
How does the process of globalization influence the relation between the state of Israel – in its capacity as a Jewish state – and Jews elsewhere in the world? How does the identity and identification of Jews in the so-called Diaspora change in societies that embrace multiculturalism and recognize Jews as fully belonging members of their nation? Is a Jewish and democratic state an oxymoron or the only historically justified solution for the predicament of Jews worldwide?

This extensive edited volume sets to answer such questions as it examines the multiple impacts of the process of globalization on Klal Yisrael, i.e. ‘the worldwide “commonwealth” of the Jewish people’ (p. 1). The book interrogates changes on the macro level, in the composition and configuration of world Jewry, as well as on the micro level, the perceptions and experiences of Jews in the Diaspora. The four editors treat the process of globalization in its capacity to juxtapose – socially and spatially – traditional and modern forms of political organization, collective and individual formations of identity, and old and new senses of belonging.

Case studies from the Jewish Diaspora in countries across Latin America provide most of the empirical material in the book, but contributions that draw on the historic and contemporary experiences of Jews in the US and France add a valuable perspective to this regional focus.

Two major developments changed the position of Jews around the world in recent decades. First, after the Holocaust and since 1948, the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel created the possibility for every Jew to renounce a diasporic life, and emigrate to Israel, or “return home”, as Zionism frames this move. Second, and more recently, most countries across the world have legally recognized Jews as equal citizens, and increasingly acknowledge their entitlement for maintaining their Jewish identity as part of the national multicultural mosaic. These developments force Jews to be reflexive about their Jewish identity and its meaning in new ways.

For Jews in Israel, living a secular life with scarce attention to Jewish traditions has little consequences for one’s Jewish identity. Moreover, the loyalty of Jewish Israelis to the Jewish state is almost unquestioned. The
same cannot be said for Jews in the Diaspora; if they abandon their Jewish –
religious, cultural, social – practices, their identity as Jews can be put into
serious question. As the case studies in this book show, keeping with Jew-
ish practices and traditions becomes challenging as membership in Jewish
organizations dwindles, and community life gives way to highly individu-
alized experiences.

For secular Jews in the Diaspora, it is often their identification with the
Jewish state that brands their Jewishness. Yet, as this volume illustrates, the
relationship between the world Jewry and the state of Israel is also being
challenged. The center-periphery model for conceptualizing this relation
has been historically contested on theological ground, as Ratzabi’s contri-
bution makes clear. More recently, morally contestable wars against Leba-
non in 1982 and again in 2006, and the ongoing military oppression of
Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, have seriously damaged the image
of Israel internationally, and damped the unquestionable identification of
many Jews worldwide with its cause. For many Jews, their loyalty and sup-
port for Israel has turned from a source of pride and legitimization into a
liability. These Jews often experience a new type of anti-Semitism, which
as Wieviorka argues in the French case, is fuelled mainly by anti-Israeli –
and not anti-Jewish – sentiments.

In a thought-provoking chapter, Raanan Rein calls for ‘waning essen-
tialism’ in the study of the identities of Jews in Latin-America. He urges us
to look at the many Jews, whose loyalty to their own country supersedes
the one they have for Israel; to study the majority of Jews, who are not
associated with any Jewish organization; to move away from the ‘the notion
of Jewish uniqueness and exceptionality as an a priori category of analysis’
(p. 120). The fact that such challenges are not fully taken on board in this
volume is a missed opportunity. This book is a good source to start recon-
sidering the future of Klal Yisrael. Intentionally or not, the book forces the
reader to question the extent to which it is analytically useful to speak of
Jewish identities, and even a Jewish Diaspora, when speaking in general of
people from Jewish decent. While the former sees one’s Jewishness and
relation to Israel as having primacy over all other ingredients that form
identities, the latter questions precisely this.

In several countries in recent years, new Jewish organizations have
adopted a critical stance towards the state of Israel. The “Other Jewish
Voice” in the Netherlands, and the alliance of “American Jews for a Just