Credo of a Dove Zionist

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I am a dove Zionist who believes strongly that American Jewry and Israeli Jewry must live in a state of "interdependent independence."

As a Zionist, I know the psychological and theological space Israel occupies in my self-definition. Israel's right to be is a sine qua non of my Jewish self. As I worked for the fulfillment of the Zionist ideal, the right of the Jewish people to have a state of their own, so do I remain unalterably committed to that state's survival, its security, and its flourishing in peace. Thus, I stand in a symbiotic relationship with Israel. We are interdependently related. So far the description is "standard."

The word "independent" is the one that raises eyebrows and suspicions among some of my "main line" Zionist friends. The word suggests, and quite correctly, that I as an American Jew have some right to be critical, even publicly, of certain Israeli actions and policies, particularly when those activities or policies may, in my judgment, weaken the bond I know I must maintain between Israel and my Jewish self. What upsets my more traditionally oriented Zionist colleagues is exactly this refusal either to blink at or be silent about what I may consider to be errors in judgment or tactics or in demands that Israel may make on me and/or my government. It is my friends' refusal either to admit those shortcomings or to create forums within the Jewish community where these lacunae can be openly discussed that drives people like me into what has been described, for lack of a better term, as the "dove" camp.

The phrase "interdependent independence" suggests something more. It implies a belief that a well-funded, strong American Jewish community—one that develops needed and, up to now, all too neglected programs and projects of its own, some of which may not have anything to do with Israel—is as important both to Israel and the diaspora as are flourishing new towns in Dimona, Arad, or Ashdod. It may be as important to have a well-financed film media project or an institute for Jewish life (both of which are about to collapse for lack of Jewish community funds) as it is to lay a new pipeline from Elath to Ashkelon. American Jews should never be placed in the terrifying and untenable posture of having to choose one over the other. Energy commitment and financial support for both Israel and the diaspora are one single mitzvah for which Jews must be responsible in equal measure. No Jew here should be made to feel guilty for his or her support of American Jewry's needs, even if it may be at the expense of some support for Israel through contribution to the United Jewish Appeal or the purchase of an Israel Bond.

The truth is that American Jews can support both in equal measure. They have just not been so trained. From cradle to grave they are taught that Israel is the alpha and the omega of their lives, with scant attention given to the importance of building and maintaining the structures of American Jewry. If Israel's economy is in bad straits today (and it is), so too is the economic situation of many of our congregations here.

As a "dove Zionist," I refuse to think of myself as a "crypto-Israeli"—a person living an ersatz or pseudo-Jewish life here in galut—to dream of aliyah—permanent resettlement in Israel—or to feel guilty that I am not "there" "fulfilling" my Jewish self. I continue to make the classic distinction between "galut" and "diaspora." I do not believe that I am living in exile. Thus, aliyah—now a sacred idol of American Jewish Zionism—is not a cardinal or even primary concern of mine. Nor, in fact, is it actually very high on the agenda of most pro-Israel American Jews. The refusal (I do not use the word failure) of American Jewry to make aliyah attests eloquently to their silent reject of this emphasis.

Instead of promoting aliyah, a "lend-lease" program ought to be advocated seriously. American Jews ought to be encouraged to lend lease to Israel their children, themselves, for limited periods of time. That should be done in many ways and for as many different reasons as the imagination of diaspora Jewry can devise. It is legitimate to go to Israel for a limited period of time to learn Hebrew or to work on the land and thus to learn how the land affected the formation of Judaism, or to learn Judaism from some great Israeli scholar, or simply to have one's Jewish batteries recharged by a stimulating tour of the country. Such "lend-lease" diaspora Jews

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should then be expected to return home, here to Jewishly enrich their environment with all they have received and learned in Israel.

Israelis too have much to learn from the diaspora, particularly from the way American Jews live their lives in interaction with a larger non-Jewish society. Here, Israelis could learn how the separation of Church and State fructifies the Jewish religious experience. By living here for a while Israelis could understand more fully the practical reality of applied civil rights. They would also understand better why diaspora Jews in this country reject Israeli perceptions about the depth or intensity of the Anti-Semitic virus all too many of them mistakenly believe is soon to engulf American Jewry.

