

## Giving the Diaspora Its Due

By Alan Wolfe  
September 8, 2014

chronicle.com



The months of war in Gaza have raised intense questions about the nature of the Jewish state. Is Israel acting, as any state has a right to do, to protect itself against enemies bent on its elimination? Or has it gone too far down the road toward religious and ethnic extremism?

As those questions dominate our minds and media, however, they are crowding out what is the most important development in the more-than-two-thousand-year history of the Jewish people. No, I am not referring to Israel's birth in 1948, significant as that event was. I mean instead that in the years after World War II, a vibrant, successful, and above all else, secure life has, for the first time, become possible in states in which Jews are, and always will be, in the minority.

"In the diaspora," [proclaimed \*The Economist\*](#) in the summer of 2012, "Jewish life has never been so free, so prosperous, so unthreatened." That Jews can live among gentiles without living in fear is an epochal accomplishment, as much testimony to the perseverance of those who have made the Diaspora their home as it is to the willingness of their compatriots to overcome centuries of prejudice. Most remarkable of all, it is rarely remarked.

It is time for the Diaspora to have its due. Living at the mercy of the majorities around them throughout history, Jews have experienced more than their fair share of discrimination and destruction, the latter as thorough and unwarranted as any group has ever faced. Nor can there be any doubt that anti-Semitism persists throughout the contemporary world and rears its ugly head all too many times.

Yet lost in the tales of endless woe that Jews so frequently tell each other has been the opportunity that living in a land not their own has offered: a deep understanding of unfairness and a commitment to the absolute necessity of fighting against it. "Exile and dispersion," as David J. Goldberg, rabbi emeritus of London's Liberal Jewish Synagogue, writes of the Jews, "far from being the disasters they were invariably considered to be were in fact blessings in disguise, enabling them to escape the fate that befell other contemporary nations rooted in a single territory." Now that they have become so much safer in non-Jewish lands, Diaspora Jews are in a stronger-than-ever position to transform the passion for justice that so moved the Hebrew prophets into ideals of human dignity desperately needed in an age of rising domestic inequality and overseas instability.

That, unfortunately, has not been happening, at least not enough. The Jewish Defense League, based in New York and Los Angeles, with the mandate "to protect Jews from anti-Semitism," is a violence-prone organization rightly condemned by Jews around the world. But defensiveness is widespread among all those Diaspora Jews who remain reluctant to accept the fact that at long last they belong where they have chosen to live.

It is not difficult to grasp why. For the past 70-plus years—the same years in which I, born in 1942, have been alive—Jewish life has been marked by the shift, in the course of a mere decade, from the horrors of the Holocaust to the haven offered by statehood. Those events are inevitably linked, and not just because Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) occurs just a week before Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day).

It is often said that there exists within Judaism a tension between particularism and universalism, one of those dichotomies that on the one hand greatly oversimplifies but on the other contains a good deal of truth: Particularists believe that Jews should be primarily concerned with their own, while universalists insist they are under a special obligation to spread the light of reason to as many people as possible. The twin events that have dominated contemporary Jewish life created an environment especially conducive to particularism: The Holocaust singled out Jews for extermination, while Israel singled them out for citizenship. Statehood promised a final solution to the Final Solution: Now that they had achieved it, Jews would finally constitute a nation like the others, able to speak in their own name and defend their own interests.

Finality, alas, was not to be. Because it was built on land occupied by others, the Jewish state has been unable to satisfy the need for security that gave rise to it. Nor, despite a dynamic economy and numerous efforts at outreach, has it been able to appeal to all Jews. Many Jews have made aliyah (ascent), the Hebrew word that characterizes the decision to leave the Diaspora for Israel. Today, roughly half the world Jewry lives there. Worse, at least for those who consider Israel the only appropriate home for the Jews, a significant number of Israelis in recent years have made *yeridah*, or descent into the gentile world.)

As it increasingly becomes clear that the Diaspora is not a disaster and that the security offered by statehood is precarious, the

lost universalism that was so much a part of Jewish tradition may well be prepared for a comeback, and this time on firmer ground than in the past. That will be good for the Jews no matter where they live, Israel very much included. It will be just as important for the non-Jews with whom they live, Israel, again, very much included.

As important as it may be to achieve, no one should expect that a revival of diasporic universalism will prove easy. There are four intimately interconnected reasons why so many Jews are determined never to forget the events of the 1930s and 1940s, no matter the cost to the universalist element in their own tradition.

The first is the feeling, strongly believed if rarely explicitly stated, that honoring the living somehow insults the dead. Six million Jews, from this perspective, did not die so that another six million could lead the good life in New York, Toronto, London, or, God forbid, Berlin. Since Hitler was determined to kill each and every one of them, any Jew who is now alive must be so through sheer chance: by the decision of one's grandparents to leave Europe before it all began, for example, or by the fact that they boarded one train rather than another, or because they had the right connections to obtain an elusive exit visa. When survival is the result of individual fortitude, pride in longevity follows. When it is a roll of the dice, the winners ought to have the good sense not to brag. Every living Jew must understand that he or she is taking the place of another who never had the opportunity. Guilt that pervasive is not easily overcome.

