



## **THE ORGANIZATIONS REPORT**

Mapping the challenges of American  
and Diaspora Jewry and of the  
connection with Israel

Executive Summary  
2022



קבוצת ראות  
Reut Group



## BACKGROUND

This document was prepared at the initiative of the Ruderman Family Foundation, within the framework of its activities to strengthen relations between Israel and world Jewry. As part of its overall mission, the Ruderman Family Foundation sees American Jewry as a strategic asset for the State of Israel and a significant factor in the prosperity of the Jewish people. The Foundation works to strengthen and deepen the knowledge of Israeli society about the history and contemporary challenges of US Jews by exposing the Israeli public in general and policymakers in particular to the contribution of the US Jews to the realization of the Zionist dream, from the establishment of the State to the present day.

The Foundation operates a variety of programs for leaders and policymakers aimed at strengthening the relationship between the two largest Jewish communities in the world, those in Israel and the US. Among others, the Foundation participates in programs in academia, organizes delegations of opinion leaders to the US, and develops collaborations with research institutions. The Foundation also works to provide reliable, high-quality knowledge about the Jewish community in the US to the Israeli public, to deepen familiarity and understanding of the needs, successes, and challenges faced by American Jews.

As part of these efforts, the Ruderman Family Foundation held a virtual event on July 27, 2021, in collaboration with the Peoplehood Coalition, under the title "Mapping the challenges of American and Diaspora Jewry and the connection with Israel." The conference was attended by over a hundred leaders and key activists from organizations in Israel, the US, and other countries engaged in strengthening the relationship between world Jewry and Israel. The composition of

conference participants reflected the fact that 85% of Jews outside of Israel live in the US.

The purpose of the conference was to use the knowledge and experience of the participants, which they accumulated in the course of extended work in the field, to bridge the existing gaps between theory and activity in the field. Many studies have been published on the relationship between Israel and world Jewry, but the conference aimed to add to the knowledge map insights based on proven field activity with various target audiences. Participants at the conference were divided into professional workgroups that connected the different perspectives of the participants concerning a variety of issues in their work. Participants were required to present a challenge or issue related to their work in the field, and they examined together the points of contact of the various challenges. After reaching agreement regarding the challenges in the workgroups and outlining a potential course of action to deal with the challenge as a whole, each group presented its conclusions in a central discussion, which were summarized by the team leading the conference.

This document summarizes the main ideas that emerged from the insights and recommendations of conference participants, focusing on the Israeli arena and decision makers in Israel, as the State of the Jewish people. The document contains references based on a review of the literature and media, to validate and enrich the ideas raised.

The relationship that was the focus of the discussion involves two parties, possibly more, but in the first stage, the document focuses on operational recommendations for Israel, aimed at the professional

field, the government, and the decision-making level. Later, we will examine the possibility of organizing a complementary process to formulate action items and recommendations for American and Diaspora Jewry.

The document was written with the view that the State of Israel plays a key role, as the state of the Jewish people, and that it must act strategically to position and strengthen the relationship with Diaspora Jewry in all relevant areas. The dynamics created with the establishment of the State have changed in the last 75 years, after the State of Israel became strong and prosperous. The relationship between the State and independent, dispersed communities that function without central coordination is a significant challenge that must be given serious thought. In light of the challenges and opportunities that exist today, both regionally and at the international level, this issue must be examined in depth, and recommendations and solutions must be provided to ensure a secure and prosperous future for the Jewish people.

The purpose of this document, in addition to the presentation of the data, conclusions, and recommendations, is to serve the professional field in Israel and the decision makers involved in strengthening relations between Israel and Jews in the US and the Diaspora. The unequivocal recommendations that appear in this document are likely to serve as practical tools of great importance for change and deployment of an Israeli policy that regards Diaspora Jews as an indispensable strategic asset for the national security of Israel. We hope that the readers of this document will find interest and value in its content.



# INTRODUCTION

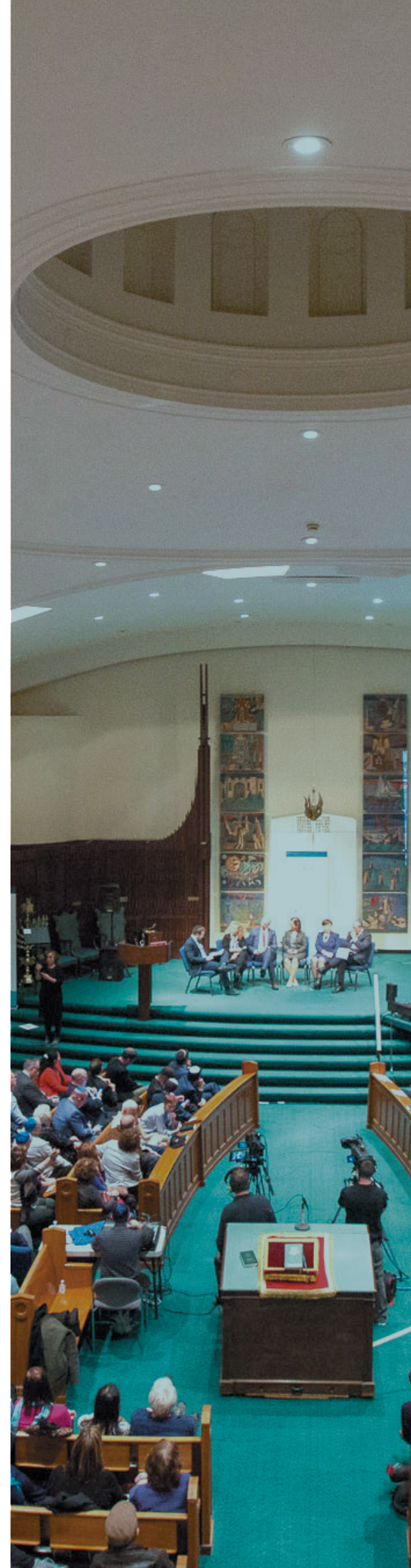
## **This document was written by the Ruderman Family Foundation and the Reut Institute.**