The lend-lease process ought to be a convertible program. Israel ought to be "lent leased" to America. Funds for such prolonged visits are sadly lacking in an already financially strapped Israel community. Thus, instead of seeking to raise, and eventually frittering away, huge sums of money on an aliyah program that will never really succeed here, a lend-lease "grant bank" ought to be created from which Israeli Jews and Arabs who may wish to take advantage of such an opportunity could draw the funds necessary to bring them here and maintain them during such a learning period.

Yet another plank in the credo of a "dove Zionist" relates to the conflicting rights between Arabs and Israelis in Palestine. Both have rights; unfortunately, their claims conflict.

The citizens of Israel and those who live in the occupied West Bank who call themselves Palestinians have legitimate claims to parts of the same territory. (One hesitates to use the word "land," knowing the emotional content of such a word.) An amalgam of religious beliefs, religious history, and twentieth-century politics created that situation. As a consequence of World War I and its aftermath, when England was made mandatory power in the area, the same territory was promised to both Jews and Arabs at almost the same time, and the international diplomatic world stood by and let it happen. The claims of Arabs and Jews are based on their
individually differing perceptions of that period of history. The tragedy is that both are right. Today both parties to the present conflict have difficulty, if not a blindness, in recognizing each other's claims. A "dove" in Israel today is one who has the courage to say that fulfillment of these mutual rights is the only way to peace in the area. As they see it, "'ayn breira"—"there is no other choice"—short of war.

A growing number of Israeli writers, politicians, generals, and ex-military officers, people like Mattityahu Peled, Meir Pa'il, Uri Avnery, Amos Kenan, and Lova Eliav, express viewpoints predicated on this recognition. What they say and write resonates positively in the ears of this American "dove Zionist." Some of these people have formed an "Israel Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace." They issued a statement that contained the following:

...the establishment of a Palestinian Arab state alongside the state of Israel should be the outcome of negotiations between the government of Israel and a recognized and authoritative representative body of the Palestinian Arab people without refusing negotiation with the PLO, on the basis of mutual recognition (italics mine).

Elaborating on this, Mr. Avnery said it was in Israel's interests to "face the Palestinian issue squarely." The Geneva Peace Conference should be reconvened with Palestinian participation. Once negotiations had begun, "there should be an end to the violence and Israel should refrain from establishing new settlements in the occupied territories." (New York Times, January 13, 1976).

Such an attitude stands in diametrical opposition to that of either the Gush Emunim bloc or those who would advocate negotiations with the PLO without prior qualification, publicly expressed, of mutual recognition. So long as the PLO continues to insist on the terms of their 1968 Covenant, calling for the creation of a "democratic state of Palestine," acceptance of this latter position would lead to the "politicide" of Israel. The former position is equally suicidal. Responsibility for the present turmoil in the West Bank, leading as it has to the tragic shooting of Israeli Arabs, must in large measure be laid at the doorstep of religious, and sometimes pseudo-religious, zealots. These zealots—by their clearly illegal insistence on their "innocent" right to pray to their God on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and by their provocative "invasions" of West Bank Arab communities—triggered the first reactive protests in East Jerusalem by Arab students and adults and the subsequent rock-throwing protests of near-riot dimensions.

It is indeed ironic that those who precipitated this confrontation with the Arabs in East Jerusalem, doing so in the name of Judaism, defy the very religious principles and practices they say they are defending. Since rabbinical law prohibits Jews from setting foot on the sacred soil where the Temple once stood, the rabbinate of Israel has forbidden Jewish prayers at the Temple Mount. A sign posted by the chief rabbinate of Israel at the entrance to the area clearly warns Jews against entering. And to add pain to the paradox, it ought to be pointed out that Orthodox Jews—those who supposedly adhere to the dicta of their chief rabbis—have now defied that edict, provoking militant confrontation with the Arabs of the community. Thousands of non-Orthodox Jews, peaceably ignoring that sign since it was first posted after the 1967 war, have crossed through the doorway near the Western Wall to visit as tourists (not to pray) at the sacred spot. (One cannot help wondering: Which is the less religious of the two Jewish elements?)