The never fully quarantined disease of anti-Semitism is commonly brought forward as the second reason for Jews not to succumb to any illusion of security in the Diaspora. Waiting for the next Hitler to appear requires that instances of Jew hatred be told and retold with increasing fervor. How, this responsive reading asks, can any Jew be safe in Paris when Jewish children are killed in Toulouse? British Jews can and do attend Oxford and Cambridge, but anti-Semitism in that country, now polite and respectable rather than cruel and arbitrary, is as pernicious. It is only a matter of time before societies long known for their record of anti-Semitism, especially those in Eastern Europe such as Hungary, Ukraine, and Russia, return to their pattern of hating the Jews, paradoxically made all that much easier because so few of them live there now. America's Jews may have it better than those in Europe, but let an economic crisis linger, and criticisms of Wall Street, which the knowing inform us are actually attacks on the Jews, will come from the angry left as well as from the nativist right.

And above all else, there are the Islamic militants, whether they live in the Middle East or in the West, who, a number of fervid writers warn, have inherited the hideous Nazi obsession with the Jews and are unafraid to act upon it. Jews can never bring Hitler's victims back to life. But, the conclusion follows, they can at least avoid the mistaken optimism that condemned so many to death.

Third, love for everything Israel has accomplished since its founding keeps Jews in a particularist frame of mind. For those who view the state as the last refuge against hatred, Israel has everything Diaspora Jewry lacks. In contrast to a long tradition of subservience in foreign courts, its military makes it the dominant state in the Middle East. Because of the protection it continues to offer to Jews who remain vulnerable in Eastern European or in Arab lands, it is still the natural destination for those unwelcome in the countries in which they live. For the most religious, it is too secular, and for the secular it is too religious. But its very existence demonstrates to the world that, because they have a state of their own, Jews can never again be treated as a people undeserving of the respect of others.

Of course Israel needs the Diaspora, for without the support of American Jews, especially, it would have too few friends in the world. Yet for all that, the notion persists that Diaspora Jews, cut off from the language, traditions, and sense of solidarity that nationhood offers, are being unfaithful to their Jewishness. Israel's strength and Jewish survival, many Diasporic Jews believe, have become one and the same. Should the day ever come when they find themselves not so welcome at home, the existence of a Jewish state will mean that, unlike the last time around, they will have a place to go.

But will Israel continue to exist? The final reason so many Jews are determined never to forget the events of past decades and their relevance to the realities of today is the idea that everything Jews have accomplished with their sovereignty is now being threatened by ever-newer enemies determined to wipe the Jewish state from the face of the earth. Statehood, to the great regret of Israel's defenders, has transferred rather than solved the problem of Jew hatred: Israel's very triumphs have led to new rounds of criticism of its policies and plans to boycott its products and universities. These moves, we are told, may be expressed in the language of support for supposedly oppressed people such as the Palestinians. But in reality, the criticisms are little more than expressions of age-old tropes about Jewish power. The proclivity to single out Israel for its alleged crimes, while ignoring or excusing worse crimes of other states, shows that celebrating diasporic universalism is a bad idea. The Jewish people, always small in number and vulnerable to attack, need to present a united front to the rest of the world.

Intentionally or not, a focus on the success of Jews in the Diaspora undermines that unity, for if Jews can flourish outside Israel, the fundamental rationale for that state's existence is inevitably brought into question. Zionists did not build a home for some Jews so that others could treat it as a place to go on vacation. The cold, hard truth about the Diaspora is that no matter how welcoming it may seem, it will always be a second home.

These are emotionally powerful matters touching on the most sensitive of subjects. Unable to ignore the Nazi years that brought such ways of thinking into being—indeed, I am obsessed by those years to the point of reading endless books and watching nearly every new film about them—I find myself unable to dismiss such points of view out of hand. Nonetheless, they must be discussed and, when necessary, challenged.

The scholar of Judaism Jacob Neusner, who has argued passionately that "America is a better place to be a Jew than Jerusalem," sees in the conjunction of events that dominate the consciousness of contemporary Jewry nothing less than a new faith, which he calls the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption. But this faith, rooted in history rather than God, cannot appeal to eternal truths: The events that brought it into existence will inevitably lose their emotional power as new generations arise with new needs and interests.

Already we can see signs of that happening. According to the Pew Research Center, which published [an exhaustive study](#) of the attitudes of American Jews in 2013, 77 percent of those 65 or older considered remembrance of the Holocaust an essential element of Jewish identity, compared with 68 percent of those between 18 and 20. A similar, indeed more striking change involved Israel: 92 percent of the younger cohort say that people can be considered Jewish if they are strongly critical of Israel, compared with 84 percent among the older group. And three times as many younger Jews than older ones believe that the United States is *too* supportive of Israel.

