LEGITIMATING JEWISH IDENTITY AMIDST CHAOS: ZIONIST PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

How do global contests impact the conduct of public diplomacy? This paper, taking Zionist public diplomacy as a case-study in response to the Israeli-as-occupier image, proposes that when critical events shock the Jewish world by striking negatively at the legitimacy of Jewish identity—the right to believe and act as a Jew in a non-Jewish world—they stimulate a public diplomacy backlash. This happened after the Six-Day War of 1967, during the Second Intifada of the early 2000s, and most recently in the lead-up to the unilateral Palestinian statehood bid in 2011. These events provided the motivation for the mutually supportive activities of legitimating Jewish identity and campaigning for Zionist causes. Because these events affected the entire Jewish community and not just individuals, they stirred debates within the Jewish community about the proper role of public diplomacy. These debates, and the public diplomacy produced by their participants, reflected shared national understandings of the events and the vulnerabilities of Jewish identity.

Key Words

Israel, Palestine, Soviet Jewry, Zionism, Israeli Defense Force, crisis management, framing, cultural identity, Six-Day War, Arab-Israeli Conflict, Intifada, media relations

This article observes the roots motivating fundamental shifts in how diplomats understand the role of public diplomacy (PD). I look at the modern Zionist movement, whose unusual decentralized PD community produces diverse opinion and lively debates on the topic. Their debates tend to intensify around events that threaten the Zionist mission. These events, or global contests in the context of this issue of Exchange, are prolonged international phenomena emotionally impacting the movement’s diplomats. My argument is that when global contests recall Jewish self-confidence failures (i.e., the specters of the pogroms and/or the Holocaust), Zionists search for value in PD and often develop bolder, more innovative PD strategies.

My goal here is to explain the threat that the diplomats recognize in these contests and why that threat prompts major PD innovation. Following the first two sections, outlining the origins of Zionist approaches to PD and the relationship between PD and legitimacy, I describe select Zionist diplomats’ perceptions and responses to especially influential contests surrounding the Soviet Jewry movement, the second Intifada, and the Palestinian statehood bid.

Origins of Zionist Identification

Common to the various streams of Zionist thought is a belief that non-Zionist Jews are failing in their national mission. In the words of Theodor Herzl to the First Zionist Congress, “Zionism is a return to the Jewish fold, even before it becomes a return to the Jewish land. We . . . find much to redress under the ancestral roof, for some of our brothers have sunk deep into misery.” 3 In this perspective, non-Zionist Jews have either assimilated and become indistinguishable from non-Jews or failed to carry forth their special Jewish global mission (i.e., ignoring the outside world). Zionists typically imagine their Jewish detractors as weak in their identity, and they believe that Zionism is a path to national strength.

Firm in their homeland, Jews would be free to pursue their national destiny. Zionism is not merely about securing Jewish livelihood in the people’s national homeland; as Revisionist Zionist ideologue Ze’ev Jabotinsky famously declared in 1937, the “demand for a Jewish majority—is our minimum;” it is merely the basis for Jewish continuity against the dire situation caused by anti-Semitism. 4 On a deeper level, Zionism is about empowering Jewish “nonconformity,” or the ability to be different from other nations and to give Jewish values a role in “fashioning the world of tomorrow.” 5 Zionism is a way for Jews to reestablish themselves as “religious witnesses,” to “proclaim the power of the Jewish spirit over the chaos of history” and carry the message of G-d and the Bible to the world through their testimony. 6

Critical aspects of Jewish identity rely on such nonconformity, particularly the concepts of being “a light unto the nations,” showing non-Jews the beauty of G-d’s righteousness and justice, as well as “repairing the world” (tikkun olam) so that society reflects Jewish ideals. Both concepts originate from the Bible, and early rabbis, medieval “court Jews” (shahuvim), and even modern Zionist diplomats have found purpose and direction in them. 7 Embodying these concepts requires not only a sustainable separation from and opposition to other nations, but also a constant effort to carry the Jewish example to the non-Jewish world. Often, for Zionists, this message is not the Jewish faith itself, but rather an advancement of the modern, liberal, and even progressive projects of civilization. 8