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**Today the relationship between Israel and world Jewry is affected by different and contradictory trends. Although the dominant trends encourage distancing between the parties, trends that encourage rapprochement are getting stronger. The process of distancing between Israel and world Jewry, and especially the distancing from American Jewry, is the result of various processes occurring simultaneously in Israel and in the Diaspora:**

In general, on the Israeli side, there has been a weakening of many Israelis' sense of belonging together with Jews living outside of Israel, and the perception of Jewish identity is gradually becoming more national. These attitudes are strengthened by the lack of knowledge regarding Jewish life outside of Israel.

At the same time, on the American side, especially in young liberal and progressive circles, Israel is becoming a polarizing factor in the face of issues related to Israeli state security policies and to religion and state. The attitude toward Israel is largely affected by the American Jews' identity challenges, which also undermine the Jewish establishment in the US and are accelerated by various factors such as the intergenerational gap and economic and social issues.



**The current relationship is full of contradictions and tensions, and it is possible to detect a real clash of perceptual paradigms.** At present, we identify two conflicting perceptions: one stems from changes in the balance of political and economic power, the other from value-related and social changes in Israel and the Diaspora. The undermining of several working assumptions about the relations between Israel and world Jewry, reviewed in this document, widens the cognitive and emotional gap, creates a sense of mutual alienation, and challenges the centrality of Israel in the Jewish world.

**Despite the above, in recent years we have witnessed a certain increase in the public and media discourse in Israel on the subject of strengthening relations between Israel and world Jewry.** Dozens of civil society and committed philanthropy organizations are driving a deep social change that in a few years is likely to significantly affect the perception of belonging in Jewish society in Israel. Among others, study programs about the Jewish world are implemented today in hundreds of schools in formal education and academia; most Zionist youth movements in Israel today also include Jewish peoplehood-related activities; and peoplehood studies are also integrated into training courses for senior civil servants.

**In recent years, ideological voices in Israel are challenging the effort to connect between Israeli society and the US Jews have gained traction,** often motivated by the claim that it is an attempt to suppress the status of Orthodoxy in Israel and even to challenge Zionism. The opinion of the authors of this document is that these voices are to a large extent a reaction to the "creeping" consciousness revolution regarding **the relationship with world Jewry. Either way, it seems that the relationship between Israel and world Jewry is finally emerging, even if little by little, on the agenda of the Israeli public.**

The relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry is full of complex challenges but also of valuable opportunities. An active position must be taken, rooted in a deep understanding of the trends, focusing on areas where it is possible to influence and change. **It is in the vital Jewish-Israeli interest to strengthen the trends that encourage rapprochement because the connection with US Jewry is crucial for the national security of Israel and the future of the Jewish people.**

Without acknowledging the importance of these connections, the current gap between a broad spectrum of American Jewish population and the State of Israel may erode Israel's *raison-d'être* as the nation state of the entire Jewish people, which is the basis of its international legitimacy. The crisis may damage Israel's soft power and its special relationship with the US. A thriving Jewish Diaspora that maintains a close relationship with Israel is a clear and proven strategic, diplomatic, political, and economic advantage.

**The founding ethos of the State of Israel, as clearly stated in the Declaration of Independence, is to be the nation state of the Jewish people.**

To realize it, several steps must be taken. In the short term, it is important to recognize the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora as a matter of national security. Significant resources must be allocated focusing on the areas of education, building leadership, and reshaping relations with the Diaspora. In the long term, it is important to work toward profoundly changing the Israeli perception of Diaspora Jews. Action must be taken to create a systematic policy in government offices and public institutions, so that they take an active position in relation to the Diaspora. Broad public awareness must be achieved through the creation of a "public space advocating peoplehood," striving for the mechanisms of identity formation in formal and informal education to reflect a pedagogical content that promotes the connection of Israel to world Jewry in line with the concept of peoplehood-based Zionism.