Theodore Sasson, a professor of international and global studies at Middlebury College, argues that such change does not necessarily imply decreasing support for Israel among younger Diaspora Jews so much as a move toward a more individualized, less organizationally dominated way of thinking about the relationship. Yet even if he is correct, which seems unlikely given the size of the shift, there can be little doubt that the Holocaust's impact has been fading as new generations come to the fore.

One can lament all this, arguing, as one scholar of Jewish studies, Alvin H. Rosenfeld, of Indiana University, has, that something special will be lost if what happened to the Jews is watered down by treating Jewish suffering as a metaphor for all human suffering, just as one can accuse Jews who show insufficient zeal for Zion of manifesting symptoms of self-hatred. But that puts contemporary Jews in the position of making the recollection of their pain central to everything they think and do. Far better, I believe, is to face the fact that the world never stops changing, even while we never forget the past.

In theory, no reason prevents a Jewish state from embodying universalist values; no matter how far Israel turns to the right, as it so distressingly has in recent years, more than its share of writers and thinkers speak eloquently of human rights or find fault with their own society's chauvinism. In a world in which nation-states are primarily concerned with protecting their own, however, the Diaspora remains the place where universalistic Judaism will thrive best.

Its Judaism will become more complex and vibrant as its culture intermingles with other cultures. Its religion, far from dissolving into meaningless syncretism, will be enriched by its encounter with other faiths. Its ethnicity will no longer be defined by the vulgarity of Jackie Mason, the claustrophobia of *Fiddler on the Roof*, or the determination to prevent Yiddish from breathing its last breath, but instead will be free to find new forms of expression in a world that values individual freedom more than group attachment.

Because I speak favorably about the Diaspora, no one should accuse me of being a "diasporist." Readers of Philip Roth will know that I am referring to *Operation Shylock*. In the novel, a Newark-born Jewish novelist named Philip Roth finds himself distressed by another man using the same name, and even wearing the same clothes, who advocates "a program that seeks to resettle all Israeli Jews of European origin back in those countries where they or their families were residents before the outbreak of the Second World War and thereby to avert a 'second Holocaust,'" this one at the hands of the Arabs. Roth meant diasporism to be absurd, and it indeed is; leaving Tel Aviv for Krakow would benefit the residents of neither (although this did not prevent the Israeli Dutch avant-garde artist Yael Bartana from imaginatively exploring the same ground in *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, a three-part video in which a Jewish resistance movement in Poland advocates reverse Zionism in order to bring pluralism back to that country).

It is more important what Jews think than where they live.

Just as Israel remains the home of at least some Jewish universalists, the Diaspora has more than its share of narrow particularists. At one point in *Operation Shylock*, Roth the novelist is saved from a mob outside Ramallah by an Israeli lieutenant, Gal Metzler, who, as it happens, had just been reading one of his novels. They get into a discussion—*Operation Shylock*, like so much of Roth, is one long discussion after another—and Metzler tells him that "the Diaspora is the normal condition and Zionism is the abnormality," which, to him, means that only Diaspora Jews can be authentic ones. Roth was no doubt playing on writers like A.B. Yehoshua, who insist that only in Israel can Jews lead authentic lives. I disagree with both; if by authentic we mean being shaped by one tradition while gaining respect for others, Jews can lead that sort of life anywhere.

Unlike those who see threats to Jewish continuity from both anti-Semitism and assimilation, I believe that Judaism, which has been around so long, is not going away anytime soon. The crucial question is what kind of Judaism it will be: open and inquiring or defensive and insecure. No one can know the answer to that question; so much happened to the Jews in the 20th century that presuming to predict what will happen to them in the remainder of the 21st is beyond anyone's capacity. But just as Israel is a fact of life, and, in my opinion, has every right to exist (although I hope in a humane way rather than the one its current direction indicates), the Diaspora also is here to stay, and with it the universalism that was so much part of its history.

Such universalism could prove a great help to Israel as it contemplates the possibility of endless wars with its neighbors. Once the source of financial support, the Diaspora can become a place for the expression of morality. Israel lacks what the Diaspora nourishes: A vision more capacious than the state's current policy of making more enemies in the process of relying on violence to deal with those who already exist.

Like so many others concerned about where Jewish nationalism has led, I prefer a Judaism that is special but not chosen to one that is chosen but not special. Jews survive best, for themselves and for the gentile world around them, when they do more than live but live up to an ideal.

*Alan Wolfe is a professor of political science and director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. This essay is adapted from At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews, to be published by Beacon Press next month.*

---

Copyright © 2014 The Chronicle of Higher Education