Carrying this message requires international legitimacy: respect as a rightful and admirable nation among nations. Thus, many early Zionist leaders demanded respect for their national legitimacy from other diplomats before establishing substantial relationships. For example, when meeting with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, both Chaim Weizmann in 1938 and Moshe Sharett in 1956—the Zionism movement’s principal diplomats at their respective times—told Nehru that their conversations were pointless if he refused to accept the fundamental legitimacy of the Zionist effort. 9 When Zionist leaders fail to assert the movement’s basic legitimacy—for example, by appeasing the Soviet Union or wooing anti-Semitic journalists—they lose support within the Zionist movement. On the other hand, bonds with countries that more fully recognize Israel’s legitimacy, such as the United States, retain almost universal support.

The quest for legitimacy, and strengthening it, is therefore a primary objective of Jewish diplomacy. For the early rabbis, confrontational dialogue with anti-rabbinic Jews and (in a later period) Christians was essentially a

1 Research conducted in conjunction with senior thesis project at Goucher College, advised by Amalia Fried-Honikon, Sanford J. Ungar, and Jerome Copulsky.
2 Defined here as the Jewish nationalist movement from the mid-1800s to today, Zionism strives to protect the Jewish nation and to ensure the survival and success of the state of Israel. The diplomats described in this article represent a variety of Zionist ideological trends that influence their approach to PD, especially political Zionism (Lithuanian Hakehes), religious political Zionism (grauzeets Soviet Jewry activists), and revisionist Zionism (Danny Seaman). Arthur Herzberg’s text is an excellent introduction to these nuances. Herzberg, ed., The Zionist Idea, A Historical Analysis and Reader (New York: Atheneum, 1976).
3 Theodor Herzl, “First Congress Address” (1897), in Herzberg, The Zionist Idea, 227.
6 For personal reasons, the author chose not to write G-d in its full form.
response to attacks on their legitimacy. 11 The rabbis had to defend the right to practice their religion by preserving a healthy reputation. Training for this self-defense was crucial; indeed, it was the lesson underlying a popular teaching of first-century Rabbi Elazar ben Arach: "Be diligent to learn Torah and know what to answer an Epicurean." 12 Studying Torah is a joint effort between teacher and student to seek G-d’s message, a behavior Goffman would describe as "backstage." On-stage, Jews must defend their belief system before a distrustful outside world, legitimating the separate Jewish identity and message. 13

Answering the ‘Epicurean’ on the meaning of Jewish identity and its compatibility with contemporary Jewish ideals is a frequent problem for modern Jews. Facing stereotypes of Jews as backwards and un-American, a Jewish organization called B’nai Brith, which would later become a powerful PD force for Zionism, erected a Statue of Religion in 1876 to show American Jews’ devotion to ideals of liberty and religious freedom. In refusing to participate in a theological debate intended to demonstrate Jewish backwash, the Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn displayed Judaism’s consistency with rational ideals. A debate, he argued was unnecessary and could produce no positive value. 14 He boasted that Judaism’s “truths, "were identical to those of natural religion," and its values, like those of Christianity, “were effective in perfecting mankind,” which was the ultimate goal of the Enlightenment. 15 Mendelssohn took a potentially dangerous situation and transformed it into an opportunity to strengthen his legitimacy before both of his audiences: his “fellow Enlightenment intellectuals and his fellow Jews." 17

Zionists, facing their own distinct challenges—most notably the global contests discussed in this article—refused to repeat the Jewish timidity before and during the Holocaust. Legitimacy failures, such as the Allied countries’ decision to refusal to accept Jewish refugees about the St. Louis in 1943, became clarion calls for improving Zionist PD in later years. 16 Instead, Zionists glorify bold responses that defend the legitimacy of their twofold identity as a nation apart and as a nation with an international purpose. As the case studies show, these responses often changed the way Zionists understand the role of public policy, developing a plan to link their causes with such universal principles as human rights, justice, democracy, and international norms.

