
Malcolm Hoenlein

We are probably the most privileged generation in modern Jewish history. We have been blessed to witness events that, for two millennia, our ancestors could only dream and pray to see, but were not destined to experience. The State of Israel was reborn and Jerusalem reunified under Jewish sovereignty. In the face of countless obstacles and overwhelming odds, Israel has become an economic role model for and a significant player on the world stage. Moreover, Israel has sustained democracy in a region where it is a rarity. And we have seen the fulfillment of the prophetic vision of the Ingathering of the Exiles with the redemption of the endangered Jewish communities of Russia, Ethiopia, Syria and Yemen. The Talmud likens the Ingathering of the Exiles to the day of Creation. Indeed, our generation has seen a world recreated.

Israel's success is more than temporal. The State of Israel is not just another piece of real estate; Zion is intrinsic to the history and essence of the entire Jewish people. The Land of Israel is unique, with a special *kedusha* (sanctity) where certain *mitzvot* can be fulfilled. Without diminishing the importance of diaspora communities, the absolute fulfillment of a Jew can only be attained in Israel.

The entire world marvels at the fifty-year miracle of modern Israel. When former Prime Minister Peres promoted the concept of a new Middle East with the prospect of economic cooperation, many Arab leaders expressed a real fear that Israel would dominate them. Imagine a hundred million Arabs with huge oil incomes and immense territories being worried about a few million Jews in a territory the size of the state of Connecticut!

Ours could be characterized as the generation of miracles. Unlike much of the world, however, Jews have become blasé about their tremendous good

fortune. We are ignorant, oblivious or unappreciative of the miracles. We take the Jewish state for granted and have a diminishing sense of the uniqueness of the Land of Israel and of our special ties to it.

It might behoove us to recall Herzl's reaction when he was asked why he did not establish a Jewish homeland in land offered in what is now Uganda. Herzl answered to the effect that "It is like asking me why I travel hundreds of miles to visit my grandmother, when there are hundreds of old women nearby whom I could visit more easily."

In his opening commentary on the Tora, Rashi argues that the Tora begins with the account of Creation rather than the first commandment so that when in the future our right to Israel is challenged, Jews can proclaim that the Creator of the heavens and the earth gave the Land of Israel to us. This justification, some commentators note, is not really aimed at answering the rest of the world, but at reassuring us Jews—to quell any doubts we may have when the world challenges our right to the Land of Israel.

As Jews in the diaspora, we must work in synergy with Israeli Jews. Our survival is intertwined; we depend upon Israel, and Israel depends upon us. We cannot afford a divide in that relationship. Jewish unity always has been a precondition for the great events and achievements in Jewish history—from Sinai, where we stood as "one person with one heart" to receive the Tora, to the recent struggle for the freedom of Soviet Jewry, when we marched together regardless of geographic, ideological or religious differences. Although we have always been a diverse people since biblical times, we cannot afford to let our differences dominate. Our enemies see every breach in the armor of Jewish unity as an opportunity to weaken us and threaten our interests. Accordingly, we need to find common ground among all Jews and emphasize that which binds us, not that which divides us. We need to create an atmosphere in which we can talk frankly about our differences in a constructive and respectful way. We have one faith and one fate. If one part of the Jewish people is endangered, we all suffer. "We are one" is more than a fundraising campaign slogan; it is the key to our survival. Indeed, the whole of the Jewish people is far greater than the sum of its

parts. We owe it to future generations not to waste scarce resources on internal conflicts and to allow *sin'at hinam* (baseless hatred) to divert us.

The diaspora's task is not simply to lend political support and economic aid to Israel. Diaspora Jewry itself is in crisis. (Attitudes towards Israel are a symptom of that broader crisis.) Recognizing this, many today talk about Jewish continuity. Unfortunately, much of that talk is just sloganeering. Jewish continuity must be more than a justification for the existence of new communal programs. Instead, Jewish continuity needs to be understood as the core of our responsibility, the substance and essence of our being as Jews—maintaining our traditions, sustaining our values and passing them on to future generations.

