

From aliyah to 'Cloud-Zionism'

As Israel turns 72, a shift in focus could turn Zionism into the vehicle through which Jews preserve their Judaism



By GOL KALEV

COMMENT

Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann said a century ago that Zionism is about Judaizing the Jewish communities. Today, as old connections to Judaism fade, Zionism is indeed turning into a primary manner Diaspora Jews relate to their Judaism. This is both through positive and negative connections.

Since its inception, Zionism had both practical and ideological aspects, but over the last century, the focus tended to be on the practical side since it was so successful: The Jewish state was established and is now thriving. Theodor Herzl was aware that success could suppress the greater meaning of Zionism: "There are those people who do not understand us properly and think that the goal of our efforts is to come back to our land," he said in 1899. "Our ideal goes further than that. Our ideal is the great eternal truth."

Herzl underscored that Zionism would continue to be an infinite ideal long after the establishment of the Jewish state because Zionism embeds "not only the aspiration to the Promised Land... but also the aspiration to moral and spiritual completion."

As Israel turns 72, a shift in focus from the practical to the ideological aspect of Zionism could unleash this great eternal truth and turn Zionism into the vehicle through which Jews preserve their Judaism.

Conditions are now ripe for this conceptual shift, as Israeli leaders and the Jewish Agency have in recent years softened their attempts to convince Diaspora Jews to make aliyah, recognizing that Diaspora Jews can choose from a range of alternative relationships with the Jewish state: They can stay at home and consume Israeli experiences through their laptop or phone, they can be serial visitors, they can own a vacation home in Israel or they can indeed make aliyah, which certainly remains a Zionist aspiration.

All these alternatives are much more accessible today than they were merely a few years ago. Hence the ability to relate to one's Judaism through Israel is now easier.

This comes at a time when a new conduit to Judaism is needed, especially in North America, home to about 80% of Diaspora

Jews. For Orthodox Jews and "super-Jews" – those actively involved in Jewish organizations and activities – Judaism remains a core aspect of life. But for the vast majority of American Jews, Judaism is low on their hierarchy of identities. Being a member of a synagogue does not mean being engaged with Judaism, just like having a library card does not mean being a regular book reader.

A connection to Judaism through Israel is compatible with those contemporary realities and embeds in it a transformative approach for American Jews – from a relationship to Judaism that is based on obligation and tradition to an organic one that is based on want and appeal. An American Jew can connect to his Judaism through a wide array of Israeli-related experiences, products and values that are appealing to him.

Indeed, the more desirable items there are on the shelves of the Jewish connections supermarket, the more likely it is that a consumer would purchase at least one product. The Israeli supermarket has a wide range of connections, while the old Jewish supermarket is limited and depends on "customer loyalty."

An American Jew who is into wine can connect to his Judaism through the growing list of award-winning Israeli wines. An American Jew who is gay can connect to his Judaism through Israeli gay culture. An American Jewish innovator can connect through Israeli hi-tech advances. The American Jew is the one who chooses when to connect, how often and in what form – hence the connection is more genuine and relevant.

Unlike a few years ago, the Jew can now do so from his own home. Israel is now at the fingertips of an American Jew. He can access Israeli music in the exact same way the Israeli does – since neither of them do so via radio airwaves anymore. He can access Israeli TV shows and tune into Israel-related webinars. For example, the America-Israel Friendship League recently brought Israeli cuisine into the homes of over 2,500 Americans, with a live demonstration class by a top Israeli chef. (Note: The writer is a board member of the AIFL and chair of its think tank).

The idea of Israel turning into a vehicle



Celebrating Passover in New York with Israeli wine. (Courtesy)



A dog looks out from a balcony decorated with Israeli and American flags during a performance by IDF soldiers in Tel Aviv last month for residents observing stay-at-home orders to help fight the spread of the novel coronavirus. (Amir Cohen/Reuters)

for the American Jew's connection to Judaism has been deliberated by the AIFL Think Tank since 2011, but what has changed in 2020 is that this is no longer theoretical. Not only is Zionism now on a cloud which is easily accessible, but also the coronavirus pandemic led to a swift behavioral shift and adaptation to the cloud-mentality by the masses. It altered the relationship between the physical and the virtual.