The Relationship Between Dual Identity and Legitimation

Zionist legitimacy without its dual identity is untenable, both internally and externally. As Jewish nationalists, Zionist public diplomats confront a Jewish community that is inherently a distinct kin network bound by a heritage of national movements. In their quest to achieve and retain a legitimate self-image within that network, they must protect familial survival interests and, at the same time, present the Zionist project as embodying their heritage. In other words, the diplomats must sustain an image of a Jewish nation protecting its own communities while behaving as proper Jews. Moreover, in establishing external legitimacy, Zionist public diplomats must emphasize both their perseverance as a people and the universal aspects of Judaism’s moral teachings (Mendelssohn’s focus), or at least those aspects that resonate with particular foreign audiences. 18

11 For much of this paragraph, see Schleifer, “Jewish and Contemporary Origins”: 127-128.
12 Pitt-Rivers, From Epicurus to the Epicurean (epikuros), in this context, was a generic name used by Valentine of the period to refer to their tough challenger: those of their pupils who had rejected Judaism’s teachings. Educated in rabbinic Judaism, Epicureans were the most able to delegitimize rabbinic authority,w Activity with Rabbi Moshe Dev Shaulay, of Baltimore, MD.
15 Schleifer, “Jewish and Contemporary Origins”: 129.
19 Steinzalts, We Jews: Who Are We and What Should We Do? trans. Yehuda Hanegbi and Rebecca Tong (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 48-53. While one can argue that Jewish teachings often prescribe particular practices, not moral codes, Steinzalts and most experts on Judaism emphasize that the practices are less critical to the Jewish community than the ethical principles that surround and support them.

24 Lecture, Benzi Gruber, January 2012, Erfat, Israel.
26 Henrikson, “Nice Diplomacy,” 68.
27 On the “power of the better argument,” see Henrikson, “Nice Diplomacy,” 69-71. For the insight on building emotional connections to Israel, I am grateful to a lecture by Zvi Abeles, Senior Director, Brand Management Section, Media and Public Affairs, Israel Ministry on Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, January 2012. It is significant that this type of emotional appeal is a key component in public relations projects in the Foreign Ministry.
28 Schleifer, “Jewish and Contemporary Origins”: 137. Schleifer equates propaganda with media and public diplomacy. Though the differences between them are significant, they will not be discussed in any length here and his insight about the need for conviction applies equally to all of them. See p. 150 in Schleifer’s article.

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https://surface.syr.edu/exchange/vol3/iss1/7
The media, drawn to the conflict for headlines, has tended to favor Palestinian narratives and assume Israeli culpability. For the extent and origins of this double standard, see Joshua Muravchik, *Covering the Intifada: How the Media Reported the Palestinian Uprising* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2003); and Stephanie Gutmann, *The Other War: Israelis, Palestinians and the Struggle for Media Supremacy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005).


The truth about al-Dura remains obscure to this day, but Israeli investigations showed that, given the physical positions of the IDF, al-Dura, and the surrounding structures at the time, the IDF could not possibly have shot the boy. Since the evidence was quickly obscured under Palestinian control, no definitively guilty party was named, but speculations included that the event was a staged shooting (by Palestinian militants claiming to be Israelis) that went horribly wrong, or a complete forgery. In recent years, Israel has won legal battles against France-2 for irresponsible reporting of the incident.

Gutmann, *The Other War*, 56-56.


Hirsh Goodman, "Introduction," in *The Battle of Jenin, 10*. Most statistics agree that over 30 of the about 56 killed Palestinians were armed, and approximately 130 homes were destroyed. See the summary of the accusation the Human Rights Watch report, included in *The Battle of Jenin as an Appendix*. Also available at http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/israel3/.