These assertive, clearly provocative acts by the Gush Emunim bloc triggered the intense debate (surrounding the Arab-inspired attempt to equate Judaism with racism) at the U.N. during March—the debate which, but for yet another U.S. veto, would have again culminated in an anti-Israel vote. These actions have also forced the periodic intervention of Israeli police and military, resulting in accidental deaths of Israeli Arab children and adults. No more incendiary fuel could have been fed an already smoldering fire than these unjustifiable, offensive activities. When combined with the official government policies of expropriating Israeli Arab as well as Israeli Jewish land in the Galilean portion of the occupied territory and deporting with suspicious haste two prominent West Bank Arabs, both of whom were candidates in the recent municipal elections, the tragic consequences of such misplaced zeal take on a destructive dimension of the gravest proportions.

It is neither distortion nor exaggeration to accuse Gush Emunim and their supporters of undermining the security and threatening the survival of the State of Israel. Their outrageous belief that Jews have some divine right to a Greater Israel—reaching, one might suppose, as far as they believe the Israeli armed forces can extend protection—jeopardizes the fragile nonwar-none peace situation in the Middle East. And it does so precisely at a time when a powerful Arab leftist element, enflamed by what has taken place in Lebanon, might very well decide the time is ripe to capitalize on the emotional fervor generated by the recent events in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. It might not take much more than that to whip up Arab passions into a more militant "protest movement" in the occupied areas. Nothing would more delight the PLO and the Communists.

The behavior of Gush Emunim and their followers, predicated as it is on an unholy brew of theological fanaticism and political ultraconservatism, is frighteningly similar to the beliefs and behavior of those in Syria who believe that they too have a divine right to Lebanon, Golan, and Galilee, and all in the name of some "Greater Syria." The Gush Emunim bloc has by its foolish and ill-timed activities brought Israel to the brink of another crisis of international proportions. Their timing must be seen as an action designed only to bring down the present government and to put into political power those who share their rightist views. One gets the impression that in Israel politics is more important than peace and that those out of power are more interested in gaining political ascendancy than they are in reducing the risk of another war. Professor Uriel Simon, leader of the "Political and Ideological Circle for Religious Zionism," was quite correct when he wrote:
Today there are those who hear the cry of the "Greater Land of Israel" and those who hear the cry of religious conscience. The Jewishness of the State of Israel will be determined by the country's essence and not by its size.... Rectifying the evil that was done to the citizens of Biram and Ikrit is a more important religious problem than the order of prayers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. There is too much silence from our religious leaders on the former and too much excitement on the latter.

American Jewry insults itself and does a disservice to Israel by remaining silent on this issue at this time. Its silence will be misunderstood as approval. This is not merely some "domestic political squabble" within Israeli politics. It has become a provocation of dire proportion, and we in America have an obligation to express our revulsion at these activities. The larger American community wants to know whether the majority of Jews here supports such misguided zealotry. We have an obligation to let them know. There are, unquestionably, a proportion of Orthodox Jews in America who support the ideology and tactics of Gush Emunim. I believe they are in the same minority here as they are in Israel. Let the American people and the American government know that there is a most serious disagreement on this issue within the American Jewish community and that the majority of Jews here are appalled and disgusted by the antics of this bloc.

As I would publicly disagree with, and disassociate myself from, those here and in Israel who follow the Greater Israel ideology, so I prefer the approach of those in Israel (some within, some outside government circles) who would encourage a stronger role for Jordan—the one government that could, in the absence of Palestinian self-determination, become the Palestinians' voice. But that is second best to the Palestinians acting as their own political spokesman. Israelis have given thought to formulas for just such a goal. During the past year, for example, Hilel Kook and Samuel Merlin, former members of the Israeli Knesset, distributed a memo to a select group in Israel suggesting such a formula. (See their presentation in Worldview, November, 1975.) The memo stimulated intense debate within Israel, yet it remains largely unread in the United States. It is a guideline for alternative action to that now being taken, suggesting that Israel offer through the U.N. Security Council a plan to initiate, in cooperation with Jordan, elections to a Constituent Assembly of the Palestinians to be held on the West Bank and in Gaza within one year's time. If King Hussein refuses or is unable to act as spokesman for the Palestinian people, Kook and Merlin advise, Israel should then express its readiness to enter into negotiations with an alternative body representing the Palestinians. They add:

