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## Israel's evolving approach to citizens who have returned to the diaspora

The Zionists who first envisioned Israel as a homeland for the world's Jews in the 1890s conceived of a state populated through the ingathering of exiles as producing an end to Jews' long saga of oppression in other people's lands. In 1948, this undertaking became a reality with the founding of the state in the wake of the Holocaust (Cohen, 1997). During the last 73 years, Israel has endured political, economic, social, ethnic, and military challenges but ultimately survived, growing from a population of 500,000 in 1948 to nearly 10,000,000 in 2022 (Jewish Virtual Library, 2022).

While Zionist ideology called for the movement of the world's Jewish population to Israel, a large fraction stayed where they were. Most migrants to Israel have been stateless persons in search of refuge following the Holocaust, deportation from Arab countries, and recent flight from Iran and the former Soviet Union. In contrast, few Jews from the affluent and democratic nations of the West chose to become Israelis. Accordingly, a large fraction of the diaspora chose to contribute political and financial backing from afar.

While diaspora Jews' unwillingness to move to Israel disappointed Zionists, they understood the practical benefits provided by having supporters abroad. It is doubtful that the Jewish State would have survived without the assistance of diaspora Jews and their nations of residence (Evron, 1995; Sobel, 1986).

Consequently, Israelis learned to accept an enduring diaspora. However, they showed far less tolerance toward their own citizens going abroad. The Jewish People Policy Institute estimates that as of 2015, 575,000 Israelis had been living abroad for at least a year and had not returned (Jewish People Policy Institute, 2017). This group includes persons born elsewhere who became Israeli citizens, as well as native-born Israeli Jews (*sabras*). Israeli emigrants currently dwell in several countries including the UK, France, Germany, Canada, and Australia. However, the great majority – estimated to be between 150,000 and 250,000 persons – live in the US (United States Bureau of the Census, 1990; Gold, 2002).

From the Israeli point of view, migration from the Jewish State threatens the assertion that Israel is the best place for Jews to live. And practically, Jews are needed to populate

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the country and to ensure its military, economic and demographic viability in a hostile world region. In contrast to the Hebrew term *aliyah* that refers to Jews' move from the diaspora to the higher place of Israel, *yeridah* describes the stigmatized downward path of Israelis who descend from the promised land into the diaspora. Emigrants were the *yordim*. "There is an implication that the citizen who has left Israel is guilty of a subtle form of betrayal of the shared obligation to protect the land of Israel" (Linn, Barkan-Ascher, 1996: 7).

This article examines the means by which Israel has sought to fulfill the contradictory goals involved with maintaining contacts with emigrants while simultaneously sustaining a national mission that asserts Jews can only achieve fulfilment, security, and self-determination by residing in Israel (Engel, 2021). It describes three successive approaches by which Israel and the larger global Jewish community have addressed the challenges associated with Israeli emigration. I identify these as condemnation, pragmatic acceptance, and the assent of the Israeli American Council (IAC).

## Methods

Data for this article were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation fieldwork with Israeli immigrants in North America and Europe. A major source was 194 interviews (conducted in both Hebrew and English) with a socially diverse sample of Israeli immigrants and others knowledgeable about their community in Los Angeles between 1991 and 1996. Additional interviews were collected between 1994 and 2005 in suburban Detroit, Silicon Valley, New York City, London, and Paris and with returned emigrants in Israel. Most interviews were audio recorded, translated into English (if conducted in Hebrew) and transcribed. All names of respondents in this report are pseudonyms. (Gold, 2002: 27-29). In addition to these sources, the article relies on official statistics, communal reports, academic publications, and journalistic accounts (Gold, 2013).

## Strategies for responding to Israeli emigrants

### Condemnation

From the formation of Israel (1948) until the middle to late 1980s, Israeli emigrants were denounced by both Israel and the local Jewish communities where they settled. This denigration reached its peak during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Israeli government officials depicted émigrés as unpatriotic, selfish and of low character (Cohen, 2007).

Israeli politicians such as Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, voiced especially vitriolic responses to the issue, calling Israeli emigrants "moral lepers", "the fallen among the weaklings", and "the dregs of the earth" (Ritterband, 1986: 113). Actions intended to dis-

courage emigration involved Israel-based peer pressure in the form of unflattering journalism, and condemnation by political leaders.

Academic studies, news reports, and portrayals in entertainment media commonly depicted Israeli emigrants as encountering difficulty in their attempts to handle the host society (Shokeid, 1988; Sabar, 2000). A 1979 text on Israeli social problems explained “yordim are described by the media in negative terms, and where failure to adjust overseas can be cited, this is reported with great relish” (Greenberg, 1979: 55). Official estimates of the number of Israelis abroad were widely exaggerated to emphasize the threat of emigration to the country’s population (Sedan, 1980).

The Israeli government used its leverage with host Jewish communities to withhold aid. The Israeli Consulate in New York “repeatedly urged the Federation [the leading American Jewish community organization] to provide no special services to Israelis” who sought to settle in the US (Cohen, 1986: 159; Tugend, 1989). Accordingly, Israeli emigrants were denied benefits and services that were extended as a matter of course to Jewish migrants from every other country of origin (Gold, 2016; Brinkman, 2019).