... create the impression that the terrorist attacks are even advancing the solution."37 Citing the response to al-Dura as an example, Yegar argues that poor hasbara strategy has led to "tactical mistakes of worthless reactions, like the haste to acknowledge guilt for events that were not caused by Israel."38 In a slightly softer tone, Gideon Meir of the foreign ministry claimed that Israeli media preparedness failed to achieve its objectives for Defensive Shield: attain legitimacy and "freedom of action" for Israel, "confront and challenge" international anti-Israel efforts, and situate Israel's campaign within the international War on Terror.39 After listing a wide array of operational recommendations intended to ease government-media communications, Meir added, "real change will only come when communicating Israel’s message to the outside world is considered a critical weapon by political leaders, and the resources and authority are given to the relevant government bodies."40 The legitimacy of Israeli self-defense was at stake, and hasbara strategy at the time was clearly unprepared to protect it.

In the aftermath of these PD failure episodes, Danny Seaman, director of the Government Press Office (GPO), bred controversy for confronting media double standards head-on. Recognizing that the Palestinians were using the media to delegitimize Israel and challenge Israel’s right to self-defense, he decided to, "not play games with reporters who don’t take this as seriously as we do."41 An especially gruesome suicide bombing about two months after Operation Defensive Shield drove this radical change in his thinking about PD. Tearing off the scene, he heard a reporter describing the "alleged bombing" to a distant audience. The reporter was treating this tangible disaster, which for Seaman recalled the Holocaust-style butchering of his people, as a questionable affair. At the same time, the media was generally ready to blame Israel for atrocities with only mere rumors as evidence.42 To him, irresponsible journalists quick to blame the Israelis for crimes like “murdering” Muhammad al-Dura were not simply misguided; they were perpetuating “blood libels,” the predominant historical source of Jewish persecutions.43

Seaman’s position in the GPO gave him the ability to arrange exclusive interviews and the authority to press cards, which ease foreign correspondents travels through the conflict zones. With these tools, he sought to cultivate media professionalism by boycotting and delaying flagrantly anti-Israel reporters and strictly enforcing the legal requirement that they not simply live in the same neighborhood as activist employed by fringe media outlets. This contrasted dramatically with prior PD efforts of journaling well in hopes that they would return the favor.44 Though the media tried to punish Seaman for his policies, even taking him to court, he and his policies survived. In his opinion, he was doing his duty as a civil servant and as a Zionist: government officials who reacted passively to media attacks on Israel were failing in their jobs for the state and in their obligations to the Jewish people.45

The media’s double-standard tendencies persisted well after the Second Intifada waned, returning in force during the Second Lebanon War and again during Operation Cast Lead, and to lesser degrees during numerous other episodes. Since accusations based on these double standards gained a strong foothold on college campuses, many Zionist diplomats responded by targeting college students.46

Colonel (reserves) Ben-Tzion “Bentzi” Graber’s Ethics in the Field traveling lectures focus more narrowly than the above-listed programs on cultivating an image of the IDF defending human rights. Self-described as “a true Zionist...
and hasbara Superman," Gruber’s presentations respond directly to misinformed vilifications of Israel and the IDF.\textsuperscript{47} Rather than dispel each individual myth, however, he focuses on the IDF’s “Code of Ethics” in the field: the meanings of proportionality and collateral damage and their measurement against reducing the human threat posed to Israelis. He emphasizes that, as it did in Jenin, the IDF frequently puts its soldiers in significant risk in order to avoid excessive collateral Palestinian damage. Gruber’s presentations combine his personal accounts and comments on Israeli policy with interactive footage and information that journalists and journalists rarely see.\textsuperscript{48} His position is an uncomfortable one for Israeli officers—he claims to have received frequent heckles—but he has become a useful resource for Zionist groups on college campuses to educate their classmates about the conflict.

Just as importantly, Gruber also runs a project called “Chesed (Lovingkindness) in the Field,” which trains Israeli soldiers to be sensitive to the weak in society, especially the young and disabled, and to recognize that there is no difference between Israeli and Palestinian children.\textsuperscript{49} In this sense, he is not only committed to defending Israel against demonization of the IDF on college campuses, but he is also strengthening the IDF’s attachment to Jewish and universal principles of human rights.\textsuperscript{50}

One of the aspects of the conflict since the Second Intifada most poorly covered in the media has been the frequent shelling of Jewish neighborhoods near the Gaza Strip, most famously Sderot. Thanks in part to the locally funded Sderot Media Center, the atrocities inflicted on Sderot’s residents have finally received significant attention. The Media Center’s director, Noam Bedein, gives on-site tours and delivers lectures at universities, especially in the United States.