This must be on the condition, however, that such an alternative representation possesses a plausible mandate from the Palestinian people and is not just an artificial creation, as is the PLO, appointed and financed by foreign governments. Such a mandate can be obtained by a simple procedure of electing a Constituent Assembly of the Palestinian people. The elections should take place in the West Bank (Judea and Sumaria), in Gaza and Transjordan, under the aegis and supervision of the Security Council. The Government of Israel will offer maximum cooperation with the Security Council in carrying out this most important and decisive undertaking. Complete freedom to participate in the election campaign will be contingent upon one condition only—that those groups who wish to be part of this democratic process proclaim a suspension of violence for the whole period of the election campaign. In an atmosphere of violence no genuine elections are possible.

Upon completion of the elections to the Palestine Constituent Assembly the Government of Israel will enter into direct or indirect negotiations with representatives of the newly elected Constituent Assembly of the Palestinians, regardless of who wins the election. The negotiations will be conducted on a basis of equality and mutual recognition and respect. No preconditions will be advanced by any of the two sides. The legal, international basis of reference for these negotiations will be Security Council Resolution 242.

Such an initiative is but one among many innovative proposals. It comes as a creative alternative to the "compromise-and-react" practices of the present Israeli administration. The criticism currently leveled against the Rabin government is that it has no real foreign policy. My colleague Rabbi Alexander Schindler, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, recently criticized the Israeli government on this point. "Their world image was that of a nation without strong leadership because it has postponed dealing with basic problems such as the Palestinians," he said in Israel. "If Israel has policies that it keeps under wraps for tactical reasons, all well and good, but if it has no policy, it is high time that Israel adopted one" (Jewish Telegraphic Agency, April 2, 1976).

The criticism is well taken. But does American Jewry have a policy regarding its own right to think and act independently on Israel's behalf, even if it does so differently from the way in which the Israelis would want us to go? Did we act independently in 1972, when the government of Israel urged American Jewry not to be too critical of the then President's policies viz. the war in Vietnam? Many American Jews were all too silent in their criticism of that war on the assumption that criticism might jeopardize the delivery of Phantom jets to Israel (both policies under the management of a petulant President who, as has been reported, was something less than a lover of Jews). Did we act independently when, recently, severe pressure was placed upon American Jews to protest the sale of six C-130s to Egypt? We did not. It bears saying that there were some of us in the American Jewish community who disagreed profoundly with our Israeli friends on this issue. For many reasons—some subtle, some not so subtle—we did not believe it was wise to mount an American Jewish campaign of opposition to the sale of these aircraft to
Egypt. We saw, as Bernard Gwertzman suggested in his New York Times ‘‘Analysis’’ of March 15, that President Sadat was on the defensive, not only in the Arab world, but also at home, and needed economic assistance and the sale to him of American equipment as a symbolic gesture that would raise his standing in the eyes of his own people. American failure to help him, particularly and precisely at the time he broke his relationships with Moscow, might have brought his fall from power. There were, and are, enemies of Sadat in the Arab world who are only too willing to ridicule his alliance with the United States by asserting that it is a fruitless course to follow. Had America capitulated to American Jewish and Israeli pressures on this matter, Sadat’s enemies would have pointed out gleefully that he receives nothing from his new-found ‘‘friend.’’

A New York Times editorial of March 14 added still another reason to justify the reluctance of some of us to jump on the Jewish ‘‘establishment’s’’ bandwagon in drumfire protest:

By spending their influence on such a false issue [trying to prevent the United States from fulfilling commitments to provide modest amounts of military material to Egypt] Israel’s leaders and their American supporters threaten to neutralize United States diplomacy as a force for conciliation in the Middle East—a tragic turn of events for Israel’s interests as well as those of this country.

