“Like Oil and Water”:
Progressive Judaism and the Nations of the World

Lawrence A. Englander

During my first year of rabbinical school at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem, I remember studying the following midrash describing the status of the Jewish people among the nations of the world:

*Your name is like oil poured forth* (Song of Songs 1:3):

1. Just as olive oil in its original state [as raw olive] is bitter but afterward becomes sweet, so “Though your beginning was small, yet your end shall greatly increase” (Job 8:7).
2. Just as this oil is improved by crushing, so Israel does *t’shuvah* through chastisements.
3. Just as this oil does not mix with other liquids, so Israel does not mix with the other nations of the world.
4. Just as this oil brings light to the world, so Israel is a light to the world, as Scripture states, “Nations shall walk by your light” (Isa. 40:3; *Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, 1:2).

That was in 1971. With regard to statement 1, my classmates and I thought of how our people had spread from Eretz Yisrael to permeate almost every civilization on Earth. We remembered with pride the song from our NFTY days, “Wherever you go, there’s always someone Jewish.” We smiled confidently as we read statement 2: Our people may have suffered in times past, but we no longer need to find a justification for being “crushed” since we now enjoy a freedom and economic prosperity greater than any other time in Jewish history. As for statement 4, we recalled the teaching of our Reform ancestors that the “Mission of Israel” is to bring justice,

---

LAWRENCE A. ENGLANDER (C75) is rabbi of Solel Congregation of Mississauga, Ontario, and is a former editor of the *CCAR Journal*.
freedom, and peace to all the peoples of the world—a message that the Reform Movement has carried since its inception.

It was statement 3 that gave us the most trouble. Had we not integrated ourselves so thoroughly into Western culture that we could easily count Jews among political leaders, entrepreneurs, and movie celebrities? The Jewish People and General Culture were no longer like oil and water; on the contrary, we had mixed so well into these societies that we were also helping to shape them. Anti-Semitism was almost nonexistent—and besides, we now had the State of Israel to act in defense of persecuted Jewish communities and bring them to safety.1 Comfortably swaddled in our blanket of security and confidence, we studied this midrash as a quaint relic of our past existence whose warnings were no longer relevant.

But then, just weeks ago, I began to read the essays that follow in this issue. It seems that the prophecy in statement 1 has been compromised in present times: you can no longer find Jews everywhere you go. There has been an exodus of Jews from Arab lands and from many places in Africa and Asia. In Germany, Austria, and areas of the Former Soviet Union, the Jewish remnant from the Holocaust has found other places to live; most Jews who do live there now have immigrated from other countries. The downturn of the global economy, especially in Europe, has provoked a sober second look at statement 2: it is hard to sustain synagogues, schools, and other Jewish communal institutions when you experience a severe reduction of income.

As in the past, times of austerity are not good for the Jews; consequently, the liquids in statement 3 have separated yet again. Anti-Semitism is on the rise, and even the most tolerant European governments (not to mention many Jews) tend to regard Israeli government policies with suspicion. Ironically, within the Jewish State itself, our Progressive communities face opposition from our own kin: Chareidim and Chardalim2 refuse to recognize us as viable streams of the Jewish People. As for statement 4, how do we advance the Mission of Israel if our gentile neighbors refuse to accept the message?

The essays in this issue give us insight into a world rather different from the one most of us experience in North America. For one thing, the specter of the Holocaust still looms darkly over the countries where the Nazis had decimated the Jewish
population. Perhaps the testimonies of rabbis working in these countries will help to shake us out of our naivety. This is not to say, however, that everything in these locales is gloom and doom. On the contrary, you will read about the noble history of Jewish communities in many parts of the world and their indelible contributions to their country of birth. Moreover, the multinational experience of our people has given to us all a rich blend of Jewish cultures.

It is our hope that these essays will engender a lively discussion among our readers and the people whom you teach. To begin this process, I offer the following questions for your consideration. They center around the notion of Jewish Peoplehood—a notion that appears to be a stronger component of contemporary Jewish identity than we find in Canada and the United States, where we tend to define ourselves more as a religion. So the first question is this: Does the sense of Jewish Peoplehood form a stronger bond between one Jew and another, wherever we live? Does it impart to us a greater responsibility to care for each other?

Chazal seemed to think so.3 In comparing two prophets, they depicted Elijah as expressing “love for the parent” (i.e., God) but not “love for the child” (i.e., the Israelite people). Jonah, in contrast, demonstrated the opposite. Despite his religious zeal, Elijah’s prophetic gift was taken from him shortly after the contest on Mount Carmel. But Jonah, even though he hoped to protect his own people by disobeying God and leaving the Ninevites unrepentant, was given a second chance. For the Rabbis, love of people trumps even the love of God. The ideal prophet, of course, would possess both—as did Jeremiah in this passage in the M’chilta.

This brings us to the second question. In a few of the essays, the authors point out that community programming has shifted more toward Jewish cultural events and Israel-centered discussions rather than on text study, liturgy, and theology. If this be so, what is the status of the “love of parent,” expressed through communal prayer in these Progressive congregations? How does this outlook affect Jewish traditional practice of the ritual mitzvot? What is it that gives their constituents a Jewish identity that is distinct from that of their non-Jewish neighbors? If Jeremiah is the ideal, then perhaps the Jewish communities on either side of the globe have much to learn from each other.
Our third question: How does this sense of Peoplehood affect our relationship with those members of the Jewish People who refuse to acknowledge the Progressive communities as equal partners? How successful have these Progressive communities been in attracting members despite being shunned by the Orthodox establishment? Are we repeating history in allowing sinat chinam (baseless hatred) to tear our people apart? And what can the worldwide Progressive community do to resolve this impasse?

Fourth: What is the relationship between each Progressive community and the general population? If anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment are prevalent among the populace, what role does the state government play in fostering or mitigating them? Despite these challenges, is there still a sense that Jews have a messianic mission to perform among the nations of the world?

I believe the essays that follow have a great deal to teach us, wherever we may live. I wish to thank the authors for their detailed, candid—and sometimes painful—testimonies of the communities whom they serve. I also thank my editorial team, Rabbis Tony Bayfield and Andrew Goldstein, both of London, for adding their insights into the process of preparing this conversation. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to the editor of this Journal, Susan Laemmle, for developing the idea for this cluster and for shepherding it through with patience and skill.

The reader will notice that many countries do not appear in this series. It was not for lack of trying: other potential authors were approached but, for different reasons, declined to participate. If these essays generate sufficient interest, perhaps the editorial board might consider launching a sequel so that Asia and the southern hemisphere, in particular, will be better represented.

These essays prompted me to take a second look at the midrash with which we began. The following analogy may sound trivial at first, but I believe it captures the present relationship between Am Yisrael v’umot haolam. If Israel is like oil, the nations of the world can be compared to balsamic vinegar. When these liquids are combined, they produce an attractive pattern and a delicious taste. But each maintains its separate identity. Perhaps our destiny as Jews, wherever we are, is to blend within the majority society but not to dissolve into it. The degree to which we attain this balance may determine our success in preserving our unique heritage and advancing our prophetic mission.
Notes

1. At that time (1971), we were still demonstrating for the release of Soviet Refuseniks, and the plight of Ethiopian Jews had not yet appeared on our radar screen. Now both communities are able to live securely in Israel and elsewhere.


3. See M’chilta, Bo, piska 1.

4. See, e.g., BT Yoma 9b.