Though Bedein covers the statistics on the rocket attacks in his presentations, he concentrates on the human challenges that the rockets pose for residents.\textsuperscript{51} He rushes to the scene of the rocket strikes with camera in-hand for publicity. Further, the Media Center’s museum (“the Kassam Gallery,” situated in the Sderot police department’s parking lot) is filled with sandbags piled against sand-fortified benches that look like cardboard boxes. These constitute the basic record of the attacks that maintains media attention. Yet, his main story is the contradiction between the terror constantly surrounding Sderot residents and the human right not to live in fear. Critical to his approach is a refusal to compare casualty figures with Gaza; unlike journalists, who frequently use these figures to imply symmetries or asymmetries of suffering, Bedein dwells on the right to a terror-free quality-of-life on legitimate Israeli territory. Telling of that right, he emphasizes that Sderot residents live next to bomb shelters (which serve as nurseries for the children too young to run into them with just five seconds warning), reinforce their schools with shielded roofs or build them underground, and send their children to a playground shelter shaped like a caterpillar.

The psychological implications of this life resonate with college students in a radically different way than dry news reports and underlines the importance of Israeli self-defense as a means of protecting human rights.

Legal Delegation and Cultural & Moral Bonds

The Palestinian Authority prodded the United Nations (as yet unsuccessfully) to declare a Palestinian state outside of a negotiated settlement in 2011. Their primary claim, in the eyes of Zionist diplomats, was that Palestinians deserved a state, had the institutions to succeed, and Israel—an unreliable negotiating partner and a rogue regime underserving of international norms—was standing in the way of legitimate Palestinian rights. Whatever the Palestinian leadership’s claims to internal viability may have had, their attacks on Israel derived from historic legal campaigns to delegitimize Israel through international legal forums, including the United Nations’ 1975 Zionsim—equals-racism resolution, the Durban conference, and the Goldstone Report on purported Israeli war crimes in the Gaza Strip, as well as the BDS movement.

These campaigns have sought to reverse the fundamental basis of Zionist legitimacy, that international norms of tolerance and respect for national identity justify the existence of Israel. They argue that creating the Israeli state


\textsuperscript{48} Gruber, “Ethics in the Field’ Lectures.”


\textsuperscript{50} It is significant to note that Chesed is a theologically and morally central concept in Judaism.

\textsuperscript{51} This description of Bedein’s approach relies on his presentation to the 2012 ZOA Student Leadership Mission to Israel, January 1, 2012, http://surface.syr.edu/exchange/vol3/iss1/7.

\textsuperscript{47} Many Zionists perceive a parallel between this delegitimization and older forms of anti-Semitism: a belief that Jews are somehow less worthy and more repugnant than other peoples. Marketing, branding, and conventional campaign tools are insufficient to rebut these attacks because they strike a deeper cultural and moral chord than these tools can reach.\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{55} A play on the Hebrew acronym for the UN, “U.M.”

\textsuperscript{56} Author interview, Daniel Mariashcin.


\textsuperscript{58} Regarding the ambidextrous role of Zionist youth groups, B’nai B’rith’s Daniel Mariashcin sees these youth programs as critical ways to expose youth to Jewish literacy and to cultivate an appreciation for Israel, Jewish history, and Jewish values. Author interview, Daniel Mariashcin. The foreign ministry’s Brand Israel program is similar in that it seeks to draw emotional connections with young American Jews, but it recognizes that Brand Israel is not a resort to a specific cultural content (and therefore does not pertain to this article) in a responsible PD analysis. See Efe Sevin’s useful study of Brand Israel in his Controlling the Message: A Strategic Approach to Nation Branding (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).


\textsuperscript{61} Author interview, Daniel Mariashcin; also, Mariashcin, “As D&D Go Mainstream,” 9.


