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How Does Israel Help Jews be Jews?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Fundraising slogans to the contrary, American Jews are not "one" when it comes to our attitudes toward Israel. But whatever our feelings, our identity as American Jews is shaped and defined by the relationship.

The range of views often breaks down by generation. The older generation who witnessed the Holocaust and founding of Israel has forever bundled these events together. They are likely to remain stubbornly loyal to Israel—right or wrong—and find it hard to brook any challenge to it.

But this connection and allegiance have worn thin for many in the younger generation. They are less impressed by Israel's rebirth than distressed by her military dominance, occupation of foreign land, wall of division and disturbing internal social problems. Our support of Israel—and the bolstering of our Jewish identity, along with our stature as Americans—comes from engaging in these matters, not ducking them.

Most significantly, the Israel-diaspora dichotomy no longer exists for most American Jews, especially those who consider themselves secular or cultural Jews. While our Jewish identity may be enriched by connections to Israel, it does not depend on them.