On March 31, 2005, after six years of debates, Israel’s supreme court—sitting as the High Court of Justice—ruled that non-Orthodox conversions in which the study process was conducted in Israel but was finalized in the United States by Reform or Conservative Rabbis will be recognized. This ruling broke the monopoly of the Orthodoxy over recognized conversions inside Israel. The court accepted the petition filed by the Religious Action Center, the extension arm of the U.S.-based Reform movement, and allowed for the first time in the state’s history non-Orthodox converts to be fully recognized by Israel as Jews deserving Israeli citizenship based on Israel’s law of return. The ruling, which drew harsh criticism from Orthodox leaders, was the latest manifestation of a culture war over Jewish identity inside and outside Israel. Part of the debate is over the dilemma of who is a Jew, and the question of who has the ultimate religious authority among Jews to determine membership.

The clash at the heart of the debate over Jewish identity inside Israel within the diaspora and between Israel and diaspora Jewry also involves dilemmas of Jewish politics and geography—including who speaks on behalf of the Jews and where the boundaries of the state of Israel or the Jewish homeland end. These dilemmas have far-reaching implications for the dissemination of religious values across frontiers and the role of kinship in international affairs. For example, just a few days before the Supreme Court’s decision on conversion, a group of forty people, mostly Orthodox Jews from New York and New Jersey, arrived in Tel Aviv to demonstrate solidarity with settlers in Gush Katif, the main Israeli settlement bloc in the Gaza Strip. The group included bankers, two state
supreme court judges, and doctors, and was comprised of both Demo-
crats and Republicans. Their leader, Dov Hikind, a member of the New
York State Assembly, promised to bring thousands of American Jews to
Gaza in the summer of 2005 to obstruct the Israeli government’s plan to
evacuate Gaza. Helen Friedman, head of Americans for a Safe Israel,
vowed to return in the summer with her family to organize resistance,
which she described as civil disobedience. “Our slogan is ‘let our people
stay,’” said the primary school teacher, invoking the famous biblical call
of “Let my people go,” which Moses addressed to Pharaoh. “The land
belongs to all the Jewish people and not only to Israelis,” said Friedman.¹
At the other end of the religio-ideological spectrum, the Association of
Reform Rabbis in the United States declared their support for Sharon’s
government, emphasizing that the sanctity of life precedes the sanctity
of the land. The president of the Hebrew Union College, David Ellenson,
welcomed Sharon in New York, saying that the courage shown by the
prime minister in evacuating settlers from Gaza improves diaspora-Israeli
relations.²

The identity of U.S.-based diaspora groups is made up of elements
that are shared with the homeland, elements that are unique to the Amer-
ican experience, and elements shared with kin in other countries. Dias-
poric interests in homeland affairs are the product of a multiplicity of
motivations, among them the desire that there be harmony and a
confluence of interests between them and their kin in their respective
homelands. Debates between diasporic and homeland elements may arise
over the interests of “the people” and the interests of the homeland,
including the extent to which the diaspora should have a voice in defining
the terms of the homeland’s existence, well-being, and international
behavior. These issues are constantly contested, subject as they are to
developments on the American domestic scene, the realm of interna-
tional politics, and homeland affairs. For diasporas that are part of the
rich and accommodating tapestry of American society, the difficulty of
maintaining the content of their respective ethnocultural and religious
identities in America has led to an increasing dependence on ties to the
homeland for identity sustenance. Homeland societies, for their part,
which have been struggling against economic and military challenges, as
well as with core questions concerning ideational foundations, have
turned to diaspora communities for material, psychological, and spiritual
assistance to ensure their viability and inform national identities and
goals. The fact that many U.S-based diasporas and their respective
homelands often see their character and interests intertwined in some
fashion underscores the elastic and flexible nature of identity and interest across frontiers.

This interaction is particularly powerful and durable when diasporic and homeland (ethnonational) identities are strongly linked with religious affiliation, as in the case of the Hindus, Punjabi Sikhs, Catholic Poles, Irish, Armenians, and Jews vis-à-vis Israel. The saliency of the religious component in the identity of these groups is strengthened by its ties to their ethnonational origin and the strong resonance of a homeland, which is deeply intertwined in the religion. In the American context, the religious component of these diasporic identities is also embellished because other ideational components and forces of communal cohesion—ethnicity, language, geography, and nationalism, which form the core of identity inside the homeland—are constantly eroded in the face of a strong assimilationist culture. In addition, in the current U.S. context, religion is appreciated and culturally valued much more than ethnicity. In fact, “religious organizations become the means of maintaining and expressing ethnic identity [in the United States] not just for non-Christian groups such as Hindus, but also for groups such as the Chinese Christians, Korean Christians, and Maya Catholics.” In some respects religious affiliation provides a lower cost for the creation and assertion of homeland-related identities as part of the American way of life that greatly respects religiosity. If we add religion to occasional concerns of kinship security (e.g., Armenians and Nagorno-Karabakh, Hindus versus Pakistanis in Kashmir, or the struggle of Irish-Americans over Northern Ireland), these are the twin concerns that mobilize diasporas today.

Indeed, the interaction between Jewish-Americans and Israel is a model for both decision makers and scholars of interactions between diasporas and their kin states on political, economic, and religious affairs. The growing fluidity and diversity of Jewishness in the United States and in Israel, the two largest centers of world Jewry, compounded by a renewed sense of threat to Jewish security worldwide (emanating from the violence in the Middle East and the concomitant anti-Semitic campaign of the early twenty-first century), make the study of the mutual influences between American and Israeli Jews a valuable study in the overall analysis of diasporas in world affairs.

This chapter examines the Israeli-diaspora relationship from the perspective of an evolving Jewish identity. The question of Jewish identity in Israel and in the United States, the continuing insistence of many Jewish-Americans on perceiving Israel as a critical source of their own identity—and therefore as a crucial target of their influence—and Israel’s direct or
indirect involvement in the lives of all Jewish communities create a
dynamic in which reciprocal influences mutually constitute Jewish iden-
tity. The chapter underscores the reasons for Jewish-Americans’ increas-
ing involvement in and impact on the Israeli identity battle. It also ana-
lyzes the growing openness of Israeli society to both Orthodox and
non-Orthodox diasporic influences. The new modes of Jewish-American
participation in Israeli affairs—domestic and international, on the one
hand, and Israeli rethinking of its own position vis-à-vis the diaspora in
terms of legitimacy, status, power, and identity, on the other—has
opened the way for greater negotiation over, and coordination of, the
meaning and purpose of Judaism in our time.

While many speak of the widening “gulf between the two centers of
world Jewry” due to divergence of identities, or of “the waning of the
American Jewish love affair with Israel,” I argue the opposite.4 Today,
Jewish-Americans influence the nature of Jewish identity in Israel more
than ever before, and Israel is reaching out to diasporic voices in an
unprecedented manner. This mutual reinforcement draws the two com-
munities closer together, reinvigorating Jewish identity in both coun-
tries. Indeed, American Jews, from those most deeply and directly
involved with Jewish communal life and with Israel to those who habitu-
ally shunned synagogues and other Jewish institutions and eschewed
involvement with anything Israeli, found themselves by the beginning of
the twenty-first century confronted by myriad issues ranging from iden-
tity to physical security that were catalyzed or radically intensified by the
Middle East’s newest war of attrition, and further exacerbated by the ter-
ror attacks of September 11 and their aftermath. The new conflict raised
uncomfortable questions for American Jews, not least for the unaffiliated.
These questions included, among others, the direct and personal mean-
ing to themselves of an existential crisis in Israel and among threatened
Jewish communities elsewhere; the moral component of Israel’s war and
the United States’ war and their responsibility for it, if any; and, based on
these two dilemmas, what they owed their country—or countries—and
how it would be possible to navigate their several obligations.

A deeper understanding of these questions sheds light on the broader
phenomena of ethnoreligious American impact on the identity and poli-
tics of other countries via their diasporas. As will become evident, the two
issues that dominate diaspora-Israeli relations are security and identity,
both in the United States and in Israel. The perceived significance of
identity issues on both sides is elastic and always determined by concerns
with security. When security is threatened, debates over identity recede.
Equally, when security threats recede, debates over identity resurface. Indeed, perceptions regarding the acuteness of the security issues are not always shared between and within the two countries, and the debates will directly correspond to the differing emphases on Jewish identity. Yet when perceptions of acute insecurity are evident, they rapidly create a sense of kinship solidarity that overwhelms other dimensions of identity. Thus, an examination of the interplay of these two issues with the Israeli–Jewish-American case also generates important theoretical lessons.

Judaism and the Homeland Dimension

Throughout the 1990s the Israeli-diaspora relationship had been evolving in different directions. For almost a decade, many Israelis and diaspora Jews believed that a comprehensive Middle East peace would alter fundamentally both Israel's Jewish character and relations between the sovereign Jewish state and Jewish existence in the West. Peace would have enabled Israel to achieve a level of normalization that would have loosened the bonds of involvement with and responsibility for the diaspora, while releasing the diaspora from burdensome entanglements with Israeli security issues that had overshadowed their lives in their countries of domicile for over a generation. As late as the summer of 2000 the prevailing sense among observers of Jewish-American affairs was that “the Israel agenda” of American Jews and Jewish advocacy groups “has changed radically. Whatever the serious problems and deep pitfalls in the peace process, the issues that have come to the fore are related more to the relationship between Israel and America’s Jews than with the physical security of Israel.”

