Chapter 21

Reflections on Israel and Jerusalem as the Centers of World Jewry

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Introductory Comments

One of the main questions facing all diasporans in their hostlands, their kin in their homelands, and observers of the diasporic phenomenon, is where the actual centers of ethno-national-religious diasporas and transnational entities are; however, this chapter focuses on diasporas and especially the Jewish Diaspora. In view of the connections between diasporic entities and their homelands and the various hostlands where parts of these entities exist, the main issue in this context is whether the homeland and its capital are conceptually and practically regarded, and actually serve, as the undeniable centers of these entire entities existing in hostlands all over the world.

This has become a major controversial issue because of a number of complicated developments that have existed for quite a while in diasporas, their homelands, and their hostlands. Among those critical developments are the following: the closer and quicker connections between diasporans and their homelands due to easier, faster, and better communications systems (including transportation, media, and electronic devices); the interests in and ties with the homeland of the core diasporans (those whose identities and identification are fully with the national entity); the cores of the diasporans’ cultural, social, and political integration into their hostlands; and the homelands’ cultural, social, political, and economic involvement in what happens in “their” diaspora’s affairs, including attempts to influence their thinking and activities, and to reinforce their connections with the homeland, as well as actually regarding it as the entire national center.

On the other hand, clear liberalization processes are occurring, especially in Western states—where many active diasporans reside. There are ongoing processes of diasporans’ assimilation and integration into hostlands, and demands by hostlands that the diasporans should behave like the rest of the citizens and obey what the hostlands’ authorities dictate and demand. It means that hostlands actually demand that those states and their capitals will be the actual
centers of all their citizens and residents, including the diasporans residing there. These two conflicting processes raise severe practical and theoretical questions concerning the actual location of the cultural, social, political, and economic center of diasporas and diasporans. This aspect has not been adequately studied or discussed by individuals, groups, entities, politicians, or scholars.

This chapter deals with this issue. As a case-study concerning the question of where the diasporas’ centers are, the chapter discusses the Jewish Diaspora’s current attitudes toward Israel and Jerusalem. However, it examines not only the specific issues concerning the Jewish Diaspora’s position regarding the national centrality of Israel and Jerusalem, that in themselves are very significant and sensitive matters. The chapter’s main argument is that both the common views and the different perceptions and positions of individuals, groups, and communities reflect the Jewish diasporans’ identity, their emotional and cognitive positions concerning the main issues facing them, their individual and communal interests, their connections with the Jewish nation and Israel, and their specific feelings and attitudes vis-à-vis the centrality of Israel and Jerusalem. The first aspect discussed here is the Jewish Diaspora’s views and attitudes vis-à-vis Jerusalem’s position in the Jewish nation. Because of the argument that the Jewish Diaspora’s attitudes towards Jerusalem are very closely connected and determined by its relations, and concepts about Israel’s place and role in the diaspora, the next main aspect discussed here is Jewish Diaspora-Israeli relations and the perception of Israel’s centrality for what is regarded as the entire Jewish nation. As noted above, based on the findings concerning the Jewish Diaspora in this respect, the chapter concludes with some very general conclusions on the question of where the centers of diasporas are—whether it is the homeland and its capital, or the hostland and its capital.

The Jewish Diaspora’s Views and Attitudes vis-à-vis Jerusalem

First and foremost, it should be noted that like all other diasporas, the entire Jewish Diaspora and each of its sub-groups, such as the ultra-religious (the haredim), the religious Jews (such as the Reformists, Conservatives, and Progressives), and secular Jews, are heterogeneous groups. However, although there are differences within and between these groups, when examining the Jewish Diasporans’ attitudes to the centrality of Israel and Jerusalem it should be borne in mind that there is also some degree of consensus among core Diasporans on the question of the national center’s location. These