

Commentary

VOLUME EIGHTY-FIVE • NUMBER TWO • FEBRUARY 1988

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

PUBLISHED BY THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE / \$3.50

Lionel Abel / Edward Alexander / Robert Alter / Jerold S. Auerbach / Daniel Bell / Eric M. Breindel / Joel Carmichael / Paul Cowan / Werner J. Dannhauser / Midge Decter / Maier Deshell / Leonard Fein / Maurice Friedberg / Murray Friedman / Nathan Glazer / Irving Greenberg / Ben Halpern / Mark Helprin / Nat Hentoff / Gertrude Himmelfarb / Milton Himmelfarb / Erich Isaac / Rael Jean Isaac / H.J. Kaplan / Roger Kaplan / Hilton Kramer / Irving Kristol / Max Lerner / Edward N. Luttwak / Michael A. Meyer / Jacob Neusner / William Phillips / Daniel Pipes / Richard Pipes / Dennis Prager / Earl Raab / Eugene V. Rostow / Edward Rothstein / Jonathan D. Sarna / Peter Shaw / David Sidorsky / Seymour Siegel / David Singer / Max Singer / Steven L. Spiegel / Roger Starr / Sol Stern / Marie Syrkin / Ruth R. Wisse

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 the Iraq-Iran war now overshadows Israel's conflict with the Arabs. The calming of Israeli politics permits one to view the country with more equanimity and more distance. It's a well-deserved rest.

When considering Israel's achievements, one has to begin by recalling that its heroic era is over. Making the desert bloom, building a state, and achieving military miracles all belong to the past. And so too national consensus: unity of spirit and purpose was easy when the threat was immediate. But now the external threat is less deadly, or at least less palpable; it has come to resemble the distant and complex sort of danger that the USSR poses to the United States. As the threat becomes less immediate, the divisions in Israeli society emerge and are vented. Accordingly, Israel offers a far less inspiring picture than it did in the past.

The end of the heroic age in fact marks a great achievement; the country no longer lives at danger's edge. Even more than the whores and pickpockets hoped for by Ben-Gurion, the fractious

quality of Israel's life symbolizes its transition to a normal society. Superficially, Israel disappoints; a more profound interpretation reveals that it has traversed much of the ground to maturity.

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*.