A 1993 report entitled *The Israeli Corner of the American Jewish Community*, asserted that the communal response had been to approach Israeli émigrés as “anything but Jewish settlers seeking to build new lives for themselves and their families in the United States” (Rosen, 1993: 2). An employee of a Jewish communal agency working with Israeli emigrants recalled the climate of hostility towards them during the 1970s and 1980s:

I wouldn’t call it (American Jews’ attitude towards immigrants) hostility, but I would say that there was a real discomfort. For the Americans, it wasn’t an individual thing but a global phenomenon that is, “How could they come here? They belong *there*. I mean, they’re beautiful Israeli sabras (Jews born in Israel). Sabras belong in Israel, and you know, we help them, and they could fight in the wars.” That was the American perception (Gold, 2002: 156).

### **Pragmatic acceptance**

In the late 1980s, both Israel and host country Jewish agencies began to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards Israeli expatriates. This had the effect of reducing the stigma associated with emigration and opened a path for their incorporation into local Jewish communities. During a 1989 trip to Los Angeles, Israeli Absorption Minister, Yitzhak Peretz, claimed that Israel should change its attitude towards émigrés if they cannot be convinced to return. “Israelis,” he said, “should be encouraged to be part of the Jewish community and become integrated because it offers them, and particularly their children, some chance of retaining their Jewish identity” (Tugend, 1989).

In 1990, Los Angeles consul-general, Ron Ronen, approached the local Jewish Federation (which had already been offering some outreach activities since 1984) to develop a new and more inclusive policy towards Israeli émigrés. A year later in 1991, Prime Minister Rabin recanted his famous condemnation of Israeli émigrés in an interview in the Israeli American newspaper *Hadashot LA* saying: “What I said then doesn’t apply

today [...] the Israelis living abroad are an integral part of the Jewish community and there is no point in talking about ostracism” (Rosen, 1993: 3).

“Because of the importance it attaches to the re-emigration of Israelis to Israel” in 1992, the Israeli government took charge of the remigration of emigrants from an NGO called the Jewish Agency. In addition, government policy provided returning émigrés with cash assistance, low-cost air fare, suspension of import duties, assistance in finding jobs and housing, financial aid for school tuition, and reduction in military duty (Yisrael Shelanu, 1995).

Towards the same end, Israel implemented the lone soldier programme which facilitates the children of Israeli emigrants’ involvement in the Israeli Defense Forces – a rite of passage essential for achieving full membership in Israeli society. Since the early 1990s, major Jewish communities have created various endeavours to aid and incorporate Israelis. These include social activities, Israeli-style education programmes, celebration of Israeli holidays, and the creation of Israeli divisions of communal organizations. In London, Paris, Chicago, Washington DC and other cities, émigrés can attend social events in a network of embassy-sponsored Israeli Houses that are intended to keep overseas Israelis affiliated with the home country. Through the provision of these benefits, Israel accepted the presence of its citizens living abroad while continuing to emphasize remigration as the most favored outcome (Cohen, 2007).

Israel’s revised attitude towards emigration developed in a context of unprecedented demographic and economic growth and significant improvements in the country’s political situation. In 1989, the time of the last major spike of anti-emigrant editorializing in Israeli newspapers, Israel was suffering economic stagnation, had a rate of inflation near 20%, an ongoing fear of war, and an inability to retain many of its best and brightest.

However, a mere decade later, Israel had signed the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords with the Palestinians and seen a relaxation of the Arab economic embargo. At the same time, due to the massive Soviet *aliyah*, Israel’s population had increased by close to 20%, or almost 1 million people, many of whom were highly educated. Its inflation rate was below 3%, and it had the greatest number of engineers per capita in the world, almost double that of the second-ranking United States (Richtel, 1998). During the 1980s, Israel’s economy was plagued by stagflation and its major export was citrus. By 2000, however, it had become a centre of high tech and had developed into one of the world’s top growth economies (Hiltzik, 2000; Saxenian, 2006; Senor, Singer, 2009).

As such, it could offer its more affluent citizens a standard of material life equal to that of the industrialized West. These political, economic, technological, and demographic developments transformed Israeli society, making it better able to tolerate population losses to emigration.

Israel’s economic metamorphosis made it ever more in need of a globalized workforce – including the overseas involvement of Israelis in venture capital markets – to facilitate continued growth. During the 1990s, Israel had developed a reputation

a high-tech centre, with emigrants converging in advanced production enclaves in Silicon Valley, Route 128, New York City, Toronto, and London. A number of these enterprises received funding from the Israeli government's YOZMA venture capital programme (Avnimelech, 2009).

Research suggests that Israeli émigrés working in STEM fields are regarded by their nationals in a much more positive light than were an earlier wave of exiles who gravitated towards typical diaspora Jewish enterprises such as real estate, construction, and the garment industry. In this way, a segment of the contemporary emigrant population is now celebrated as innovators and contributors as opposed to being derided as self-serving dropouts (Zilber, 2006).