There are two words that are used for inheritance: *morasha* and *yerusha*. *Yerusha* is what a rich uncle leaves you to do with as you wish. A *morasha* is something left to you in trust. The Tora refers to only two things as a *morasha*: Tora and Israel. They are bestowed upon us to enhance and to make sure that they are secure for future generations. Jewish continuity—passing on our heritage and a secure Israel for the next generation—is a charge and a responsibility we all share. Assuring Jewish continuity is one reason that, for millennia, when non-Jews educated only their elite, Jewish communities were mandated to see to it that every child received an education. It was a collective responsibility and a priority for the entire community.

As diaspora Jews, we have to stop expecting Israel to solve our problems, and vice versa. We have to work together, sharing resources and experiences to address our common challenges. We cannot send sixteen-year-old American Jews to Israel for a three-week trip and expect them to become Jews, if we have ignored the first fifteen years of their Jewish upbringing. Likewise, Israelis should not point to intermarriage rates of American Jews to avoid the need to make young Israelis Jews as well. Being an Israeli citizen is not enough: Israelis need Jewish substance that gives them a full appreciation of why the Land of Israel is a special place, why so many have given their lives for it—why the goal of “next year in Jerusalem” sustained and motivated our people over the generations.

For far too long, we have focused merely on the negatives in Jewish history. The reason that Jews look back is in order to look forward. We must study the Holocaust and the tragedies of the past to learn the lessons so we can spare future generations these trials and tribulations. But Jewish continuity cannot be built on negatives. While we must be keenly aware of the dangers if we are to respond to them effectively, we must stress the celebrations, the joys, the victories, the miracle of Judaism today. Judaism is a positive religion—urging us to celebrate life and commanding us to infuse our religious observances with *simha*.

We failed to do a sufficient job educating our fellow Jews. As a result, many potential supporters of Israel have become alienated. When looking at Israel, all too often we lose perspective, focusing on day-to-day policy decisions by this or that government. There is a great deal of ignorance, misinformation, disinformation. There are real problems, and we must invest in efforts to educate, sensitize and understand each other. Israel is not perfect. It is not Disneyland. It exists in the real world and faces real dangers, and at times it makes real mistakes. Overall, however, we can be justly proud of Israel's record in every area and we need to speak up more vociferously in her defense.

As opposed to a generation of fifty years ago, we can rightly be described as a the generation of miracles. In our time, God has certainly done his part for the Jewish people. Now we have to do ours. Zionism is a dynamic and ongoing process, one extending beyond the creation of the State of Israel. This holds especially true if we take seriously the belief that “from Zion, the Tora will come forth.” With a majority of the world's Jewish population in the near future, Israel will be the cultural and religious center for world Jewry; for many diaspora Jews, it will continue to be at the core of their Jewish identity.

A quarter-century ago, then-Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Allon remarked to a group of Jewish leaders in New York that it might be better for American Jewry to take some of the money it sends to Israel and put it to better use at home by devoting these resources to Jewish education. That sentiment has been echoed frequently in recent years in Israel and abroad.

But it should not be presented as an either-or proposition. We must meet both responsibilities, and doing so must be a joint enterprise of the Jewish state and the Jewish people. Together we can meet the great challenges of today and the responsibilities of tomorrow. We must recall what our Patriarch Jacob said after describing the unique characteristics of each of his sons—good and bad—he reminds them and us that “all of these are the Tribes of Israel.” Our differences can only be addressed if we appreciate the preponderance of that which unites us. Future generations will hold us to account, just as we look back and judge past generations. Jewish unity and Jewish commitment and Jewish education are our best investments in Israel’s future. Israel is essential to the future of the diaspora. To be Zionists, our youth first have to be Jews. It’s time to proclaim the miracles and prove ourselves worthy of them.

Malcolm Hoenlein is executive vice-chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. This article is excerpted from Mr. Hoenlein’s remarks on Zionism and Israel-diaspora relations.