

Homeland and Diaspora: Then and Now

A tale of comings, goings and household idols

How Israel (Jacob) became the first to leave Israel (the land)...And the first to return
How his family assimilated into a “foreign” culture while maintaining their distinctiveness
And what happens to Jews – and Israelis – here in America

Parashat Vayetze 5772 – Temple Beth El, Stamford Conn

ל"ז ורחל לְקַחַת אֲתִ-הַתְּרָפִים,
וַתִּשְׁבֹּם בְּכֶר הַכֶּלֶל--וַתֵּשֶׁב עַלְיָהּ
וַיִּמְשֶׁשׁ לְכֹן אֲתִ-כָּל-הַאָהֶל, וְלֹא
מֵצָא.

Gen. 31: 34 Now Rachel had taken the teraphim, and put them in the saddle of the camel, and sat upon them. And Laban felt about all the tent, but found them not.

טו הַלֹּא נִכְרִיּוֹת נִחְשַׁבְנוּ לוֹ, כִּי מִכְרָנוּ;
וַיִּאֲכַל גַּם-אֲכָל, אֲתִ-כְּסִפְנוּ.

31:15 Are we not accounted by him **strangers?** for he hath sold us, and hath also quite devoured our price. (*the word “Nochri” has since become synonymous with “Christian”*)



An Immigration and Absorption Ministry campaign in the United States to convince expatriate Israelis to return has raised the ire of American Jewish groups. The campaign warns Israelis that if they continue to live in the United States, they or their children are likely to become assimilated. The drive began at the end of September with billboards in cities with large concentrations of Israelis, including New York, Los Angeles and Palo Alto. The messages included "Before Hanukkah turns into Christmas, it's time to come back to Israel," and "Before Abba turns into Daddy, it's time to come back to Israel." The ministry then posted videos on its website and other websites with similar messages. One shows a set of Israeli grandparents, a menorah lit behind them, Skyping with their children and granddaughter in the United States. When the grandmother asks the girl if she knows what holiday it is and she answers "Christmas!" the four adults give each other worried looks.

Netanyahu Government Suggests Israelis Avoid Marrying American Jews

By Jeffrey Goldberg

The Netanyahu government's Ministry of Immigrant Absorption is sponsoring advertisements in at least five American communities that warn Israeli expatriates that they will lose their identities if they don't return home.

The Ministry is also featuring on its website a series of short videos that, in an almost comically heavy-handed way, caution Israelis against raising their children in America -- one scare-ad shows a pair of Israeli grandparents seated before a menorah and Skypeing with their granddaughter, who lives in America. When they ask the child to name the holiday they're celebrating, she says "Christmas." In another ad, an actor playing a slightly-adenoidal, goateed young man (who, to my expert Semitic eye, is meant to represent a typical young American Jew) is shown to be oblivious to the fact that his Israeli girlfriend is in mourning on Yom HaZikaron, Israel's memorial day. The Jewish Channel, which [broke the story](#) of what it calls a "semi-covert national campaign," suggests that the Ministry does not differentiate between the "dangers" of marrying American Jews, and American non-Jews, and I have to agree. But let's lay that aside for a minute and watch the video:

The narrator says, in essence, "they will never understand what it means to be Israeli." The narration leaves no room for the possibility that "Dafna," the Israeli girlfriend, could explain to the Josh-character (my name for him, though it could be Jeremy as well) why she's sad on Memorial Day.

And here's the in-your-face Christmas ad:

I don't think I have ever seen a demonstration of Israeli contempt for American Jews as obvious as these ads. I understand the impulse behind them: Israel wants as many of its citizens as possible to live in Israel. This is not an abnormal desire. But the way it is expressed, in wholly negative terms, is somewhat appalling. How about, "Hey, come back to Israel, because our unemployment rate is half that of the U.S.'s"? Or, "It's always sunny in Israel"? Or, "Hey, Shmulik, your mother misses you"?

These government-sponsored ads suggest that it is impossible for Jews to remain Jewish in America. How else are we supposed to understand the "Christmas" ad? Obviously, assimilation and intermarriage are issues in America in ways they aren't in Israel. Israel has other problems of course, such as the fact that many of its rabbis act like Iranian mullahs. (I'm not even going to try to unpack my complicated beliefs about intermarriage and assimilation and life in the Diaspora here; that's for a book. But let me just say that intermarriage can also be understood as an opportunity.)

The idea, communicated in these ads, that America is no place for a proper Jew, and that a Jew who is concerned about the Jewish future should live in Israel, is archaic, and also chutzpadik (if you don't mind me resorting to the vernacular). The message is: Dear American Jews, thank you for lobbying for American defense aid (and what a great show you put on at the AIPAC convention every year!) but, please, stay away from our sons and daughters.