\textsuperscript{63} Itamar Marcus, presentation to 2012 ZOA Student Leadership Mission to Israel, December 29, 2011, Jerusalem.
have no legal basis for delegitimizing Israel. His presentations and website, www.palwatch.org, attest to this argument and provide frameworks for learning about Palestinian failures to carry out their end of the peace process. Using Palestinian government-controlled media as a barometer of policies and intentions, Marcus argues that the government refuses to recognize Israel and its history, demonizes and incites hate against it, and supports and glorifies terror and violence.62

Recently, Marcus and Nan Jacobs Zilberdik co-authored a book based on the website’s material. Their title directly paints the Palestinian statehood bid itself as illegitimate: Deception: Betraying the Peace Process—Palestinian Authority non-recognition of Israel, hate incitement and promotion of violence during the 2010 peace talks and through 2011.63 Thickeky referenced but also filled with easy-to-access illustrations, the book is a useful PD tool. Israel’s Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs deemed it so useful that they decided to distribute this book to lawmakers around the world as well as Israeli ambassadors in an effort to present Israel’s case against the Palestinian Authority.64 Rather than simply defend Israel against the Palestinian leadership’s accusations, the book worked to undermine the gains made for the Palestinian Authority’s reputation in recent years.

A key aspect of PMW’s projects is highlighting the Palestinian Authority’s threats of violence and support of hatred against Jews and Israelis. This complements B’naï B’rith’s programs designed to strengthen the positive emotional connections between foreign audiences and Israel. While B’naï B’rith forges the bonds, PMW raises the fear that the country on the other end of that bond (i.e., Israel) is under existential threat.

Final Notes

The ever-transforming quest for legitimacy, among both Jews and non-Jews, drives major innovations in Zionist thinking about PD. With the Soviet Jewry movement, Zionists combined the practical political interest in aliyah with civil rights and religious freedoms. Secondly, in response to media double standards concerning IDF operations, a later generation of diplomats took an aggressive stance to protect the image of the Jewish right to self-defense on moral, humanitarian grounds. Lastly, in their efforts to tackle legal delegitimization campaigns, the diplomats revived Zionism’s once-neglected attention to international bodies and norms and strove to connect with audience emotions on a cultural and moral level.

Combining a variety of these innovations is an intriguing program of the Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs called Masbirim (literally, those practicing hasbara). Masbirim trains Israeli citizens to be representatives for Israel abroad. The goal, according to a senior official, is to “get the image across through using the people of Israel.”60 Rather than deploying knowledgeable and professional government spokespersons, Masbirim gives a forum to Israelis with interesting stories—about Israel and its tolerance, or its international aid, or its high-tech industry, and so on—where they can speak with foreigners and put a human face on the country. Training consists of skills for successful communication, but it does not include the substance of the message, giving the representatives largely free rein to express themselves before audiences. Despite media and official ridicule, at least 80% of the Israeli public supports the program, and in just a short time, 12,000 have undergone the training.61 This enthusiasm reflects the transformations in how Zionists understand the role of PD as covered in this article: It allows Israelis to take pride in their national achievements, defend their rights to their political beliefs and security interests, and connect with international audiences on a cultural and moral level.

62 Itamar Marcus, presentation to 2012 ZDA Student Leadership Mission to Israel, December 29, 2011, Jerusalem. Note that Marcus’s PD differs from others in this article by emphasizing anti-Palestinian themes.
63 Itamar Marcus and Nan Jacobs Zilberdik, Deception: Betraying the Peace Process—Palestinian Authority non-recognition of Israel, hate incitement and promotion of violence during the 2010 peace talks and through 2011 (Israel: Palestinian Media Watch, 2011).
64 Author Interview, Danny Seaman.
65 This description of the Masbirim campaign is based on an author interview with Danny Seaman. Also, see the Masbirim website, http://www.masbirim.gov.il.
66 Interview with Danny Seaman.


Pirkhei Avot (Chapters of the Fathers). Ancient Jewish rabbinical treatise, part of the Mishnah.


Author Interviews:


Presentations:


