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Opinion // Diaspora Jews Shouldn't Be Israel's Top Priority

The state has limited resources, which means the government's priority should be Israeli citizens, Jews and non-Jews alike

Hila Zaban Dec 02, 2017 6:41 PM

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Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely near the Israeli settlement of Ariel November 03, 2015 Credit: MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP

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There was a furor following Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely's [recent criticism of American Jews](#), damaging already shaky relations between Israel and Diaspora Jews – particularly since the [freezing of the agreement over egalitarian prayer arrangements at the Western Wall](#). Hotovely's hurtful and unnecessary remarks are symptomatic of the lack of Israeli understanding of [Diaspora Jews](#) and its abnormal relations with them.

Israel sends [conflicting messages to overseas Jewish communities](#). On the one hand, there is the old message of “Don't interfere if you don't live here” and “If you want to be involved, pick up and come here.” On the other, there's the message that this is the country of the entire Jewish people, open and welcoming to all Jews. Then there's an expectation that overseas Jews donate money, yet simultaneously there's disrespect for the diverse ways in which Jews live around the world.

the West and its absorption to private organizations operating with its support, simplifying the bureaucratic maze associated with moving here.

Different cities in Israel fight over these immigrants – who are perceived, usually justifiably, as a strong population which contributes to places where it settles.

The free market also plays a role. Prestigious housing projects sprout up in Jerusalem and coastal cities for [Diaspora Jews](#)' benefit. Some buyers are Israeli, but these projects, particularly in Jerusalem, are geared toward Jews from overseas and are marketed in English and French.

Fairs marketing apartments in Israel are often held in Britain, France, the United States and other countries in which there is a target population that can pay more than the average Israeli.

In recent years I've been studying Britain's Jew and its ties with Israel. I have focused on people with vacation homes in Israel. My research, which doesn't include ultra-Orthodox Jews – who comprise one-fifth of [Britain's 300,000 Jews](#) – shows that the four most attractive cities for British Jews are Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Netanya and Herzliya Pituah (not necessarily in that order).

My study also shows that, in contrast to American Jews, British Jews have close ties with Israel. In a survey I conducted, which included 640 participants, I found that the vast majority of British Jews have family and friends here in Israel. Some 94 percent have visited Israel, 20 percent of them at least once a year. A third have lived here at some point. Nine percent noted that they own property in Israel, usually in Netanya or Tel Aviv, while 17 percent noted that a close family member has property here. Most property owners had acquired their assets since 2000.

This means that neoliberal Israel has become a competitor in the market for international vacation homes. Most apartment owners use them for vacations, and these dwellings stand empty when they leave, or are rented for short terms. Only a quarter of owners rent them on a permanent basis.

Most British Jews are Zionists who believe that Diaspora Jews should support Israel. Almost all of them follow the news from Israel. They are proud of Israel's existence and feel more secure for it. For most of them, Israel is a significant part of their identity. However, a small minority – less than 9 percent – believe that every Jew should strive to move here, and only one-third believe that Jews who don't live here have no right to publicly criticize Israel. Ten percent support a partial or total boycott of Israel, particularly of the settlements. Two-thirds placed themselves in the center-left with regard to Israeli politics. They are very concerned about Israel's reputation around the world, less so about Israel's security situation.

In contrast to concerns of Israeli policymakers regarding harming their rights to buy and hold assets here, apartment owners I interviewed are worried about inequality in Israel, and many believe Israel is entitled to act toward closing these gaps, including in housing. Raising taxes (sales tax or property taxes) applies to foreign residents who are interested in buying property here, and this seems legitimate to the people I interviewed – similar to steps taken recently by Britain, which has similar housing problems.

The other message, which wishes to attract Diaspora Jews through economic incentives, is also problematic. Diaspora Jews want their way of life to be recognized as legitimate and wish to be proud of Israel. Israel denies them both of these through its policies, offering instead economic benefits at the expense of Israeli citizens. In light of the fact that the state's resources – the budget, land, apartments – are limited, it should give priority to Israeli citizens, Jews and non-Jews, and not to Diaspora Jews.

Dr. Hila Zaban is a research fellow at the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick, England.

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