Indeed, far from representing a process of detachment, the 1990s were marked by a growing involvement of Jewish-American liberal movements in the backlash against and coercion by Israel’s religious establishment, which led many Israelis to shed their religious identities even beyond their secular Zionist socialization. In 1999, U.S.-based Reform and Conservative movements funded a public campaign on Israeli billboards and in the media, calling on secular Israelis to embrace religious pluralism under the slogan “There is more than one way to be a Jew.” The campaign, financed by a grant from a Jewish family foundation in San Francisco, met with a harsh response from the Israeli ultra-Orthodox sector. This campaign was part of a growing Jewish-American involvement in the battle over Israel’s Jewish identity. This battle, often described in general terms as the struggle between secular and religious
Jews, or between “Israeliness” and “Jewishness,” was the most controversial domestic theme in Israeli politics and civic culture in the 1990s, with far-reaching political, economic, and legal ramifications. Only the al-Aqsa intifada, which erupted in late September 2000, and the ensuing wave of Palestinian terrorism that brought security back to the center of the Jewish agenda were able to heal this rupture that threatened Israeli society from within. Ari Shavit, one of Israel’s famous writers, said, today the Jewish people is waging two existential wars simultaneously. One for the body, against the Arabs, and a second war for the soul, against itself. The identification of Judaism with a religion from which people are trying to dissociate themselves is creating a very serious vacuum [in Israel]. That is why there is a deep recoil from everything Jewish. But without Jewish identity, we will not be able to exist.

As Asher Arian has noted, since the 1980s “there has been a parallel growth of both secularism and religion in the country, decreasing the spirit of coexistence and pluralism, and increasing the anxieties and fears of a ‘war of cultures’—or worse—among the Jews of Israel.” Certainly by the mid-1990s violence has become a common feature of the Israeli Kulturkampf, most dramatically expressed in the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Religious ultranationalists saw Rabin’s willingness to trade Jewish land for peace with the Palestinians as a sin against divine law. Indeed, the religious aspects of the Israeli Kulturkampf link dilemmas of Jewish identity boundaries with attachments and commitments to the physical ancient and modern boundaries of the Jewish state. On June 24, 2000, with secular-religious tensions rising, religious extremists set a Conservative synagogue in the heart of Jerusalem on fire. Former prime minister Ehud Barak declared the attack “shocking . . . a horrible act that chills the souls of all Jews.” Yet, just months later, after the apparent collapse of the Oslo Peace Process, and as the identity issues among Jews were pushed to the side in the face of a renewed Arab-Jewish conflict, Israeli president Moshe Katsav said that the violent clashes between Jews and Arabs helped reduce the divisions that exist in Israeli society.

Before the eruption of violence between Israeli and Palestinians in the autumn of 2000, the struggle over Israel’s Jewish character also had been considered the most contentious issue within the Jewish-American diaspora, which has been grappling with its own identity. True, internal Jewish-American debates regarding the standards for gauging Jewish iden-
tity are mostly informed by the reality of Jewish life in the United States and are thus somewhat distant from internal Israeli debates. Yet, the American and Israeli contexts are closely interconnected in principle and in practice. Jewish-American positions on matters of politics and society in the United States, including on Judaism and the interests of the Jewish people, are often fashioned according to perceptions about Israel, U.S.-Israeli relations, and Israeli domestic and international behavior. Israeli politics and society, in turn, has been highly dependent on the government and the Jewish community of the United States and must take into consideration the views of the diaspora regarding Israel’s disposition on matters of war and peace, as well as Israel’s Jewish and democratic character.

Certainly the efforts of non-Orthodox denominations to influence the homeland’s Jewish identity are not new. Yet, until the 1980s their intervention in Israeli affairs was sporadic at best. In 1977, Charles Liebman wrote that “because Israel is a symbol, its particular policies are not very important to [non-Orthodox] American Jews . . . fall[ing] outside the boundaries of [their] legitimate activity.” The Orthodox, however, are the only ones who “have a clear image of what Israel should be like and a sense of religious obligation to translate the image into specific policies.” Liebman could only envisage Jewish-American Orthodox interventions to restrain Israeli Zionist attempts to erode the state’s “Jewish content.” The assertion that Israeli Jewish content is more relevant to the diaspora Orthodoxy than to non-Orthodox denominations was thus built on the assumption that the latter’s version of Judaism is loose and ephemeral.

Regardless of the validity of this argument, this is certainly not the case today. Reform and Conservative Jews now increasingly embrace more traditional Jewish religious practices as a way of combating complete secularization and reversing the impact of interreligious marriage. A corollary of this indigenously American trend is the heightened attention toward Jewish identity in Israel. There are many answers to the question of why Reform and Conservative Jews in the United States, who have always considered the United States their chosen country, are so invested in shaping Jewish identity inside Israel at this juncture. Many emphasize the comfort of having a place to which one can always move should conditions in the United States become unfriendly. Periodic episodes of anti-Semitism are seen as reminders to older generations of Jewish-Americans of the precariousness of being a Jew in a Christian-majority culture. Others argue that it is not danger but rather the absence thereof that drives
the current attention of Jewish-Americans to Israel. As they achieve full integration and great triumphs in all aspects of American life, American Jews, qua Jews, have become victims of their own success. From the point of view of Jewish identity, some argue that the community faces a demographic peril as half of its members marry non-Jews, assimilate, or drift.

In *Jewish Identity Survey, 2001*, a study of American Jewry, Egon Mayer et al. portrayed mutually reinforcing trends of increasing secularity, decreasing attachment to Jewish religious and communal institutions, decreasing commitment to and involvement with Israel, and a weakening sense of Jewish identity among large parts of American Jewry. Heightened divisions among American Jews over the nature and future of Jewish identity and affiliation were accompanied by increased assimilation in the forms of intermarriage and religious and philosophical syncretism, conversion, and indifference. The primary fault line was Jewish religious observance, a line pressed further into the ground by issues such as membership in other Jewish organizations, general social milieu, and attachment to Israel, with largely the same individuals falling on either side of the line.

Mayer described the ongoing exodus of Jews from organized Jewish life, shedding both the form and the substance of Jewish affiliation. Jews who became more secular found Jewish organizations less accommodating and less fulfilling. This process fed on itself, pushing these individuals further away not only from Jewish organizations, but from Jewish social attachments and other potential reinforcements of Jewish identity, eventually placing many altogether outside any kind of Jewish identity or affiliation. Among the ever-larger portion of American Jews who described themselves as secular but retained consciousness of Jewish identity, many searched for something substantive upon which to base this identity and develop effective vehicles for belonging and community, and did not find it in the larger Jewish community’s existing frameworks. In the conclusion to Mayer’s study, Jewish philanthropist Felix Posen writes that since so many American Jews do not identify with the main religious streams of Judaism, “Jewish secularism” must be given serious attention and new resources in order to become “a potent source of identification and motivation.”

Notwithstanding the debate regarding the content of “Jewish secularism”—especially outside the state of Israel—it is clear that with Jewish-American ethnicity (as a cultural trait) no longer enough to sustain Jewish existence in the United States, and with the fading of traditional Jewish
neighborhoods, Jews in America have lost many of their distinctive ethnic markers. Not surprisingly, other survey data show that religion is the most distinctive attribute of most Jewish-Americans. Today, even the most liberal streams in American Jewry acknowledge that “without the synagogue Jewish life in the U.S. cannot endure.” Reform Jews—as part of the movement’s “worship revolution”—are now searching for new meaning in old religious rituals that were disposed of as part of their grandparents’ desire to assimilate. Likewise Conservative Jews also experienced renewed interest in ritual observance. A 1995 survey of Conservative synagogue members found that “younger Conservative Jewish adults are . . . more Jewishly active than their older counterparts, even when taking family life stage and presence of children into account.” The younger Conservative Jews were also proved “more ritually active than older congregants despite having been raised by less observant Parents.”

Certainly, the memory of the Holocaust has become a major source of communal identity and mobilization and to a large extent is “a primary vehicle not only of invoking unity among Jews . . . but also of connection between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities.” However, given the fact that the Holocaust is gradually becoming what Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider called a universalized, “cosmopolitan memory,” even this memory is no longer sufficient in and of itself to foster and retain Jewish identity (especially as the generation of survivors leaves the historical stage). These trends further heighten the importance of religion in the ongoing formation of American-Jewish identity.