Cloud-Zionism enables a richer, relevant and personalized relationship with one's Judaism through Zionism. This is true also through negative-connections.

For many Jews, the primary Jewish-related activity is criticism of Israel, informally or through an organization, such as J-Street. This too is a connection to one's Judaism through Zionism.

Cloud-Zionism also contributes to a more physical connection with Israel. More and more Diaspora Jews have turned into serial visitors in recent years. Airbnb has changed the affordability dynamics of visiting and the increased number of daily flights, and destinations along with reduced airline cost, have all contributed to making Israel more accessible.

For some, a virtual bridge to Israel has emerged – so much that its suspension during the coronavirus crisis created a secondary crisis for some Diaspora Jews feeling in “exile” by denial of their ability to visit. These are not just religious Jews, but also young millennials – some of whom got exposed to Israel through Birthright/Taglit – as well as secular American Jews of all ages and backgrounds.

The serial-visitors to Israel are in line with global trends, such as the NyLon, who travel frequently between New York to London and maintain similar life and social circles

in each city. NyLons would often encounter the same people in restaurants, clubs and events in London as they would in New York.

The same dynamics exists today with the “DiasporaSraeli.” Many American serial-visitors would encounter the same people in parties, lectures and festivals in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv as they would in New York or Los Angeles (for example, at TLV International, which organizes intellectual gatherings for young people).

But there is an important distinction – NyLons are both New Yorkers and Londoners – there is parity. In the Diaspora-Israel case, those are Diaspora Jews connecting through their visits to Israel and not the other way around. Louis Brandeis, the American Zionist leader in the early 20th century, envisioned lines coming out of Jerusalem into the various Jewish communities. Yet he drew a contrast between his views and that of Weizmann and his colleagues. Brandeis viewed it exclusively as a hub-and-spoke relationship and repudiated Weizmann's camp for seeking intra-Diaspora connections between the various Jewish centers. “To this I can not agree,” he said. “You should be satisfied that our aspirations would meet in Jerusalem.”

In other words, the Zionist connection to Judaism goes exclusively through Israel and is not organically-generated in the Diaspora.

This projects to today's attempts to replace the fading American Jewish glues with new Diaspora-generated connections to Judaism, such as through the environment, human rights, and various other modern applications of *tikkun olam* (improving the world).

Those intra-Diaspora connections for the

most part are futile as they are not sufficiently particular to serve as a Jewish connector. A Jewish environmental activist is not wearing his “Jewish hat” during his environmental involvement, and is by far more likely to pursue his interest through an environmental organization than through a Jewish organization. However, those activities could become relevant to one's Judaism if funneled through a Zionist conduit.

This could be done in this example through a successful Israeli environmental project that is appealing to such American Jew on its own merits (for example, Israeli solar fields in Africa). American Jews can fulfill the visions of both Brandeis and Weizmann, by bringing their applications of *tikkun olam* into the hub of Zionism, and in doing so Judaizing their own Judaism.

Cloud-Zionism facilitates a variety of connections to Judaism – from periodic webinars to making aliyah. It is a fulfillment of the ideological aspect that Herzl developed right from the onset of Zionism. Indeed, less than a week after publishing *The Jewish State* in 1896, Herzl shared a profound facet of his vision with enthused members of a Jewish student union in Vienna. He told them: “Maybe we will never to get to Zion, and then we need to aspire to Zion that is in our hearts.”

Today, for those Jews who never got to Zion, the conditions are now ripe to aspire to the Zion that is in their hearts! ■

The writer is author of the upcoming book *Judaism 3.0*. More information can be found at JewishTransformation.com.

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