, the numbers of ritually observant Jews, for whom alone procreation continues to be a prime commandment of Judaism, will continue to grow.

Should Israel vanish, I myself would not find the existence of such an American Jewry to be of any interest. Seen from the perspective of a non-observant Jew, a thousand more years of synagogue-going do not strike one as a fit continuation of the great historical adventure that being Jewish has been until now. And while Judaism in the Diaspora would continue to evolve in the future as it has done in the past, the Jewish people has been there before, too. Coming after the immense and open-ended Jewish drama of Israel, such questions as whether American Jewish women should be called to the Torah, or American Jewish homosexuals should be allowed to become rabbis, strike me as trivial.

But even from within, from the perspective of Jewish observance, would there not be something dishearteningly pointless in life after the death of Israel? After all, what is it that Judaism has been telling the world ever since it and Christianity parted ways? Is it not that, unlike Christianity, it is not just a faith but a way of life that seeks to permeate every aspect of existence, and that it can therefore only demonstrate its true worth when every aspect of existence is permeated by it? What then, if not a Jewish state, in which alone such permeability exists, can be Judaism's ultimate test? And what would be the purpose of a religious existence that, without having finished taking this test, its first attempts at which did not earn it high marks, was reduced to facing lesser challenges again? Would it not be a stale anti-climax even to itself?

It is possible to think of Israel as the psychiatrist's couch on which the Jewish people has lain down after long centuries of Diaspora life. Israel forces Jews to surrender fantasies and illusions about themselves that have long been part of their character. It has, literally and figuratively, brought the Jewish people down to earth. As is always the case with punctured ego ideals, this is painful. Still, it is liberating to know who you are, however belatedly, even if it is not who you thought you were.

Except that, at precisely this point, the world has chosen to think otherwise. At the very historical moment when Israel has obliged Jews to come to terms with their ordinary humanity, Israel has more and more

impressed ordinary humanity in the opposite manner. Not only has it failed to gain acceptance by a good part of the world as an ordinary country, it has aroused reactions and emotions that ordinary countries do not arouse. The world declines to see it in ordinary terms.

This is increasingly true of Israel's friends no less than of its enemies. Israel's strongest non-Jewish supporters, especially in America, are now evangelical Christians. Certainly, the discomfort many Jews feel with the backing of evangelicals owes much to the latter's conservative political agenda; certainly, too, it stirs visceral Jewish fears of Christian religious fervor, which has rarely redounded to the benefit of Jews. But it is also related to the larger-than-life role in which evangelicals have cast the Jewish people and Israel—a role in which, regardless of whether a Christian or a Jewish script is written for it, secular Jews, in Israel and the Diaspora alike, are increasingly unable to recognize themselves.

Yet Christian philo-Semitism, however it may exaggerate Jewish virtues and induce fears of what may happen if its high image of the Jews ever collapses, is hardly the greatest problem facing them. This distinction continues to be reserved for anti-Semitism, and especially for that variety of it that manifests itself as an extreme hostility toward the state of Israel. And because anti-Israelism is now badly infected by anti-Semitism, it too attributes qualities to Israel and the Jews that do not belong to ordinary human life. Israel is not just one of many countries ruling another people that wishes to be free of it, it is a reincarnation of Nazism; it is not another nation-state stubbornly trying to make a go of it in an ostensibly post-national age, but the very avatar of reactionary tribalism in a new era of global brotherhood; its Jewish supporters are not merely a well-organized political force, they secretly run the world's most powerful country from their hidden seats of power, and so on and so forth.

In the face of such charges, many Jews feel a mental helplessness greater than in the past because their sense of themselves is more diminished than in the past. Once, when they believed more in their own exceptionalism, it was possible for them to understand anti-Semitism as the hateful distortion of that belief, its sinister mirror image in which all the good in them was reversed. Did the anti-Semites accuse them of being an infernally arrogant people who refused to mix with the rest of the human race? Yes, they did refuse, but their mission was not infernal but divine. Were they blamed for thinking they were better than others? Of course they thought that—because they were. Was their invisible hand at the center of everything? No, but everything indeed revolved around them, for they were the indispensable ingredient, the magical leaven, that would uplift the entire human race.

Today Jews are left staring at the distorted mirror image alone. The figure that stood before the mirror is gone.

The world, then, miscasts the Jews. It has not yet realized that they are not as different or as important as it thinks they are.

Or is it possible that, however distorted its image of them may be, it knows something about them that they no longer do?

This is a question to be asked with trepidation. There is good reason for a religiously skeptical Jew to be dismayed by the thought that his people are forever destined or doomed to a special and inescapable fate. Before picking up the gauntlet that is again being flung at their feet, Jews should be wary of slipping back into the delusions that Israel should have cured them of.

I have in mind those conceptions that would again place Israel and the Jewish Diaspora, linked in common cause and purpose, at the epicenter of history by means of some new, secularized version of Jewish

specialness: Israel and the Jews as the front line of democracy, Israel and the Jews as the standard bearers of Western civilization, Israel and the Jews as the world's shock troops against Islamofascism, Israel and the Jews as the canaries in the coal mines of the new barbarism, etc., etc.—anything, in a word, but Israel and the Jews as a small country and nation that have carried the burden of specialness long enough and paid too heavy a price for it.

This is not to say that all of these things may not, in some sense, be true. It is simply to observe that Jews should not hurry to embrace them without an awareness of the inner need they serve—the need to recover that belief in their own uniqueness, as a people chosen by history if not by God, that they have lost but still crave.

Do Jews really want to be at the epicenter? Is this a role they are prepared to play? Is it one they are capable of playing? Can enough of them even agree on what this role is? And again: do they have any choice about it? If this is where the world has put them, what difference do their own desires make?

The Jews are a conundrum. When all is said and done—and what hasn't been said about them and what hasn't been done, to them and by them?—there is something inexplicable about the monumental place assigned to them, by themselves and by others, over the centuries. Israel and America, each in its way, has demystified them; must they now be re-mystified? If the burden of Jewish history is to be shouldered by them once more, should they at least not know clearly what it consists of?

If Iran goes nuclear, the possibility of Israel's destruction becomes greater. But the possibility is there without Iran, too. How important is it to prevent it? And how important to whom?

We are not necessarily, as has been suggested, on the brink of catastrophe, as in the years leading up to World War II. Indeed, things haven't been this good for the world's Jews in 2,000 years. Nearly half of them are concentrated in an independent Jewish state, wealthier and more powerful than any that existed in antiquity. Most of the other half live in stable democracies in which they are economically well-off and safe from all serious harm.

In only one respect are things worse. In the 1930's the Jews were a people that had lost a first temple and a second one; yet as frightful as their next set of losses was to be, they did not have a third temple to risk. Today, they do. And in Jewish history, three strikes and you're out.