In the mid-1950s many Jews were satisfied with the legitimation and normalization of Judaism as part of a larger Americanized Judeo-Christian framework that downplayed religious differences with Christians, best articulated in Will Herberg’s famous American “Tripartite Settlement,” Protestant-Catholic-Jew. Yet a generation later, the resurgence of religious exclusivity, rather than the process of religious blending, was the desirable goal. The fact that Jews do not have to hide their religion, but rather celebrate it as part of their American identity, was made evident most strikingly by the landmark selection of modern Orthodox Jewish senator Joseph Lieberman as Al Gore’s running mate in 2000. His candidacy symbolized, perhaps more than anything else, that accentuating one’s Jewish religious life is, in itself, a part of normal American life. Even inside Israel, Lieberman’s selection seemed to challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of modern Zionism regarding the alleged anomaly of diaspora life. It also presented many Israelis with an attractive model of reconciling religion and state.
Among the major religions, Jewish theology is distinctive with its stress that religious membership is tied to a particular homeland, “the Land of Israel” (Eretz Israel). From biblical times, Jewish nationalism has been indistinguishable from religion as “God chose a particular people and promised them a particular land.” The fact that Jewish kinship is territorially related makes the character of the Jewish diaspora quite unique, since living outside the Land is theologically a sign of failing to fulfill God’s plan. The vision of returning to the holy homeland is built into the very definition of all Jewish diasporic communities, at least symbolically. Thus, while most religions do not define themselves according to “political maps” and are not bound by membership in states, nations, or homelands, Judaism lends itself more to nationalism than to transnationalism.

Interestingly enough, even though traditional Zionism and many Israelis have long rejected the theological significance of the Land of Israel as the holy homeland (emphasizing instead the creation of the state as a political-secular undertaking to ensure a safe haven for Jews—like all other “normal” nations), the very existence of a Jewish state has great theological implications for many non-Jews (Christians and Muslims). Joseph Dan has written that secular “Israelis would do well to note the vast differences between their understanding of the state as secular, and the perception by others that it is a theological phenomenon par excellence.”

For fundamentally religious Jews, whose religious self precedes their other identities, the halachic decree of dwelling in the land of Israel implies that life in the United States is only a temporary sojourn, at least conceptually. Those religious Jews who consider exilic life (galut) as a punishment from God may suspend their move to Eretz Israel until the coming of the Messiah. In fact, at least until 1945, “most Orthodox Jewish authorities opposed Zionism as a blasphemous anticipation of the divine eschatological plan. And on this point they found common cause with most early (modernist) leaders of Reform Judaism—though the two groups would have shrunken with horror from any thought of commonality.” Yet the founding of Israel in 1948 presented all streams of American Jews with a constant dilemma of whether the modern nation-state of Israel and its policies, both internal and external, reflect their aspirations for a true Jewish state.

In the mid-1950s Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, representing the most important voice of centrist modern Orthodox Rabbis in the United States, urged members of his community to commit themselves fully to the project of secular Zionists in Israel. He argued that the unifying fate of the Jewish people—regardless of the degree of their religious obser-
vance, economic status, or place of residence—obliges religious Jews to have a feeling of solidarity, kinship, and responsibility for all secular Jews. Hence, when religious Jews are overlooking the critical importance in the creation of the State of Israel they ignore God’s “knocking.” Just as Soloveitchik called on Orthodox Jews in the diaspora to recognize and assist the new State of Israel, he also called upon secular Israelis to abandon Zionism’s “nonsensical” idea of creating “the new type of a Jew” . . . who has nothing in common with the diaspora Jew.” He did not resort to messianic oratory, and as much as he believed that the creation of the State of Israel was a miracle, Judaism in his view is about free will; it requires rational understanding and action lest Jews squander the opportunity that the Almighty has presented them. Soloveitchik, who decried the failure of American Jews to utilize their resources during the Holocaust, reminded his Orthodox followers that the security and destiny of the new state of Israel was in their hands. Israel’s very existence in his view was entangled with the fate of the diaspora.29 Other religious Orthodox Zionists in the United States, like their counterparts in Israel, considered the creation of Israel as the “beginning of the flowering of Jewish redemption” (geula), a messianic doctrine that became the ideological hallmark of many American Orthodox after the Six-Day War.30

Indeed, a disproportionate number of Jewish-American immigrants to Israel are Orthodox.31 A 1998 survey indicates that while 81 percent of Orthodox Jews in America visited Israel, only 38 percent of Reform Jews visited the country, and only 25 percent of Reform Jews think that a visit to Israel is important for maintaining their Jewish identity. Still, 91 percent of Conservative Jews and 73 percent of Reform Jews agree that “caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew.”32 To be sure, the centrality of the state of Israel as the spiritual and cultural center of world Jewry is now recognized even by the Reform movement, which has undergone a dramatic shift from its early anti-Zionist position toward endorsing Zionism.33 In its 1999 Pittsburgh Convention, the Reform Movement embraced “religious and cultural pluralism as an expression of the vitality of Jewish communal life in Israel and the Diaspora,” affirming the unique qualities of living in Eretz Yisrael and encouraging aliyah (moving to Israel).34

Perhaps even more critical is the growing understanding of Reform and Conservative rabbis in the United States that their ability to develop and disseminate their creed of Judaism in the context of modernity and democracy inside Israel is the “ultimate test of Jewish authenticity for Progressive Judaism” in the diaspora. These sentiments were expressed
by Rabbi Richard Hirsch, executive director of the World Union of Progressive Judaism, in his keynote address to the Twenty-ninth International Convention of the movement, held notably in Jerusalem in March 1999. Rabbi Hirsch also declared that “to support the movement in Israel is not philanthropy toward other Jews, such as is Diaspora support for universities, hospitals, yeshivot, and a host of other worthy Israeli causes. To support Progressive Judaism in Israel is inseparable from investing in liberal Judaism in the Diaspora.” Similarly, Dr. Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of the American Conservative movement, has acknowledged that building a strong presence of the Conservative (Masorti) stream inside Israel is essential for “revitalizing the Conservative movement in North America.” Thus, the question of how to strengthen the ties between Jewish-Americans and Israel preoccupies the leadership of the more liberal Jewish-American religious streams who consider Israel to be indispensable to their Jewish identity in the United States.

The Israeli Kulturkampf and Jewish-Americans

In its first three decades the state of Israel was able to contain the strain between secularism and religion by turning the Zionist ideology and institutions into Israel’s civil religion. To begin with, Israel was established as the state of all Jews. Israel’s famous 1950 Law of Return is not only “the concrete expression of the prophetic vision of the ‘ingathering of exiles,’” but also a statutory expression of its commitment to its Jewish character. The state’s legal system distinguishes between personal status laws, which are based on the religious Jewish legal code (halacha), and all other laws (criminal and civil), based on the Napoleonic codex and Western universalistic orientations. The state was set at the center of a belief system (mamlachtiyut or statism) that provided the base for an eclectic Zionist identity. It gave Jewish content to the national project by building on the ideas of a divinely chosen nation (am nivchar) or “light unto the nations” (or lagoyim). The state often used religious symbols in order to build the national narrative, enhance nationalist conformity and collaboration among the nationalist religious community, and co-opt the newly arrived religious Mizrahim (or oriental Jews). Zionism, in turn, was slowly accepted by the nationalist religious community as a modern theology that perceived the establishment of the state as a divine intervention in Jewish history.

In the last two decades and especially during the years of the Oslo
Peace Process, however, Zionism has been in decline, some argue under assault, inside Israel. This attrition was the result of a general perception that the Zionist vision had reached its triumphant realization—a secure sovereign state with a large Jewish majority. The decline of traditional Zionism was also a result of a confluence of factors in the rapidly changing context of Israeli politics and society. In the words of Peter Berkowitz, the forces of market capitalism and globalization pushed large segments of the Israeli public to embrace “hedonism over heroism and modern consumerism over piety.”40 These tendencies, coupled with growing public sentiment that peace with the Arabs was imminent, further exacerbated Jewish-Israeli disunity. Within this context, several ideological and political camps challenged the core values of mainstream Zionism. The ultra-Orthodox envisioned Israel as a Jewish state ruled by Orthodox precepts. This camp includes the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazim of European origin and a growing voting bloc of Mizrahim represented by the Shas party, which “seeks to replace secular Zionism with religious Judaism as the hegemonic ideology in Israeli society and presents this as the remedy for both the socio-economic and the cultural grievances [of Mizrahim].”41 The secular universalistic forces, on the other hand, advocate transforming Israel into a liberal and secular state for both its Jewish and Arab citizens. While the more extreme among the ultra-Orthodox veer toward Jewish theocracy, radicals in the secularist community see post-Zionism as an opportunity to “de-Judaize” the country. Israel’s internal cultural debate has also been compounded by conflicting visions over peace with the Arabs and Palestinians and the future of the occupied territories. During the late 1990s these factors ruptured the alliance between religious and secular Zionists, culminating in fundamentalist nationalism and a growing blurring of the distinctions between religious Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox (haredim).42

For years, many believed that the internal Israeli Kulturkampf between the religious and secular communities was “fought out against the background of a general agreement on the value and importance of the Jewish tradition to Israel’s cultural identity.”43 This was also the prevailing opinion among Jewish-Americans, many of whom adopted idealized images of Israel after its 1967 victory in the Six-Day War. Yet by early 2000, many in Israel and in the United States were no longer certain about the unassailable nature of Israel’s Jewish-Zionist character, let alone satisfied with its conflicting directions—the insularity and perceived backwardness of Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy, or the weakening sense of Jewish identity among secular Israelis. Many now fear that Israeli reli-
igious forces will continue to gain power and erode Israel’s liberal democracy, or alternatively, that the secularism of the West, which Israel has adopted as its own, will obliterate Israel’s distinctly Jewish identity. For instance, Yehuda Nini, a professor of Jewish Studies at Tel Aviv University, has argued that the crisis of identity experienced by secular Israeli youth is so profound that “assimilation is a malaise no less chronic in Israel than in the Diaspora.” Yoram Hazony has charged that Israel’s Zionist-Jewish foundations are undermined by the rise of a post-Zionist, post-Jewish educated elite in Israel society. He maintained that left-oriented Israeli scholars have penetrated the state’s Education Ministry, rewriting school textbooks in an effort to undermine the founding vision of Israel and replace its Zionist and Jewish core values with more universal and democratic ones. Many, however, were more apprehensive about the growing power of the haredi parties, which use their grip on the balance of power in Israel’s political system to draw greatly on state resources for their own sectarian needs. While ultra-Orthodox leaders carry a lot of weight in Israel’s domestic and foreign affairs, including matters of war and peace with the Arabs, their followers enjoyed draft deferment and military exemption while they study at state-subsized religious schools (yeshivot). Many secular Israelis and some religious Zionists railed against the fast-growing state-funded (yet outside the state-run education system) ultra-Orthodox schools that discredit the democratic values of the state. They believed that ultra-Orthodox students “are being trained to support an intolerant theocracy like Iran.”