UPDATE: The Jewish Federations of North America [apparently agree with my analysis](#).

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/11/netanyahu-government-suggests-israelis-avoid-marrying-american-jews/249166/>

HAARETZ.com

Controversial commercials show historic balancing act of Israeli and American Jews

In the words of David Ben Gurion: In the free and prosperous countries, Judaism faces the kiss of death, a slow and imperceptible decline into the abyss of assimilation.

By [Chemi Shalev](#) Tags: [Jewish World](#) [Jewish Diaspora](#) [Benjamin Netanyahu](#)

Jacob Blaustein might be the richest and most important American Jew many of you have never heard of. He has been so thoroughly forgotten that Wikipedia doesn't even have an entry under his name, the digital age equivalent of being expunged from the Great Soviet Encyclopedia.

Nonetheless, although he died over 40 years ago, Blaustein continues to exert great influence over American Jewish history, especially on days when [three commercials of the Israeli Ministry of Absorption](#) touch a raw nerve and spark such a lively debate about Israel-Diaspora relations.

Blaustein was a towering titan of industry who, together with his father, Louis, created what was once the world's biggest oil supplier, Amoco. He was a close confidant of President Harry Truman and often served as his diplomatic emissary. He was President of the American Jewish Committee during the establishment of the State of Israel and for many years thereafter. And, together with his surprisingly close friend, David Ben Gurion, Blaustein was the chief architect of a historical Jewish "Concordat" that has shaped and governed the delicate and complex relationship between Israel and the American Jewish community ever since Israel was born.

If he were alive today, Blaustein would probably be at the forefront of those who are so vigorously protesting the commercials that are aimed at persuading Israeli expats to return home, belittling in the process, so their detractors feel, the value of American Jewish life. He might even get on a plane, as he did several times during the 1950's, to complain to the prime minister that Israel was violating the terms of the modus vivendi that he had carved out with Ben Gurion soon after Israel declared its independence. He might go so far as to threaten that American Jewry would unilaterally abandon this agreement, as he did in early 1961 after Ben Gurion told the 25th Zionist Congress in no uncertain terms what the commercials at the eye of the current storm have only subtly implied, if at all: "Those who are devoted to Judaism must see the danger facing Diaspora Jewry courageously and with open eyes. In the free and prosperous countries, it faces the kiss of death, a slow and imperceptible decline into the abyss of assimilation".

This was no Israeli boy calling his father “daddy” instead of “Abba”, like he does in the commercials, nor a boyfriend perplexed by his Israeli girlfriend’s preoccupation with Yom Hazikaron and not even teary grandparents who don’t know it’s Christmas time at all until they are told by their Israeli grandchild in America. This was Ben Gurion, at his most characteristically blunt, expounding on the basic Herzlian Zionist tenet of “negation of the Diaspora”, sending American Jewish leaders into a tizzy and getting Blaustein on a plane to Israel to sort things out and put them back on track.

The deal between the two, first reached in 1950 in what came to be known as “the Ben Gurion-Blaustein Exchange” was, in essence, a Jewish cease fire between what many have described as the modern-day equivalents of Jerusalem and Babel. In exchange for dropping the then non-Zionist and often antagonistic posture of the American Jewish Committee towards Israel, and thus enabling American Jewry to unite in financial and political support for the newly-established state, Ben Gurion agreed that Israel would refrain from speaking on behalf of the Jewish people, would recognize that American Jews owe their allegiance only to the government of the United States, would accept the legitimacy of American Jewry, would refrain from campaigns aimed at encouraging wholesale Jewish emigration to Israel and would even stop using the word “aliyah,” to ascend, as that implies a superiority of the Israeli-Jewish existence.

Ben Gurion agreed to the deal, which ran contrary to his core beliefs, because of the pragmatic need to enlist Jewish and American support in the fight for Israel’s existence (as well as his Machiavellian wish to outflank his main rival for global Zionist leadership, Nahum Goldmann by negotiating with the non-Zionist Blaustein). But Ben Gurion repeatedly violated his own promises, for reasons of political posturing but also because they were so difficult for him to swallow - only to retract his words whenever Blaustein found out.

Thus, in the wake of his inflammatory “kiss of death” and “abyss of assimilation” statement, Ben Gurion was forced to reconfirm his 1950 “exchange” with Blaustein in an even more formal 1961 “Ben Gurion-Blaustein Agreement” – mainly because he wanted Blaustein to speak on Israel’s behalf to President John Kennedy, who was then contemplating potentially harmful measures concerning Israel’s nuclear industry and the return of Palestinian refugees.