...as a major recipient both now and in past years [of arms], Israel is in poor position to use this argument [the use of arms sales as an instrument of policy]. Should Israel’s leaders and their influential supporters in this country succeed in persuading the United States government not to carry out the Administration’s commitment to President Sadat, the entire structure of the Sinai understandings would be threatened.

A far more sensible course—and one that would do infinitely more to strengthen United States-Israel relations—would be for Premier Rabin’s Government to re-evaluate the issue in its proper proportions.

Israel and Jewish fears about Egypt are quite understandable. After four wars—the most recent one the most contemptible—there is good ground for such concern. But today one must wonder whether Egypt remains the same kind of enemy of Israel it has previously been. Has nothing changed within the past three years to mute the quality of Egypt’s hostility? Are matters in the Middle East always as they are portrayed outwardly? Have the Sinai agreement and the interim accord now in effect changed nothing in the relationship between Israel and Egypt? Does a Suez Canal open to Israel-bound cargoes mean nothing? Do the repopulated cities of Suez, Port Said, and Ismailia suggest a nation about to go to war again? If at least these are questions American Jewry ought to be asking and discussing before we commit ourselves in knee-jerk fashion to an Israeli-inspired American Jewish protest to the President and the U.S. Congress over the sale of six C-130s.

Let me carry the questioning a bit further. Are Egypt and Jordan no different in their goals than they were in 1948 or 1967? Is Jordan the same enemy of Israel in 1976 that it was in 1948 or 1967? Was it an enemy of Israel in 1970, when the Israeli air force flew cover for Jordan in its war against the Palestinian terrorists? Does Israel have new and different enemies? Is Syria in a better position to wage war against Israel than it was in 1973? Would Egypt and Jordan support Syria unqualifiedly in a war against Israel? If not, could Syria initiate a one-front war against Israel?

While answers to these questions are indeed hard to come by, one thing is clear: The stereotypical answers of the past no longer suffice. Unfortunately, there is too little space within the structure of American Jewry for reflection on such questions. There is no place to which even strong supporters of Israel can take their doubts, their second thoughts, there to air them without being branded ‘‘traitor.’’ Yet, there are many of us who feel that we must have that space and those second thoughts as we struggle to remain independent and flexible. It is critical that these questions be asked and that American Jewry break the habit of looking to Jerusalem for the answers. By now it should be clear that just as the word of the Lord does not come from Jerusalem, neither do all the correct answers to hard political questions. The statements of Israeli political leaders are not and have never been unassailable gospel. They are not the ultimate in wisdom.

The more the Jewish ‘‘establishment’’ here adamantly opposes the airing of these and/or other ‘‘alternative views,’’ the more there will be attempts both within and outside official Jewish circles to discredit or defame those in the Jewish community who try to raise these issues inside and outside the Jewish community. The greater the effort to silence dissent as ‘‘inimical to Israel’s welfare at the present time,’’ the more I find myself in protest, driven as I was during the Vietnam war into a ‘‘dovish’’ posture, searching for issues and examples to justify my dissenting view, pushed on occasion to defensive overstatement when there is an attempt to respond or rebut, not with facts, but with such ad hominem epithets as ‘‘self-hater’’ or ‘‘traitor’’ (revealing more about the accuser than the accused). Traitor to what country—America or Israel? How can a citizen of America be accused of treason when critical of a country that is not his native land? No matter. These are not assertions of logic, they are responses of the viscera—viscera churning with unchanneled doubt and repressed questions, with uncertainties that grow more provocative with each passing day, with each needless inexplicable shooting both in the school houses of Israel and the streets of Nablus-Shechem.

The Zionist doves are no more traitors to Israel or America than the American doves of the Vietnam war days were traitors to America. It is because we are interdependently connected to Israel that we seek to be heard. Perhaps we can help Israel generate the imaginative initiative it so desperately, and now so obviously, needs—and without which there remains a vacuum into which the Arab propagandist and the militant activist step with political and violent offensive. And, who knows, some of the ideas we have may even be valid.