Moreover, while religious Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox camp represent a minority of the Israeli Jewish population, albeit a growing one, their authorities have maintained a monopoly over marriage, burial, conversion, and other functions governing life in Israel. The exercise of this domination, and the strong political activism of Israeli ultra-Orthodox parties in the 1990s, bred broad resentment among nonreligious Israelis and caused a backlash against Judaism in general. Va’adat Shenhar, a committee appointed by the late education minister Zvulun Hammer to study the decline of Jewish identity among Israelis, found that the general decline of ideologies, the rise of consumerism and global markets, the politicization of religion, and the growing gap between religious and secular Jews, as well as debates over issues of peace with the Arabs (which over the years became imbued with religious significance), have all contributed to the declining attachment to Judaism among nonobservant Jews. In the 1999 Israeli elections, one of the top issues galvanizing support for Prime Minister Ehud Barak and the newly established anti-
Orthodox party Shinui Party (Change) was opposition to religious coercion. In the 2003 elections Shinui became in the third largest party in the Knesset, and its platform calling for “fights against religious coercion and for a secular state with room for all opinions and beliefs” a rallying cry for many middle-class Israelis. By the turn of the twenty-first century many polls in Israel rated the religious-secular cleavage as the country’s most dangerous crisis—even above security concerns.

Despite all of these developments, survey data also show that most Israelis continue to value their ties to their ancestral faith and in fact are eager to practice it with modern content. In other words, they are not necessarily fully secular, even if they label themselves that way. The late Charles Liebman argued that most Israelis participate in Jewish religious rituals that are not fully in accordance with Jewish religious law (halacah) and in that way “have transformed [religious rituals] into the folkways of secular Jewishness.” These Israelis tend to label themselves secular rather than traditional because of “the animus they feel toward the religious establishment and the religious parties.” Others argue that many Israeli Jews who are Sephardim (or Mizrahim) and who never experienced the pluralist reformation of the Ashkenazi world do not wish to abolish the Orthodox monopoly but rather to “reserve for themselves the informal right to pick and choose” while maintaining “the [Orthodox] formal religion to remain as is.” These are forces that militate against non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel but are not the result of ultra-Orthodox machinations or the secular backlash. This argument, however, does not take into account the rapid changes in Israeli society over the last decade, above all, the large influx of about one million post-Soviet immigrants, about a quarter of whom are not Jewish by halacha. This wave of newcomers introduced a large bloc of nonreligious citizens into Israeli society who may be seeking non-Orthodox options.

In this complex reality, the American Reform and Conservative movements have appeared in Israel as among the main groups trying to confront the religious establishment in the battleground over Israeli Jewish identity. They have mainly targeted Israelis who have been exposed to Jewish alternatives in America and want similar religious choice at home and those who wish to register protest against the ultra-Orthodox political, legal, and religious stronghold. These movements also appeal to secular Israeli values, such as egalitarianism. In other words, these movements are trying to provide a middle-ground Jewish option and put special emphasis on outreach programs for the new post-Soviet immigrants. The movement toward pluralistic Judaism has grown inside
Israel, with the Reform and Conservatives establishing synagogue centers, educational programs, rabbinical schools, youth movements, and other outreach institutions. They attract a significant number of the new Russian immigrants whose secular upbringing made liberal Judaism a natural fit to their needs and orientation in the process of becoming Israeli citizens. These movements are also instrumental in the legal struggles to alter the Orthodox monopoly over Jewish marriage and conversion, to loosen Orthodox domination of religious councils, and to allow burial in nondenominational cemeteries. These Jewish-American movements and their Israeli sister organizations have also played a role in the Israeli High Court ruling to allow women to hold religious services at the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site. Finally, they led in redirecting diasporic funds from general fund-raising for Israel to educational institutions and social-political programs aimed at promoting tolerance, democracy, and religious pluralism. This new pattern in financial flows has greatly affected the sums, structure, and destination within Israel of Jewish-American philanthropy.

Since the early 1990s, targeted American-Jewish giving to Israel has quadrupled reaching approximately 2 billion dollars in the year 2000. The campaign for pluralist Judaism further made the Reform and Conservative movements the nemesis of much of Israel’s religious establishment, which has, at various times, denounced them as nonreligious, antireligious, “enemies of Judaism and the Jewish State,” and even “more dangerous to the Jewish nation than the Holocaust.” The last statement, made in 1999 by Israel’s Sephardi Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron, was described by leaders of the Reform movement in Israel as an “incitement to bloodshed and civil war.” Ultra-Orthodox leaders also charged that these movements represent a foreign American phenomenon.

As they have become more cognizant of the centrality of Israel to their own Jewish-American identity, liberal American Jews have decided to engage directly in a struggle to redefine Israel’s identity in their own image. The assumption of many Jewish-Americans, wrote Jack Wertheimer, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, is that the diaspora “has much to teach its benighted Israeli cousins. Living in a heterogeneous environment, American Jews . . . have learned the blessings of diversity, and accept the legitimacy of many different forms of religious Jewish expression. Moreover, thanks to constitutional guarantees of church/state separation, American Judaism is not demeaned by the kinds of electoral horse-trading to which Israeli religious parties inevitably must stoop. In short, American Jews and American Judaism
have grown in an atmosphere of pluralism and tolerance, and Israeli Jews would do well to learn from their example.”

*The Controversy over “Who Is a Jew?”*

The involvement of Conservative and Reform Jewish-Americans in Israeli affairs was rejuvenated in 1988 when the religious parties moved to redefine who is a Jew in a manner that invalidated Reform and Conservative rabbis in the United States. Subsequently, leaders of the vast majority of American organized Jewry declared “open revolt against Israel.” It was the first time that the bitter hostility between American non-Orthodox leaders and the New York–based Lubavitch Hasidic movement—led by the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson—was injected into the Israeli arena with such ferocity. The Lubavitchers’ ardor and money ignited Israeli religious zealosity and the move to change Israel’s legal definition of who is a Jew. It left an indelible mark on the future direction of Israeli politics and society. Dr. Ismar Schorsch commented:

> This is not an Israeli affair. This is a personal affair of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He is trying to use the Law of Return in order to discomfit Conservative and Reform Judaism. His concern is not the purity of immigrants to Israel, but rather the strength of Conservative and Reform in America. This is an American affair which the Lubavitcher Rebbe is forcing upon Israel. . . . Israel is the battlefield; but the war is in America. . . . If the State of Israel declares that [our] conversion is no conversion, that means that [our] rabbis are no rabbis. This is the instrument through which the Lubavitcher Rebbe proposes to declare that Conservative and Reform Judaism in America are not authentic Judaism.

Such debates signaled the rise in diasporic intervention in Israeli domestic and foreign affairs and brought into the open the divergence between diaspora hawks and doves regarding the Oslo Peace Process. Diaspora activists fueled the sharp divide within Israel over the peace process, even to the point of American ultra-Orthodox rabbis issuing rulings that sanctioned Israeli soldiers’ insubordination and the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in 1995.

Although the initial impetus for political battle over the legitimacy of non-Orthodox Judaism came from the diaspora, these issues took on a life of their own in Israel, raised again under the Netanyahu government.
(1996–99), which comprised an unprecedented number of religious party representatives. In 1997 the Israeli religious establishment sought once again to enact a conversion law “designed to formalize and institutionalize the prevailing norm, according to which the only acceptable conversions in Israel would be those performed by Orthodox rabbinical authorities,” and “delegitimize Reform and Conservative rabbis.”67 This brought Israeli-diaspora relations to their lowest point. Although the conversion law was eventually suspended, the storm left a lasting mark on Israel-diaspora relations. It eroded further the posture of automatic Jewish-American support of Israel in U.S. foreign policy. Thus, with the increasing involvement of Jewish-Americans the Israeli Kulturkampf took on an ever more complex international dimension.

