

3. The Operative Aspect of the Homeland Myth: A Triangular Relationship

In an old Jewish joke from an Eastern European shtetl, the husband asks his wife: "What will happen to the million zloty I invested in the business if the Messiah comes, and we have to leave everything behind?" And the wife answers: "With God's help, the Messiah will not come so soon."

A cartoon appeared in Le Monde several years ago, showing an old man who says: "I have never lost hope of returning to my homeland some day. However, I no longer remember where I came from."

Some diasporas persist—and their members do not go “home”—because there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora. In the meantime, the myth of return serves to solidify ethnic consciousness and solidarity when religion can no longer do so, when the cohesiveness of the local community is loosened, and when the family is threatened with disintegration.

For many strictly religious Jews of Eastern Europe, the homeland myth was devoid of practical consequence, not only because until the nineteenth century the Holy Land was not open to mass resettlement but, more important, because any physical return before the advent of the Messiah would be considered anathema. For many secular (Yiddish-speaking) Jews of Eastern Europe the homeland myth was displaced by a striving for communal autonomy *within* the diaspora. By contrast, among American Jews who were neither religious nor Yiddish-speaking the homeland myth was not a powerful force because they lived in a settler country that defined membership in the political community in functional rather than organic terms. The myth took on real meaning to many American Jews after World War II—in part because it helped them to assuage their feelings of guilt for not having done enough to save their brethren in the European diaspora. At the same time, American Jews defined their diaspora in theologically “neutral” terms, that is, as a purely physical dispersion (*golah*), in opposition to much of the Israeli political leadership, which continued to think of Diaspora in terms of its traditional associations with moral degradation, insecurity, and persecution (*galut*).

There are Jews—including religiously observant ones—who argue that with the establishment of Israel the Diaspora in the purely theological sense has been brought to an end, although the physical (and voluntary) dispersion of Jews may be continuing (see Cohen 184ff). There are others, however, who believe that, in a sociopsychological sense, the diaspora has not ended, because the state of Israel is itself in a “diaspora” condition globally to the extent that it is treated as a pariah state by international organizations and regarded as not even “belonging” to the region in which it is located. This may be a questionable metaphorical use of the term; it does, however, serve to fortify the sympathies of the physical diaspora for the homeland community.

While the homeland myth exists, however, it is exploited for a variety of

political and social purposes by the diaspora, the homeland, and the host society. This “triangular relationship”—alluded to by Sheffer but not subjected to a comparative analysis (1–15)—has interesting implications for majority-minority relations and has political consequences that may be both advantageous and disadvantageous for the diaspora.

Members of diaspora communities are by turns mistreated by the host country as “strangers within the gates” or welcomed or exploited for the sake of the domestic and diplomatic interests of the host country. Internal social unity has on some occasions *required* that minorities be kept as diasporas. Thus the persistence of the Jewish diaspora was for generations a convenient and even necessary element of Christian theology: the “wandering Jew” provided daily proof of the superiority of the Christian faith, on which Western societies were based. This was the obverse of the Jews’ own *post hoc* theological rationalization for their diaspora condition: the belief (reaffirmed by the devout in their daily prayers) that they had been exiled from their land as a collective punishment for their sins (which, in the eyes of the Jews, did *not* include deicide). The members of the Armenian diaspora have been spared a general demonization; the slave, and later free, members of the black diaspora may have been stigmatized according to certain biblical interpretations and, in more modern times, according to pseudo-scientific genetic criteria; and the Palestinians are often stigmatized collectively as terrorists par excellence. However, the members of these diasporas have not castigated themselves in the same manner as have the Jews. On the contrary, their diaspora conditions have been attributed to the sins of others: the cruelties of the Ottoman Turks, the greed of American colonists, and the duplicity of the British, the Americans, and the Zionists. Conversely, there are Christian fundamentalists who have theological motivations for putting an end to the Jewish diaspora: the conviction that the Jews’ return to the Holy Land would expedite the Second Coming of Christ.

Sometimes the interest of internal unity requires that minority group relations with a (potential or actual) homeland be disrupted—in effect, that the diaspora character of a minority be ended. This approach was reflected in France during the era of the Revolution and Napoleon, when the “Jewish nation” was transformed into a mere religious cult. It was also reflected in the Soviet Union in the 1920s when the authorities began to use the Cyrillic alphabet for the Turkish languages spoken within their country, in order to differentiate them (and their speakers) from the language spoken in Turkey, for which Kemal had just introduced the Latin script (see Lewis 217ff); again after World War II when the Cyrillic alphabet was used for the language spoken in the Moldavian Soviet Republic, in order to distinguish its speakers from the Romanians west of the Prut river; and when the use of Hebrew was banned and words of Hebrew origin in Yiddish were spelled phonetically so that the connection of the language with Zionism would be obscured.