Finally, Israeli policymakers realized that emigration is not always permanent. In fact, members of the emigrant community often travel to Israel for business, pleasure and family reasons and are much more likely to make *aliyah* than other segments of diaspora Jewry. All of these factors convinced policy makers to encourage return rather than punish going abroad (Yisrael Shelanu, 1995).

### Assent of IAC

In 2013, the treatment of Israeli emigrants in the diaspora (especially in the US) was further transformed via the establishment of the Israeli American Council (IAC). While programmes for dealing with Israeli emigrants during eras of condemnation and pragmatic acceptance were largely controlled by the Israeli government, the IAC was funded and conceptualized by an Israeli American couple, Miriam and Sheldon Adelson, superstars of Jewish philanthropy (IAC, 2018; Sichel, 2015; Linn, 2021). The goal of the IAC was to link Israeli Americans, Jews, and Israelis in a common and bi-national agenda to defend against antisemitism, the loss of Jewish tradition and other threats by uniting the world's two largest Jewish communities – Israel and the US (Adelson, 2019; Kampeas, 2017).

Thoroughly rejecting the censure formerly leveled at Israeli emigrants in the US, the IAC deemed them “Israeli Americans” and emphasized the central role of this group in forging deep and enduring connections between Israeli emigrants, diaspora Jews, and Israelis. Such a focus reflects the growing number of persons possessing dual citizenship (a status embraced by the Adelsons themselves) which signifies their shared loyalty to these two nations (Sales, 2017; Guttman, 2014).

In addition to celebrating Israeli Americans' role in fusing diaspora Jews and Israelis, the IAC also provides them with a wide range of activities and venues that underlies their immersion in Israeli and Jewish life. These include celebrations of Jewish and Israeli holidays; the provision of activities for children, families and young professionals; opportunities to engage in social and business networking; presentations by prominent Israelis, and occasions for political activism. While the IAC was formed in Southern California, its events and services are now provided in numerous locations, coast to coast (Rosenberg, 2014; IAC, 2018).

## Discussion

In this appraisal, we see how Israel's means of dealing with emigrants has evolved over time as a consequence of political, economic, and demographic circumstances impacting the country and major points of migrant settlement.

Prior to the late 1980s, Israeli emigrants were condemned for pursuing self-interest abroad rather than responding to the collective call to build and defend the Jewish State. Accordingly, they were denied assistance and sponsorship from both the country of origin as well as co-ethnics in points of settlement.

Following a period of economic and demographic growth that made the Jewish State more affluent, secure, and enmeshed in the global economy, Israel's reaction to its emigrant population evolved from repudiation to pragmatic acceptance. This involved both Israel's and host Jewish communities' engagement with and support of Israeli emigrants. Despite improved relations, re-migration remained the favoured remedy for emigration by Israel and many emigrants.

Most recently, the IAC ushered in a third means for dealing with the presence of Israelis abroad. Established by consummate philanthropists, the organization seeks to unify and mobilize American Jews, Israelis, and Israeli Americans who pursue Jewish security and advancement. Drawing from the philanthropy of its founders and the larger community, the IAC provides Israeli Americans and American Jews with a wide range of Jewish and Israeli activities in communities across the US.

## Conclusions

The review of the three successive strategies used by Israel and Jewish communities abroad suggests that rather than repudiating the diaspora, the general trend of Israeli policy has involved extending the carrot of outreach as opposed to the stick of discipline to Israeli émigrés. Both the pragmatic acceptance and assent of the IAC approaches provide émigrés with more support and autonomy and less criticism than did the repudiation model maintained prior to the late 1980s.

This finding is not surprising given that the periods during which the two most recent approaches were developed and applied took place during historically high levels of global engagement, migration, and transnationalism. The impacts of the era were especially significant for Israel, as the country experienced remarkable demographic, economic and cultural transformations – which provided rewards to those willing and able to participate in a range of economic, cultural, and technological projects abroad. This summary suggests that Israel's limited inclination to discourage emigration coupled with the economic and cultural rewards associated with maintaining good relations with overseas citizens offers a practicable trajectory for a country committed to both incorporating the diaspora and retaining contacts with its citizens abroad.

Unfortunately, we lack the data required to accurately ascertain these approaches' effectiveness in shaping the behaviour of Israeli emigrants. If such data were available, we would be in a better position to understand and evaluate various means for coping with emigration from a state whose *raison d'être* is the ingathering of exiles and ending the diaspora. Until that time, we will continue to speculate about the ways through which nations and their diasporas retain ties in a changing environment.

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**Abstract:** This article examines the means by which Israel has sought to fulfill the contradictory goals involved with maintaining contacts with emigrants while simultaneously sustaining a national mission that asserts Jews can only achieve fulfilment, security, and self-determination by residing in their own country. It describes three successive approaches by which Israel and the larger global Jewish community have addressed the challenges associated with Israeli emigration. These are condemnation, pragmatic acceptance, and the assent of the Israeli American Council.

**Keywords:** Ingathering of the exiles, Diaspora Jews, Israeli emigration, Emigrant organizations, Israeli Americans