Confronting the religious establishment inside Israel with outright secularism—which denies Israel’s Jewish character as a sine qua non of the state’s identity—seems unrealistic even to secularized and staunchly antireligious sectors of Israeli society. Thus when leading Israeli writers, like Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, Yehuda Amichai, and David Grossman criticized what they saw as the ultra-Orthodox attack on Israeli liberal-democratic institutions, they called on Israelis to join the Reform and Conservative movements in order to “save Judaism from the enemies of democracy” and to “generate a new dynamic which will renew Israel’s spiritual and cultural landscape.”68 A. B. Yehoshua added that “to stand with the Reform and Conservative movements is to defend ourselves.”69

The idea that American Judaism can give Israel “the greatest gift . . . a sense of pluralism in Jewish expression,”70 has been gaining momentum among the liberal segments of American Jewry, with a growing foothold inside Israel.71 Capping these trends, in 1999 Prime Minister Barak appointed Israel’s first Minister for Diaspora Affairs. When in November of that year the new diaspora minister Melchior addressed the Jewish-American General Assembly, he said that “the future of the Jewish people requires a new definition of the partnership between all Jews and finding common ground on the question of Jewish pluralism.”72

In sum, when ultra-Orthodox and more liberal Jewish denominations in the United States and in Israel clash over the central question of who is a Jew, they are fighting not only to decide the character of the modern Jewish homeland but also over the right to claim and determine religious and national identity for Jews wherever they reside. It was at this juncture that a semantic change began to appear in the discourse over Israeli-diaspora relations with terms such as the negative Galut (exile) and the more neutral tfutzot (diaspora) being replaced by references to partnership with
ha’am hayehudi (the Jewish people). This new approach was also behind the unprecedented financial backing ($70 million) that the Israeli government provided to the Birthright Israel program. This program was initiated by diasporic philanthropists and is also supported by North American Jewry’s communal institutions as an outreach effort to young people in the diaspora “who have not been drawn into existing Jewish frameworks and may therefore soon be lost to the Jewish people.”

Jewish-American Identity and Its Israeli Component

Given the complex ties between Israel and American Jewry that developed over the last two decades, it should be recalled that Israel was not always the main focus of American Jewish life. Although Zionism captured the imagination of many Jews in America, until World War II major Jewish groups—Reform, Orthodox, and Socialists—were very hesitant or hostile regarding the idea of Jewish nationalism. Moreover, even American Zionists rejected the idea that life in America is exile or temporary; they held a new vision of a dual Jewish existence in two promised homelands that coexist and nurture each other. Ezra Mendelsohn observed that from the start American Zionism was “similar to other varieties of ethnic nationalism in America.” It did not encourage American Jews to speak Hebrew or to return to the homeland and, like other mobilized diasporas in the United States, it always stressed that support for Jewish nationalism was “in no way conflicting with [the Zionists’] intense Americanism at home, just as Americans of Irish origin who fought to oust England from Ireland were perfectly good Americans.”

To be sure, the divisions among American Jews over the legitimacy and necessity of the Zionist experiment in Palestine largely ended after the Holocaust and especially with the establishment of the state of Israel. Even after the state was established the diaspora focused mainly on integrating itself and European Jewish newcomers into American society and on eradicating post-Holocaust American anti-Semitism. The three major Jewish defense groups, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the American Jewish Congress, struggled against racial and ethnic stereotypes, in ways that helped establish universalistic liberalism as Jewish-Americans’ postwar ethnic identity. This emphasis on integration also did not leave much room to cope with the trauma of the Holocaust.

Even with the very real emotional attachment they felt for Israel, Jewish-Americans feared that political expressions of support for the new
state would bring charges of dual loyalty that could not be allowed. Indeed, diaspora leaders forced Israel to recognize that for American Jews America is the promised land. A document negotiated between Israel’s first prime minister Ben-Gurion and Jacob Blaustein, then president of the American Jewish Committee, declared in 1950, “The Jews in the United States, as a community and as individuals, have only one political attachment and that is to the United States. . . . They owe no political allegiance to Israel.”

Ben-Gurion’s brand of Zionism largely ignored Jewish-American contributions to Israel’s War of Independence and relegated diasporic Zionist efforts, “no matter how . . . helpful they might be to the Jewish State, . . . [to] lower status in the hierarchy of Jewish values.” In turn, Jewish-Americans believed that, unlike other Jewish centers in the world, their experience was not going to recede into insignificance but would continue to develop alongside the newly established state. Nevertheless the definitions of this duality varied according to ideological camp. Regarding religious identity, from the beginning of the century until the 1950s, Jewish-Americans were generally removed from regular religious observance and synagogue life. Only with the postwar move to suburbia did synagogues begin to grow and proliferate, and Jewish community institutions to thrive. As religion took a more central place in American public life, Jews in suburban America began to enter mainstream American society. The social radicalism of the second generation of descendants of Jewish immigrants did not find favor among the third that came of age at this time. This new generation, following the pattern of their non-Jewish neighbors, expressed a greater interest in the religious element of their identity, but in a distinctly American way. Synagogue services and organizational structures borrowed heavily from Protestant practices, with the creation of Sunday schools, sisterhoods, and so forth.

Altogether, the return to religious worship, based in large part on a search for roots and authenticity that could in other circumstances have denoted a retreat into cultural isolationism, became a clear signal of Jewish acculturation and integration into the broader society, which adopted religious practices informed by American values. American Judaism at this juncture had little to do with Israel, a stance that was reinforced by the often hostile policy of the Eisenhower administration toward the homeland. Even further, organized Jewish lobbying for Israel did not come into its own until the early 1960s. The growing legitimacy of ethnicity in American public life in the 1960s led to the growing politicization of U.S. Jews and brought to the fore the diasporic component of
their identity. The openness of American society and the assertion of identity that came with it had several important influences on the community, leading to changes among American Jews that would soon have significant political repercussions. On the one hand, Jewish intermarriage rates, which had held steady at 4 to 6 percent for half a century, rose dramatically from 1965, reaching 30 percent in 1974 and more than 50 percent by the mid-1980s. On the other hand, differences of many kinds became more acceptable in American society, in ways that enabled younger Jews to claim their distinctiveness in a bolder manner than their parents’ generation had done. This was also the period when Jewish day schools throughout the United States began to proliferate, including the Conservative and Reform movements, whose leaders gradually subscribed to the Orthodox view “that only through day school education can Judaism survive [in the United States].” The effects of general social change were also reflected in the push for gender desegregation, leading Jewish women to challenge traditional practices and claim roles as cantors and rabbis. At the same time Jewish Orthodoxy also gained confidence, “in sharp contrast to the timidity that often characterized the movement in the first two thirds of this century.” Its younger representatives were no longer hesitant to express opposition to liberal Judaism, including the separation of synagogue and state, “the hallmark of American Jewry.”

This activism found a new outlet in the energy and emotions that the Eichmann trial and the 1967 war released among Jewish-Americans, which were channeled into the establishment of pro-Israeli organizations and the reorganization of traditional Jewish-American institutions with greater emphasis on the Israeli dimension. Israel’s victory also helped American Jews to finally begin the process of reckoning with the Holocaust. “Their psychologically empowering discovery . . . [that there would be] no annihilation of the Jews at this time, not in the face of superior Jewish armed forces” was so cathartic that they were finally able to confront this existential trauma. The diaspora’s ability to embrace both the Holocaust and Israel was augmented by America’s domestic developments as “Jews ceased to be (sort of) race (somewhat) apart, and became (white) Americans—not as mere assimilationist but with vehement reference to Israel and to the Holocaust.” Israel grew more dependent on American support, and assumption of a strategic alliance with the United States made Jewish-Americans more important to the maintenance of Jewish existence in the homeland and gave them a strong and clear purpose around which to lobby and organize. They underwent “a kind of a
mass conversion to Zionism, and the UJA, through Israel, evolved into ‘America’s Jewish religion.’ The new role of Israel provided Conservative and Reform Jewish-Americans more secular alternatives to Orthodox categories of Judaism. For Reform Jews in particular, this was a significant departure from their earlier opposition to Zionism, and part of their recognition that their fate as diaspora Jews was intimately—and legitimately—intertwined with that of the state of Israel. These developments also raised questions as to the political implications of their faith.

The 1967 war was also significant for ethnic relations within the United States. The war and its aftermath were major causes of a fundamental political and social realignment among groups that had previously fought as a united front in favor of civil rights and the general advancement of minorities. Many Jewish-Americans distanced themselves from their previous partners in the desegregation movement and the American Left. Israel bashing, especially among radical black activists and the New Left, was generally perceived by Jewish-Americans as a barely disguised form of anti-Semitism. The shock of the 1973 Yom Kippur War heightened Jewish sensitivity to the continued insecurity of Jews. A significant and highly visible minority of Jewish-Americans and Jewish organizations began to move to the right politically, a phenomenon that had been virtually unimaginable ten or twenty years before. One indication of the move rightward was the Jewish approach to the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which linked the issue of trade with the Soviet Union to Soviet willingness to permit Jewish emigration and that ran counter to the spirit of détente. The effort to free Soviet Jews gave American anti-communism “a new moral argument,” and it increased Jewish-American clout in U.S. foreign policy. This higher profile was enhanced by Jewish-American campaigns against the Arab economic boycott of Israel and against the anti-Zionist propaganda prevalent among third world and communist countries that culminated in the 1975 UN vote equating Zionism with racism.