Sometimes the host country finds it useful to emphasize and strengthen diaspora sentiments. This was done in France during the 1920s and 1930s when the Ministry of Public Instruction ordained that the children of Polish workers be instructed in the Polish language; in Germany in the 1930s, when (for purposes of scapegoating) the Nazis denaturalized Jewish citizens, thereby transforming most of them into Zionists; in the United States

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during the 1950s, when politicians stressed the diaspora aspect of Latvian and other immigrants from the “captive nations,” in order to delegitimize the postwar incorporation of Baltic lands into the Soviet Union, and during the 1960s, when the Cuban immigrants’ homeland sentiments were fanned for the purpose of recruiting them for the fight against Castro; by Arab governments since the 1960s, when they helped foster a diaspora consciousness among Palestinian Arabs in order to mobilize them against Israel;⁷ and by German authorities at present, when they emphasize the provisional character of the Turkish workers’ residence in order to increase the latter’s incentive to return to their homeland.

Occasionally, a minority’s interest in its homeland is stimulated for the sake of the promotion of a foreign-policy goal and ignored later when the direction of foreign policy has altered. This occurred when the United States at the end of World War I made grandiose promises to Armenians in the United States of an independent Armenia in eastern Anatolia—in order to weaken the Ottoman Empire, only to lose interest after the war as a result of a growing rapprochement with Turkey (Lang and Walker 2). It occurred also during World War II, when the British encouraged the formation of a Polish brigade to fight for a free Poland, only to sacrifice that aim in the interest of a postwar accommodation with the Soviet Union.

Diaspora sentiments may be manipulated by the government of the host country in order to influence the behavior of the homeland. United States government officials attempted on several occasions (especially during the presidency of Jimmy Carter) to have American Jews exert pressure on Israel; and during the post-World War II period, the Soviet Union cultivated the fear among Turks that it would someday use Armenian claims to eastern Anatolia as a lever for further Russian expansion at the expense of Turkey (Matossian 194–95).

Conversely, a “homeland” government may exploit diaspora sentiments for its purposes. Early in the twentieth century, Sun Yat-sen solicited support among overseas Chinese in his efforts at overthrowing the Ch’ing dynasty; later, the Nazis manipulated the Sudeten Germans and the *Volksdeutsche* in other parts of Eastern Europe to promote German territorial expansion and tried (without success) to have German Americans exert pressure on the United States government to stay out of World War II. The Greek government has attempted to use the Greek diaspora in the United States to lobby against Turkey; the Israeli government has used American Jewish leaders as interlocutors for the promotion of pro-Israeli policies; and France under de Gaulle attempted to use the francophone “diaspora” in Quebec to promote French cultural influence (and, incidentally, to annoy the “Anglo-Saxons”). Some factions of the PLO, representing (*inter alia*) one diaspora, the Palestinian, have tried to enlist the support of a second diaspora, the Armenian, against the homeland of a third diaspora, the Jewish. Finally, diasporas have expressed their sentiments spontaneously, in the form of general political support and remittances that are sent to Algeria, Greece, Israel, Mexico, and other homelands.

While the homelands are grateful for that support, they view the diaspora with a certain disdain for having been enticed by the fleshpots of capitalism and for retaining a vulgarized ethnic culture. This is among the reasons why homelands do not necessarily want to welcome their diasporas

back from abroad. Returnees, particularly from host countries that are more advanced than the homeland, might unsettle its political, social, and economic equilibrium; returning Maghrebis, Mexicans, and Turks might be too ambitious and too demanding politically; blacks too Americanized; and Armenians too capitalist. Palestinian Arabs returning to Jordan from abroad might pose a threat to the throne (and life) of King Hussein. Even Israel (despite the Law of Return) is somewhat ambivalent about a massive influx of Soviet or American Jews—the former, because of the problem of integrating them professionally, and the latter, because they are too “Anglo-Saxon.”

The homeland myth plays a role in the political behavior of diasporas and is reflected both in voting and in interdiaspora relations. In France, Maghrebi-Jewish relations are complicated by the Arab-Israeli conflict; in the United States, black support of the Arab cause has translated itself into hostility toward Jews (though, to be sure, that hostility has multiple determinants); and in both countries diaspora Armenians, despite their capitalist outlook, have been positively inclined to the Soviet Union (for harboring the only Armenian political entity) (see Szaz). In France, many Jews have voted for the Socialist party because of its more favorable attitude toward Israel, and one may assume that if in the future there is Maghrebi bloc voting it would benefit the Gaullist party for the opposite reason. In Britain, many Pakistanis voted for the Conservative party because of Mrs. Thatcher's anti-Soviet attitudes; and in the United States, Cubans, ethnics of East European origin, and (increasingly) Jews have voted for the Republican party because of its reputation for a tougher stand against Communism. Sometimes, the interest of the diaspora in the domestic affairs of the homeland takes the form of direct political interference, as, for example, the interference of the leaders of the Lubavitch Hasidic sect in Brooklyn in the politics of Israeli coalition formation.