And even though Ben Gurion was accused by his detractors of agreeing to a Faustian sell-out to American Jews, the blueprint he concluded with Blaustein worked out reasonably well for both sides, despite occasional glitches, though it has also undergone gradual but ultimately significant changes. Blaustein, for example, would have been horrified to hear Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu declare, as he did in his speech before Congress in May of this year, “I speak on behalf of the Jewish people and the Jewish state.” Blaustein had specifically demanded, and Ben Gurion had agreed, not to speak “on behalf of the Jewish people”, lest this buttress the accusations of “dual loyalty” regularly hurled by anti-Semites at American Jews.

As for the concept of Israel as a “Jewish state”, which has now become such a central demand in the Israeli and Jewish discourse on the peace process, it is indeed ironic that Blaustein’s representatives from the American Jewish Committee, who had been invited to voice their opinion on various aspects of a constitution that Israel had sought to enact when it was established, actually boasted of their success in removing the term “Jewish state” from the final drafts of the constitution – that was never enacted - and replacing it with the term “State of Israel.”

‘Bring them back home’

As for the commercials themselves, and the surprisingly vehement reaction to them, I am of two minds. On the one hand, the Americans who are objecting, including the Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg, do “protest too much,” as Gertrude says in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, possibly because some of the situations portrayed in the commercials hit too close to home; possibly because the protestors fail to acknowledge or comprehend that Israelis who have immigrated abroad may indeed be prone to faster assimilation than American-born Jews; and just possibly because this is a good opportunity as any to vent some pent up

anger at the current Israeli government without being automatically accused of "aiding Hamas and Hezbollah" or some such chauvinistic drivel.

On the other hand, one cannot ignore the insularity and self-centeredness that makes a growing number of Israeli politicians, government officials and opinion makers obtuse or oblivious to the effects of their actions on world public opinion, in general, and American Jews, in particular. Despite being forewarned, for example, so many members of the Knesset either couldn't comprehend or couldn't care less that the recent wave of anti-democratic legislation introduced to the Israeli parliament might alienate large swathes of liberal-minded American Jews.

Indeed, sometimes one suspects that for members of Israeli's current ruling coalition, many of whom hail from distinctly non-democratic backgrounds and represent expressly anti-democratic constituencies, the estrangement and perhaps even the exclusion of American or Israeli Jews who support "leftist" policies or espouse "liberal" values (such as "human rights", in quotation marks) is not simply "collateral damage" in the pursuit of loftier ideological goals – it is the end itself, the desired result, the outcome that they had intended to achieve in the first place.

As some of the reactions in Israel's right-wing and religious blogosphere in the past 24 hours make abundantly clear, even if that was not their original intention, the misunderstood television commercials could still achieve a righteous aim by distancing "assimilationist" Jews from Israel and thus advancing the sacred goal, inspired by Deuteronomy, Chapter 23, to "let our camp be pure," Amen.

Terafim

by Rabbi Geoffrey W. Dennis

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/t/terafim.html>

The etiology of the word itself is subject to debate. It may be a derivation of the Hittite *tarpi*, meaning "spirit,♦ of possibly from the Arabic, *raffa*, "shine." Terafim were small figurines, evidently representations of either gods or ancestors, kept in the homes by the Semitic peoples. Terafim were clearly regarded to be objects of power, as illustrated by the determination of Laban to retrieve the terafim removed by his daughter Rachel when she departed with Jacob (Gen. 31:34). Scholars speculate that terafim may have been part of a complex of beliefs concerning the deified dead among the western Semitic peoples, including the Hebrews.

The Hebrew Scriptures clearly associates terafim with mantic practices (Judges 17:5; 18:14; Ezek. 21:26; Ho. 3:4; Zech. 10:2). The exact manner of their divinatory use is unclear, though Ezek. 21:26 raises the possibility that arrows or other sticks may have been cast in front of the statues. The terafim had some connection to the *Urim and Thummim* used by the Israelite priesthood. Both were used for divination, but some speculate they resembled each other in form as well as function. There is some evidence that some terafim were made from alabaster or some other stone that would interact with light and may be related to the luminous *elmeshu* stone mentioned in Mesopotamian sources.



Why does Rachel steal them?

**If you were moving to another country, what would you want to bring with you from back home?
Does Rachel's bringing them back to Canaan with her threaten to corrupt the purity of the faith?**

ARE THE TERAFIM COMPARABLE TO A CHRISTMAS TREES?