The new diaspora-Israeli alliance pushed aside the Israeli demands from Jewish-Americans to immigrate. The dilemma of Israel’s democratic character and its contentious treatment of the Palestinian issue was minimized when safeguarding Israel’s existence was at stake. From the late 1970s, however, with the rise to power of the Likud Party and the growing divisions within Israel regarding peace, diasporic political positions became more diverse. These divisions were encouraged by Israeli efforts to establish Jewish-American counterparts in the United States that as “Friends of . . .” raised funds and lobbied to support their political
agenda in Israel, in effect expanding their constituencies to include non-voters in the diaspora. It was at this juncture that liberal Jewish-Americans established the New Israel Fund to promote a liberal agenda for Israeli politics and society. This organization represented an early departure from the traditional patterns of Jewish-American giving to the UJA toward nonstate institutional frameworks.

Although the internal diasporic rift was largely kept quiet, it surfaced whenever the American government collided with Israel’s Likud-led government. This was the case with the 1982 Reagan plan, more dramatically with the issue of loan guarantees under the George H. W. Bush administration in 1991 and 1992, and throughout this period with the controversial subject of settlements in the occupied territories. Yet, when criticism of Israel came from sources traditionally, or even categorically, seen as hostile to Israel or to Jews in general, American Jews were generally reluctant to accede. In an environment of broadly based and harsh criticism by the United States, other governments, the media, and other institutions, most American Jewish spokespeople declined to give what they saw as aid and comfort to enemies of Jews and of Israel. By the late 1980s, as the question of Israel’s moral standing became increasingly disputed, many Jewish-Americans felt that Israeli affairs might jeopardize their own standing in America. The 1985 Pollard Affair, in which an American Jewish intelligence analyst was convicted of spying for Israel, was deeply disturbing to Jewish-Americans. They were shocked to discover how Israel’s actions could quickly expose them to charges of double loyalty. Israel’s controversial relationship with South Africa’s apartheid regime also increased the tensions between Israel and the diaspora, by exacerbating tensions between Jews and Blacks in the United States. With the first Palestinian intifada, the diversification and erosion of Jewish-American support for Israel became evident.

By 1990, the deep penetration of Israel into Jewish-American life and organizational structures raised concerns about Israeli meddling in and manipulation of Jewish-American affairs. From an Israeli foreign policy view, in 1990 it seemed that an “Israel-centric perspective” in mobilizing the diaspora reached a dangerous level when AIPAC and other Jewish organizations felt so empowered that they began to adopt an independent foreign policy agenda in the Middle East. Remarking on the Israeli government’s pressure on American Jewry to stand behind the homeland, even against the U.S. government’s official position, David Vital has written that “Israel and its affairs tend to continuously rob [Jewish-Americans] of their long sought for and so very recently acquired peace of mind.”
The Hopes and Doubts of Peace

The dismantling of the friend/foe pattern of the Cold War was reflected in a blurring of similar boundaries in the Middle East and in changing Israel-diaspora dynamics. The majority of American Jews welcomed the 1993 Oslo Peace Accord, but right-wing and Orthodox groups in the United States expressed outright hostility. After Oslo, many Jewish-American organizations began to ask how they would recruit politically in the era of peace and what would compel them to remain Jews if the danger to Israel receded. Some sounded the alarm that “the declining needs of Israel will contribute to the steady decline of Jewish giving, weakening American Jewish institutions and accelerating the rate of [Jewish] assimilation.” Other voices began admonishing the diaspora for making Judaism in the United States ephemeral due to its overwhelming concentration on the Jewish state. Arthur Hertzberg wrote that with peace in the Middle East, Israel would no longer remain Jewish-Americans’ “secular religion,” and the diaspora must reshape its identity and institutions to meet domestic American challenges.

Diaspora groups that opposed the peace process financed a public relations campaign against the accords, gave financial support to the Jewish settler movement, and established American affiliates of key right-wing Israeli parties to financially support their political campaign against Rabin and his Labor Party successors, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak. The divergent positions on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process basically paralleled the rift between Jewish-American religious denominations. A 1995 public opinion survey revealed that while 77 percent of Reform and 74 percent of Conservative Jews supported the Rabin government’s handling of the peace negotiations with the Arabs, 64 percent of Orthodox Jews opposed it. A large majority of the Orthodox also opposed the idea of dismantling any Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

When in 1995 right-wing diasporic groups attempted to forestall the Oslo Process by encouraging Congress to adopt initiatives that could undermine Israeli-Arab negotiations, Thomas Friedman described their actions as attempts to subvert the Israeli democratic process by Jewish-American groups that “could only thrive if they have an enemy, someone to fight. They have no positive vision to offer American Jews on the central question of American Jewish identity or the fate of Israel-diaspora relations in this new era.”

By the year 2000, many Orthodox Jewish-Americans expressed disappointment with the pronounced secularist shift in Israeli society, which
for them was reinforced by the widespread willingness to give up the West Bank and parts of East Jerusalem. Even modern Orthodox—who uphold halachic theology but also allow for Western-democratic norms and values in their daily life, and espouse the Zionist vision without its messianic elements—became disillusioned with what they saw as a liberal post-Zionist reluctance to preserve the Jewishness of Israel. Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University and an important voice of modern Orthodoxy in the United States, drew a direct parallel between the “demographic and cultural catastrophe” brought on American Jewry by the lax practices of Reform and (less so) Conservative Judaism, and the deleterious impact of Israel’s post-Zionists on Israel’s loss of its Jewish character.99

Ironically, just at the time when it seemed that in Israel moderate Orthodox forces were on the verge of losing the Israeli Kulturkampf to both secularists and post-Zionists on the left and extreme religious nationalists and the ultra-Orthodox on the right, America embraced a modern Orthodox candidate for the vice presidency. These developments prompted some Orthodox leaders inside the United States to contemplate how to better build the future of their vibrant community by developing an “improved” brand of a modern Jew on American soil rather than directing their energies toward the biblical homeland. Even more ironically, such rethinking came at a time when non-Orthodox Jewish-Americans work harder than ever before to expand their message into Israeli society.

Throughout the Oslo Peace Process leaders of the American Jewish community acted as unofficial emissaries in the efforts to open new diplomatic channels to countries that had no diplomatic relations with Israel, to lift the Arab boycott, to reward Arab and Islamic states that normalized relations with the Jewish state, and to encourage others to do the same.100 Many Reform and Conservative Jews promoted a Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement because they viewed the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza as belying the liberal political principles they championed in the United States and that, they argued, were the foundation of Israel’s natural and close alliance with the United States. These movements saw the era of peace as an opportunity to disseminate their American views of a multifaceted Jewish identity inside Israel and to bring their vision of Jewish pluralism to the Israeli public, which was already more eager for greater openness. Yet the fact that Reform Judaism in the United States, and its extension in Israel, allied itself with the Israeli peace camp (i.e., the Israeli left) and ascribed much importance to its positions on peace with
the Palestinians as part of its religious creed alienated some of its potential constituents among the Russian immigrants. Dimitri Slivniak, an astute observer of Russian immigrants’ life in Israel, argues that this liberal tradition represents “a different cultural and social environment, not ours”—and expresses American-inspired “politically correct” positions. This American liberalism on the Arab-Israeli conflict was inconsistent with the views of many Russian immigrants. These attitudes are unattractive to post-Soviet Jews who are staunchly liberal in their religious orientations and in their belief in the market economy, but have a more conservative, right-wing outlook on security and cultural matters more in tune with American neoconservatives.101

By the year 2000 the diverse American Orthodox camp was divided between two poles: the moderates who considered religious imposition inside Israel as “ideologically dubious and pragmatically unwise”102 and the more ardent group that declared the old alliance with secular Zionism as defunct. Some in the latter camp even began to question the centrality of Israel to their Jewish theology to the point of embracing the prenationalist haredi approach. This spectrum of views is visible in the Orthodox Union, the leading Orthodox organization in the United States. In 1996, the organization attempted to strengthen its own vision of Jewish identity in Israel by creating a branch of the American National Conference of Synagogue Youth, aimed at “combating the trends of Americanization, secularization, and alienation.” This organization also targeted semireligious youth and Russian immigrants in secular Israeli cities.

When Security Overshadows Identity

By the year 2000, the Jewish Kulturkampf, both within and outside Israel, reshaped the relationship between Israel and the diaspora in several ways. First, the peace process and the widespread notion of increasing “normality” widened the gulf between Jewish universalists and Jewish particularists. As identities were pushed to the fore, the splits within Israel regarding the direction of peace negotiations further divided American Jews over their vision for U.S. Middle East policy.103 When in the summer of 2000 Prime Minister Barak negotiated with Palestinian leader Arafat at Camp David, Jewish-American leaders issued conflicting messages both supporting and opposing the Israeli government’s position. The issues that divided Israel became resonant within the diaspora, and a new symbiosis between diasporic organizations and domestic Israeli social and political formations solidified, which served the Jewish identity
interests of groups both inside and outside Israel. Conversely, many Israeli groups actively recruited Jewish allies in the diaspora to buttress their domestic political and social agendas and, consequently, pushed diaspora voices to the center of the Israeli Kulturkampf with particular emphasis on the question of religious pluralism. A third development was a growing assessment within the diaspora that Israel remained a very important factor for their own identity in the United States and that they had a vested interest in the evolution of the Israeli polity—a development that reflected their own worldview on religious pluralism, security issues, and sociopolitical affairs.

With the notion that “Israel is no longer waging an existential battle for its survival . . . against an external enemy,” a 2000 Jewish Agency for Israel study chronicles the vast proliferation of largely diaspora-supported voluntary enterprises that have become so visible in the struggle to shape Israeli-Jewish identity. In sum, the core of support for Israel remains, and there has not been a reduction of interest in Israeli affairs. On the contrary, a desire for reinvigoration and intensification of the Jewish-American–Israeli relationship surfaced on both sides, albeit marked by a comprehensive transformation of kinship affinity.

The crushing failure of the Oslo Peace Process and the waves of violence that ensued dramatically shifted the focus from identity back to existential security. To some extent, and reminiscent of the shock of the 1967 war, almost overnight both the internal and international Jewish Kulturkampf ceased as the community reunified and re-created solidarity to face the new threat. When the Barak government appeared to be willing to compromise Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem, some observers expressed their concern “that a hand-over of the Temple Mount and parts of Jerusalem threatens to undermine the Jewish identity of American Jews and tear away the already delicate fabric of their relationship with Israel.” Indeed, many in the diaspora were adamant that the Temple Mount was the inheritance of all Jews and must be discussed within the wider Jewish community rather than solely by the Israeli government. Their position was reinforced when Arafat made Jerusalem into a Muslim-Jewish battle. Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, stated, “Israel has a right to make decisions that affect its security. All Jews have a right to discuss it, but it’s up to the government of Israel. The Temple Mount is a different issue. It belongs to all Jews, it is the inheritance of all Jews, and all Jews have vested interests in it.” Even within the Conservative movement, there was vocal disagreement over the issue of Jerusalem, with American members refus-
ing to accept the idea of their left-leaning counterparts in Israel that a compromise over the Temple Mount was only a political matter rather than a core religious identity one.107

With Middle East violence rising, the urgent Israeli need for unity with the Jewish people at such a time of duress made the American diaspora an intimate partner in the articulation of the new challenges of Jewish identity and security. This new sense of Jewish unity was further magnified when Jews around the world closed ranks in the face of new manifestations of anti-Semitism, which were reaching levels not seen since the end of World War II, and renewed attempts to equate Zionism with racism at the UN conference on racism in Durban in September 2001. As one diaspora observer said, “Jews can call themselves liberal, conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, it doesn’t matter. When Israel is in danger, a different alarm system goes off.”108

When the newly elected prime minister, Ariel Sharon, appeared before AIPAC in March 2001, he announced that he considers himself “first and foremost as a Jew” and that he saw himself as having been given a mandate to unify not only Israel but Jews worldwide. In what sounded like a dramatic departure from Ben-Gurion’s Israelocentrism and the overarching Zionist vision that those who do not fight here should not have a voice on Israeli security matters, he declared that “the future of Israel is not just a matter of Israelis who live there. Israel belongs to the entire Jewish people. And Israel would not be what it is today if it were not for the efforts of all Jews worldwide.”109 At this juncture, renewed Jewish solidarity heightened issues concerning the costs of kinship loyalty. Visits to Israel at times of duress and terrorism were presented to the diaspora as litmus tests of their Jewish loyalty. Combined with the legacy of the Israeli Kulturkampf, the new dilemmas of loyalty created some paradoxical situations when ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists attempted to capitalize on the hesitance of American Reform Jews to visit the threatened homeland by using Zionist rhetoric of loyalty to the Israeli state (in which they refuse military service).

Moreover, the return to the Jewish security dilemma had long been based on events in Israel that spilled over into the diaspora. However, the events of September 11, 2001, and the emergence of violent terrorist threats on U.S. soil brought the security dilemma home to American Jews and made the American-Israeli nexus of Jewish security closer than ever before. Widespread Arab and Muslim defamation of Jews as perpetrators behind the attacks further amplified this new sense of threat and solidarity.110 Even younger, highly assimilated American Jews were awakened to
the reemergence of the Jewish security dilemma and to the subtle interconnections between anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. One young Jewish-American writer, who was suddenly reminded of his own father’s flight from Nazism, wrote in the New York Times magazine, “Arab governments have transformed Israel into an outpost of malevolent world Jewry, viewing Israelis and Jews as interchangeable emblems of cosmic evil.” In this time of peril, the debates over identity were once again trumped by Jewish existential questions.

Just a few days before the eruption of the second intifada, when the newly elected Israeli president spoke before a large gathering of Jewish educators from Israel and the diaspora, he announced that Jewish education and identity outside Israel “could at best last two or three generations.” These words angered Jewish-American leaders, who decried his ignorance about Jewish diasporic life, and even Israeli commentators attacked the president for his “foolish outbursts.” The New York–based Jewish weekly The Forward wrote in a lead editorial that President Moshe Katzav’s speech was scandalous. When pressured by the media, the president amended his statement and declared that he believed that diaspora Jews “have the right to live abroad.” A leading Israeli journalist observed that “what the Jews of the Diaspora were willing to hear (even as they clenched their teeth) from someone like [Israel’s founding prime minister David] Ben-Gurion forty years ago, they are not prepared to put up with from someone like President Katzav.”

When security once again thrust itself to the center of Jewish concern, the Israeli leaders’ attitudes changed dramatically. Sallai Meridor, the head of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist organization, announced that “Jewish solidarity with Israel contributes greatly to the sense of security of Israelis. Israel’s deterrence in the eyes of the Arab world is enhanced when Jewish-Americans present a unified front behind her.”

The question of Jewish identity inside and outside Israel took on a completely different dimension in the face of indiscriminate daily terror. The bitter Kulturkampf fell by the wayside as an overriding sense of existential threat that crossed all Jewish divides emerged. Following an attack on an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood by a Palestinian suicide bomber, prominent Israeli journalist Nahum Barnea wrote:

The terror does not distinguish between Zionism and ultra-Orthodox, between those who have served in the army and black-clad yeshiva students, between man and woman, between adult and child. Israelis stand as equals before it. This brutal equality does
not erase the causes of the secular-ultra Orthodox struggle, but it obliges both sides to reduce their tones.\textsuperscript{115}

Barnea was correct. Without a doubt, a security crisis always overshadows identity issues. At the height of the suicide bombing attacks inside Israel, the Israeli supreme court affirmed Reform and Conservative conversions. Yet internal Jewish shock waves were marginalized and Orthodox outcry muted. Although the Rabbinical Council of America—the largest association of Orthodox rabbis in the United States—declared that the court’s “myopic decision . . . will be tragic for all of Israel” it kept its voice low: “Jews around the world have closed ranks. . . . People are more concerned right now about the physical existence of Israelis than about social issues in Israel, . . . and Israel has more goodwill and sympathy from all quarters [including Orthodox],” explained the director of public policy for the Union of Orthodox Congregations of America.\textsuperscript{116} American Reform leaders reciprocated. A few weeks later, when Rabbi Eric Yoffie, head of the Reform Movement in America, convened the annual meeting of the Reform leadership in the war zone of Jerusalem, he addressed Knesset members, stating, “This is a time of crisis, a time of terror attacks, a time for unity. This is not the time for a religious crisis over conversion. People are getting killed because of the security situation, not the religious situation.”\textsuperscript{117}

By Way of Conclusion

The Jewish condition is fundamentally different today than a century ago. It is no longer characterized by deep divisions between and within proponents and opponents of Jewish sovereignty. Ezra Mendelsohn is correct when he writes that the simplicity of Jewish politics today derives from the fact that nationalism has triumphed over all other diasporic solutions. The antimodern ultra-Orthodox, the Jewish Left and the cultural Bundists, the liberal assimilationists and the Jewish cosmopolitans, the local nationalists and anti-Zionist Reform integrationists—all believed (until World War II) that the “Jewish question” must find its solution in the lands of the dispersion. Yet in the post-1948 era all aspects of Jewish life—above all, Jewish politics—are tied to “the growing hegemony of Israel.” In Jewish politics, as in the politics of so many groups in the twentieth century, the nation-state has enjoyed great triumph, even if it is not entirely victorious. The cosmopolitan, culturally and religiously divided Jewish people is united today in support of the Hebrew-speaking
Jewish nation-state where an ever-growing number of Jews actually live, and where many more visit in order to gain inspiration.\textsuperscript{118}

Despite the growing hegemony of Israel for Jewish identity and consciousness worldwide, this influence is far from being total. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Jewish world remains bifurcated between Israel and the United States with Jewish populations of approximately five and a half million in each center. Given this reality all other diaspora centers are secondary or marginal in negotiating Jewish identity. However, the situation of American Jews is somewhat anomalous. Their external environment is rarely hostile—and never overtly so. The comfortable and influential status they have achieved in their country is arguably as consequential for world Jewry as the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in Israel. To begin with, the prosperity of Jewish-Americans has enabled them to assume a world leadership role by providing smaller Jewish communities elsewhere with everything from educational funding and leadership training to political intercession on behalf of Jewish human rights. Yet, the same prosperity that enables them to assist external Jewish communities is not without its own considerable inconveniences. More precisely, the perception abroad of that prosperity and its attendant benefits leads to considerable inconveniences for the Jewish communities that enjoy its largesse. The perceptions of excessive Jewish power in America have been especially acute in recent years when characteristically shrill and hysterical voices attribute to American Jews authorship of U.S. foreign policy in many domains. Though the impact of Israel and American Jewry on the two to three million Jews residing in other countries is often direct and powerful, there is no formal mechanism for consultation among these communities. As a result, communication and cooperation is often ad hoc and haphazard. The question of Jewish identity—religious, ethnic, or national—remains entangled with the question of Jewish power and security in Israel and the United States. Other Jews may continue to face peril and other challenges related to identity and security in their countries of domicile, but the two large centers dominate their voices or even speak on their behalf.

As we have seen, Jewish security concerns always trump issues of Jewish identity. Nevertheless, the two concerns will remain intimately and uniquely intertwined and are never completely detached, because of the nexus between land and religious identity for Jewish kinship. Moreover, the physical territorial shape of the homeland greatly determines Jewish-Israeli and diaspora identity, a fact that further entangled the diaspora, particularly the religious community with the homeland. This “fate,” “an
existence of necessity,” in the words of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, remains the constant and unchanging predicament of the Jewish people. The events in 2005 once again revealed the diaspora-homeland Jewish identity nexus. With the Palestinian intifada in some retreat, tensions surrounding Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza and northern Samaria once again heightened the culture war on religion and democracy between secular Zionism and Orthodox nationalists. Religious denunciations against those who gave and obeyed orders to evict settlers as Jewish traitors, including physical attacks on army officers by religious extremists, reminded many of the violent days leading to Rabin’s assassination in 1995. The debate over whether the homeland territory is a base for Jewish security or must be treated as a sanctified religious patrimony led to a dramatic showdown between the well-organized Israeli state apparatus and the large and fully mobilized national-religious camp. Revered Orthodox rabbis called on their followers—especially among Israel Defense Force (IDF) soldiers—to disobey orders: “Should they carry out their commanders’ orders to evacuate the settlements in Gaza despite what they see as God’s commands and their rabbis’ call to oppose evacuation?” With an alarming number of religious soldiers announcing their intention to disobey orders, IDF chief of staff Dan Halutz threatened to shut religious-Zionist Hesder yeshivas, where students combine religious study with military service.

Surprisingly, the internal schism of Israeli society so exacerbated by the Gaza withdrawal did not emerge as such a divisive issue among diaspora Jewry in the United States. Even more revealing was the careful response of Orthodox rabbis there. While many expressed deep sympathy and even abetted their Orthodox Israeli kin in their political struggle, they generally refrained from employing violent rhetoric against the Israeli government or religious threats reminiscent of the behavior exhibited by some religious diaspora nationalists prior to Rabin’s assassination. In fact, this careful diaspora posture showed concerns mainly for the settler community’s civil liberties and religious rights as they protest their evacuation. This plea was fundamentally divergent from the arguments made by nationalist opposition in Israel, which had long crossed the boundary of legality in challenging the mandate of all Israeli governments to return territories to Palestinian hands. On the eve of the Gaza withdrawal, leaders of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (the largest Jewish-American Orthodox umbrella organization) wrote an open letter to Daniel Ayalon, Israel’s U.S. ambassador.
The Orthodox Union has acknowledged that questions of Israeli foreign policy and domestic security are best left to the citizens of Israel and the State of Israel’s democratically elected government. We have maintained this position despite our strong reservations regarding aspects of the disengagement plan and its effect upon the very fabric of Israeli society . . .

The Orthodox Union has fought for more than 100 years to protect the rights of world Jewry and has opposed religious discrimination in all of its forms, wherever it may arise. We certainly can not accept any justification for the discrimination against religious Jews that police and security forces appear to be pursuing in Israel in the implementation of the government disengagement policies. . . . Actions [by the Israeli government toward the settlers and their religious supporters] . . . represent religious discrimination and bigotry that should not be tolerated in any country. It is heartrending and distressing beyond words for this to be happening in the Jewish state, for which we pray each and every day.120

Even Orthodox nationalists among U.S. Jewry must take American notions of tolerance and religious pluralism into account when it comes to exporting their religious ideas or participating in Jewish debates about identity. To be sure, the interactions between American Jews and their homelands has long been premised on the idea that Americans’ ties abroad would serve America’s interests and perpetuate American ideals. U.S.-based diasporas will typically try to emphasize that there is no conflict of interest between their American identity and their ties to their kin states and cultures.121 For example, Hindu Indian-Americans who are major advocates of the religious nationalist Hindutva try to link their dream of a greater Hindu state in India to anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. Moreover, when selling their vision to American politicians they present it not as religious nationalism but a version of pluralist Hinduism.122 In the case of diaspora Jewry, these declared American principles are not only a product of intra-Jewish theological debates among various denominations but are also informed by larger American controversies about the role of religion in public life and foreign policy. In this process, intersectarian coalitions may externalize tensions generated by religious diversity in the United States and the so-called church-state schism into Israel, bringing American-born controversies to play an important role thousands of miles away.
Certainly, differences in denomination, theological orientation, levels of religious observance, and frequency of attendance at religious services have been the hallmark of American religious plurality. This inter- and intradenominational diversity is also associated with specific views on personal morality, cultural, environmental, social, and political matters, and even U.S. foreign affairs. For example, members of the American Presbyterian Church have clashed (even) with Jewish liberal groups, eventually initiating “a process of phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel.” Christian fundamentalists, by contrast, have been staunch supporters of the Israeli settler movement and have struck coalitions with American Jewish Orthodox-conservative groups (to the chagrin of liberal Jews and Jewish Reform organizations). Christian evangelists who espouse the eschatological doctrine of dispensationalism have tied the Jewish rebirth in the state of Israel and Israel’s return to its biblical patrimony in the West Bank after 1967 to the belief that certain events must take place before the onset of Armageddon, or the end of the world. In July 2004, the Presbyterian Assembly voted by large margins to condemn Israel’s construction of a security wall across the West Bank and to disavow “Christian Zionism” as a legitimate theological stance. It also directed “the denomination’s Middle East and Interfaith Relations offices to develop resources on differences between fundamental Zionism and Reformed theology.” In short, Christian-American differences sometimes impact the Jewish diaspora to protect Israel’s standings or may even extend the Jewish diaspora with additional Christian pro-Israeli voices and a rising prominence of the “Judeo-Christian” tradition in the United States.

Finally, as we have seen, the very notion of a cohesive transnational community is complicated because in international affairs a state can, in practice, represent only the people living within its boundaries. But in reality, neither the diaspora nor the homeland community, both of which are internally divided, dominates in constituting and communicating the kinship interest. In fact, a degree of flexibility can be preserved because of the distance between the homeland and the diaspora; they each can, to a degree, put their own spin on the national narrative and live out their shared identity in their own way. The degree to which the one influences the other is related to the kin community’s collective history, its members’ core identity, and the relative strength that the homeland and the diaspora can exercise vis-à-vis one another through monetary flows, cultural and religious productions, community leadership, or political clout.
in the international arena. To be sure, the power of diasporas and their perceived influence in the international arena may be amplified by the weakness of the homeland’s government and by their own capacities as independent actors. The role of American Jewry in world affairs is enlarged by uncertainty and instability in the Israeli political arena and by the Israeli government’s international constraints. Moreover, the diaspora’s influence extends beyond the reputation merited by its accomplishments. It encompasses the psychological factor of the notion, current in many parts of the world, of overwhelming “Jewish power” in the United States. Altogether, sufficient areas of overlap exist between kin communities in the homeland and the diaspora despite differences of emphasis in local identity and in the overall communal self-understanding. For years, this was the case in the vibrancy and pride of American Judaism, whereas the traditional Zionist-Israeli version of the Jewish collective identity insisted that only in the Jewish state can Judaism survive. Now, even these distinctive visions are starting to be reconsidered.

From the background of the changes that this chapter has analyzed to the events since the year 2000 that prompted the switch from the Jewish Kulturkampf to Jewish security, we have witnessed a new kinship vision emerging. This vision seems to affirm the old American Zionist formula in which the Jewish-American community is not to be subsumed into or subordinated to the Israeli homeland. Rather, the two communities are to live side by side in a symbiotic relationship of mutual influences. As early as 1914, when future Supreme Court Justice Brandeis assumed leadership of the American Zionist organization, he said: “To be good Americans, we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews we must become Zionists.”125 Whereas previously Israeli Zionism demanded a privileged Israeli voice in defining Jewish interests and identity, now not only does the diaspora largely determine its own way of life in America, but it has also demanded and gradually gained access to and voice in Israeli Jewish affairs. This new Zionist vision of reciprocity strengthens both pillars of world Jewry today in America and Israel, while simultaneously encouraging their kinship solidarity. Thus, against the thesis regarding the growing separation between Israel and the diaspora, on the contrary, one sees a new affirmation, intensification, and redefinition of Jewish kinship.

My analysis of how Jews continue to negotiate their identities in transnational ways has implications beyond this case study. Nowadays, when technological innovation and greater tolerance in host lands remove the spatial and temporal barriers that once separated diasporas
from their countries of origin, kinship ties across frontiers are an inevitable feature of international relations, with important impacts on the construction and reconstruction of national identities and policies. The evolving relations between Israel and Jewish-Americans shed light on the manner in which other diasporas, primarily in the United States, can participate directly and indirectly in shaping national policies and identities in international relations.