In sum, both diaspora consciousness and the exploitation of the homeland myth by the homeland itself are reflected not so much in instrumental as in expressive behavior. It is a defense mechanism against slights committed by the host country against the minority, but it does not—and is not intended to—lead its members to prepare for the actual departure for the homeland. The “return” of most diasporas (much like the Second Coming or the next world) can thus be seen as a largely eschatological concept: it is used to make life more tolerable by holding out a utopia—or *eutopia*—that stands in contrast to the perceived *dystopia* in which actual life is lived.

The problem of diaspora/host country/homeland relationships—and, indeed, the very definition of diaspora—goes beyond the purely ethnic, genetic, and emotional. Devout Roman Catholics who live in largely Protestant countries may see themselves as living in a religious diaspora and look to Rome as their spiritual homeland. Catalans of Perpignan, who may be patriotic French citizens, may regard Barcelona as their cultural and linguistic homeland; and the German-speaking Swiss may locate the Germanic cultural center somewhere in Germany and view themselves as living in a “dispersed” or peripheral *Kulturgebiet*. For French and Italian Stalinists, the “hieratic” homeland was, for many years, Moscow, and they may have seen themselves as living in an ideological diaspora. For multinational corporations—and their executives—the economic diaspora may be

constantly changing, and the homeland may be functionally defined: *ubi lucrum, ibi patria*. The complex and flexible positioning of ethnic diasporas between host countries and homelands thus constitutes a prototype for various sets of coordinates that social units and individuals use for defining, centering, and (if necessary) “delocalizing” their activities and identities, and that social scientists may use in analyzing the relationship between “insiders” and “outsiders” and between state and society.

4. Conclusion: Open Questions and a Research Agenda for the Future

There are a number of questions concerning the diaspora phenomenon to which we can only allude and whose detailed examination is beyond the scope of this essay.

1. To what social category and in what typological schema does the diaspora belong? Where is it to be placed on the continuum that begins with those who belong to amorphous majorities and ends with strangers and interlopers?

2. What criteria is one to choose to distinguish between one diaspora community and another—for example, between Minsk and Birobidzhan in the Soviet Union or between Soviet and American Jewish diasporas? between the Armenian diasporas in Lebanon, in Jerusalem, in Paris, and in California? between the Chinese diasporas in Singapore and in the United States?

3. Is it useful to emphasize the developmental and cultural dichotomies that exist between country of origin and host country in order to explain the attitudes and behavior patterns of diaspora communities?

4. Do the various diaspora communities—Armenian, black, Chinese, Jewish, Maghrebi, and Palestinian—behave differently toward one another than do nondiaspora minority communities? What are the crucial elements in interdiaspora relations and what are their determinants? And is it possible to draw conclusions from them that are valid for interethnic relations in general?

5. How long does it take for a diaspora consciousness to develop, and what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for its survival? Does such consciousness weaken with the passage of decades or centuries, as the relationship with the real homeland is lost, or, conversely, does the homeland focus become more deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of a minority as concrete experience is replaced by myth? What factors or conditions—for example, language, religion, relative deprivation, and political disabilities—are necessary or sufficient for the maintenance of a homeland myth?

6. Is there an ideal type of relationship between country of origin and diaspora community that is contingent on their respective roles? And under what conditions are these roles inverted?

7. What is the connection between a “millenarian” approach to country of origin and concrete action? For example, does the Jews’ myth of a return to their homeland “at the end of days” serve to encourage them to anticipate the event by settling in Israel, or does it weaken their will to do so? Conversely, does the secularization of Zionism undermine the religiosity of Jews

and therefore their ethnic unity? Does the decline of religious practice among Armenians weaken their ethnic consciousness, or, on the contrary, does it cause them to look for a territorial focus as a replacement for a lost faith? Does the weakening of religious practice among the Maghrebis in France compromise their myth of an ultimate return to their country of origin or, on the contrary, does it cause them to emphasize their "Arabness" (*arabité*) and therefore to maintain a homeland myth?

8. In the relationship between perceptions of discrimination, actual oppression, and diaspora sentiments, which are the independent and which the dependent variables? Is there a reciprocal causality? Is diaspora consciousness a concomitant of a feeling of otherness, of alienation, or of a lack of hospitality on the part of the host society; or, on the contrary, is the lack of hospitality a response by the host society to the exceptionalism that diaspora consciousness signifies? Is the exceptionalism of the diaspora a response to the very nature of the host society—of its culture, its behavior, and its dominant ideology, including a monistic approach to the definition of membership in the political community?

9. More specifically, is the diaspora consciousness of an immigrant community more likely to develop in countries whose citizenship criteria are based on *jus sanguinis* (e.g., Germany and Switzerland) and less likely to maintain itself in "settler" countries informed by *jus soli* (e.g., the United States, Canada, Australia, and [to a lesser extent] France)? Or, on the contrary, does the institutional and ideological pluralism that exists in the latter countries alleviate the pressures against the expression of diaspora sentiments?

10. To what extent is diaspora consciousness a function of the degree of structural "normality" of the minority community? Is such consciousness likely to be sharpened by a divergence of the minority community from the "normal" social-occupational pyramid (i.e., one in which there are masses of landowning peasants at the bottom, a sizable industrial working class in the middle, and a small bourgeoisie farther up the social scale)? And to the extent that such a norm no longer applies in "postindustrial" societies, may one project a weakening of diaspora consciousness in them?

11. Does the diaspora community function as a better scapegoat than an indigenous minority or an immigrant ethnic community that no longer has any links—mythic or real—with its country of origin? History seems to suggest that there is no difference: neither the American blacks (before the Civil War) nor the European Gypsies (during World War II) had a "home country"; but that fact did not prevent the former from being reduced to slavery and the latter from being persecuted and annihilated. Because of the existence of a large number of assertive and economically important Muslim states, it is highly improbable that the Maghrebis in France, though often made a scapegoat for unemployment and crimes of violence, would be forcibly expelled or that the Turkish diaspora in Germany would be subjected to a "final solution"; because of the existence of a populous and influential Chinese state, it is highly improbable that the members of the Chinese diaspora in various countries would be subjected to a similar fate; and it may be argued that the Jews would have been less likely to be victimized if a Jewish state had existed before 1948.

12. What are the implications of the diaspora phenomenon for public

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policy? More precisely, how should the government of a host country conduct itself vis-à-vis its diaspora communities? What links with their home countries should it allow? Should it discourage all cultural or organizational expression of diaspora sentiment for the sake of a rigid definition of membership in the “nation-state”? Or should it encourage such expression as a politically innocuous—and socially perhaps even useful—manifestation of a subpolitical identity? Should there be a new approach to citizenship that would distinguish it from nationality and that would accept as “normal” a diversity of cultural orientations, emotional identifications, language practices, and extraterritorial interest without these being regarded as proof of political disloyalty? Attempts to answer these questions may reveal that diaspora communities pose a more serious challenge to host societies than do other minority communities: they test the efficacy of the process of integration and the outer limits of freedom of consciousness and, finally, the limits of pluralism.

Notes

This article is a revised and much enlarged version of a paper presented at the Université de Haute Bretagne, Rennes, France, in December 1988. The earlier version was published in *Les Etrangers dans la ville*, ed. Ida Simon and Jean-Pierre Simon (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990). I also wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions, from which this version has benefited greatly.

1. For example, see Cobban; Shafer; Smith; Rothschild; and Enloe.
2. “Jeszcze Polska nie zginieła kiedy my żyjemy”—these are still the words of the Polish national anthem, which parallel those of “Hatikva,” the Zionist and, later, Israeli national anthem: “As long as there is a Jewish soul within us . . . our eyes turn to Zion.”
3. For an “inventory” of the Polish diaspora and its institutions, see Kolodziej, whose study was published under the auspices of the Cracow-based Institute for the Study of Poles Abroad.
4. See Morsy (15ff), who points out that this label is often used even for third-generation descendants of Algerian immigrants.
5. The term “Palestinian Arab” is preferred by some Israeli Jews, especially those of the older generation who remember that the term “Palestinian” was applied to the Jewish as well as the Arab inhabitants of Mandate Palestine. In Britain, the major fundraising agency in behalf of the Jewish settlers used to be called the *United Palestine Appeal*, and the *Jerusalem Post*, the English-language daily of the Jews in Israel, was, until 1948, known as the *Palestine Post*.
6. According to one sympathetic observer of the Palestinian condition, the focus of the Palestinians’ homeland aspirations would not be Haifa (or the rest of Israel within the pre-1967 borders), “as a first step at least” (Colin Smith 5).
7. According to Zuheir Mohsen, head of the Saiqa faction of the PLO, “There are no differences between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese. . . . It is only for political reasons that we carefully underline our Palestinian identity.” Saiqa is backed by the Syrian government.

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