# MAIN FINDINGS

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Most attempts to characterize the challenges and the relations between Israel and the Diaspora critically examined processes that took place outside the State of Israel and focused on the changes taking place in the Jewish communities of the Diaspora. In recent years, the understanding emerged that these relations must be shaped to be mutual, and therefore to examine the processes within Israeli society. This document presents mainly proposals to be forwarded to the Israeli government to consolidate the status of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people.

## Part 1

### The State of Israel: Challenges in strengthening and maintaining the connection with world Jewry

#### Marginality of the issue

The Israeli public perceives the connection with Diaspora Jews as a marginal issue. There is no recognition and understanding of the decisive role the State of Israel plays in the connection with Diaspora Jews and of the significant contribution of American and world Jewry to the prosperity and national security of the State of Israel. The discourse surrounding the relationship with the Diaspora is conducted within a limited and mostly professional circle. There is a lack of basic knowledge in Israeli society about the Diaspora, which increases the gap in consciousness between Israeli Jews and the rest of the Jewish world.

#### Religious-political aspect

The status quo on matters of religion and state, which emphasizes the significant role of the Jewish Orthodox stream in Israel, challenges the process of rapprochement with US and Diaspora Jews, most of whom identify with liberal Judaism. The centrality of Israel in the Jewish world is undermined by communities that make possible a complete experience of Jewish life outside of Israel.

#### Political aspect

The political impasse and Israel's security policy in the West Bank and Gaza are seen by many Jews in the US and the Diaspora as contrary to the image of the State of Israel as a peace-loving country. Criticism of Israel eroded the sweeping commitment of the Democratic Party to Israel. The erosion intensified during the Trump administration. As a result, the gap deepened between Israel and US Jews, most of whom vote Democratic.

#### Erosion of Diaspora relations in the Israeli leadership

The role played by national institutions in Israeli nationhood has greatly eroded in recent years. Furthermore, the leadership that works to promote relations between Israel and the Diaspora is not diverse enough and does not represent many sectors in Israeli society.

#### Alternatives to Jewish support for Israel

In recent years, Israel has developed deep ties with Evangelical Christians in the US and worldwide, which are often seen as a strategic alternative to the relationship with liberal American Jews.

## Part 2

### American and Diaspora Jews: Challenges in strengthening and maintaining the relationship with Israel

Surveys conducted in the US Jewish community by the Mellman Group in 2019-2021, at the initiative of the Ruderman Family Foundation, reveal that the discourse that focuses on the crisis between American Jews and Israel is apparently "inflated," with the vast majority of American Jews still feeling a strong affinity with Israel. Note, however, that many US Jews see themselves first and foremost as Jewish American citizens, and the connection to Israel is important but secondary to their American identity. Despite this encouraging information, several structural factors may exacerbate the lack of identification of American Jews with Israel and support for it.



Credit: Getty Images

#### Jewish identity

##### The trend of not belonging to any Jewish stream

There has been an increase in the number of Jews who do not associate themselves with any Jewish stream. There is a decrease in membership in Reform and Conservative synagogues, alongside stability and even an increase in the Orthodox stream. This change reflects the tendency of many young people to distance themselves from the Jewish establishment, which used to be a significant anchor in strengthening and maintaining the relationship with Israel.

##### Cost of living

Because of the increase in the cost of living, many Jewish families find it difficult to grant their children the resources necessary to live a Jewish life, especially in the area of education.

##### Antisemitism

Along with these challenges, the Jews face waves of "traditional" antisemitism from the right (originating from the white right, or incidents of violence by blacks and Muslims) and antisemitism originating from the political left.

##### Identity politics and erasure of Jewishness in the progressive discourse

The growth in the power and size of various minority groups has made identity politics more dominant as an accepted framework of discourse that challenges the old privileged white establishment. Many US Jews who are influenced by the progressive discourse and perceive themselves as white and privileged, develop hostility toward the Jewish establishment and the State of Israel, which they perceive as a white colonial state. The binary nature of the progressive discourse that categorizes groups as privileged and the disadvantaged misses the Jewish experience and "erases" key elements of Jewish identity.

##### The younger generation is more difficult to reach

The younger Jewish generation tends to adopt universal and even progressive values, at the expense of uniquely Jewish ones. This trend, together with general trends of young people moving away from established organizations in favor of alternative and new community organizations, further distances the younger generation from the Jewish establishment and Israel.

# MAIN FINDINGS



## The connection with Israel

### Undermining the strategic importance of Israel

The growing trend among Democrats and Republicans to reduce the military presence of the US in conflict zones around the world poses a challenge to the geo-strategic importance that Americans attribute to the relationship with Israel. This phenomenon directly affects American Jews and has implications for the way they perceive Israel and their growing criticism.

### Changing attitudes toward Israel on the American left

The changes in the American administration in recent years illustrated the lack of consensus and of bipartisan support for Israel. The global left, and especially the progressive stream, has changed its attitude toward Israel, from great sympathy based on appreciation of the socialist-collectivist model of society, to open criticism of Israel's security policy in the West Bank and Gaza. As mentioned, this trend directly affects American Jews and the way they perceive Israel.

### