A Symposium

Have your own attitudes toward Israel changed in recent years? Why? Why not?

To what extent do you believe Israel has fulfilled, or disappointed, the hopes vested in it?

How do you feel about the upsurge of Jewish criticism of Israel? Is it healthy? Is it dangerous? What does it portend?

Forty-nine prominent American Jewish intellectuals reply.

Plus: An expanded book-review section
Daniel Pipes: Whatever else he did, Menachem Begin caused widespread emotional turbulence during his years of leadership. 1977-83. American politicians, media, and opinion polls vacillated wildly on the subject of Israel. Along with everyone else, I felt exhilarated when Sadat traveled to Jerusalem, dismayed at the drawn-out negotiations that followed, pleased when the peace treaty was signed, and troubled by the 1982 war. And there were dozens of other issues too, from the bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor to the West Bank settlements policy to the high inflation to the treatment of religious matters.

Even though most issues confronting Israel today remain quite unchanged, the Israeli roller coaster has, mercifully, been more level since 1983. Shamir is not Begin, Pollard is not Sabra and Shatila, and the much-discussed peace conference is not Camp David. Too, external factors have changed: Lebanon no longer excites opinion, and American Jews publicly going after Israel. I suspect, perhaps unfairly, that they thrill to the man-bites-dog quality of their actions.

Likewise, the upsurge in criticism by American Jews of Israel reflects this maturation. In the old days, the Diaspora had to provide steady and almost unquestioning support for Israel, otherwise the whole enterprise was imperiled. Today, Israel's need for help has diminished. American Jews matter less, so they stray. Again, if not inspiring, this change reflects healthy developments.

This said, there is something distasteful about American Jews publicly going after Israel. I suspect, perhaps unfairly, that they thrill to the man-bites-dog quality of their actions.

How should they act, then, when they object to Israeli state policies? To formulate a code of conduct, it helps to ponder the proper behavior of the democratic citizen abroad. What should an American who disagrees with his government do when traveling, broadcast all his criticisms or pull his punches? Usually, the latter, for there is something undignified and confusing about airing every difference of opinion before outsiders. Some issues, of course, transcend this rule and require open, even vociferous, dissent, but these occur rarely in a democracy.

Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to Israel and American Jews. The relationship calls for discretion and a clear appreciation of the ways in which one's words can be misused. Different rules govern debate on the floor of the Knesset and in the American press. Even if this leads to the occasional charge of hypocrisy, the distinction is worth maintaining. This does not mean that American Jews should pretend to support what they do not agree with, but that their public criticism of Israel requires caution, tact, and thoughtfulness.

Daniel Pipes is director of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia and editor of its quarterly journal, Orbis.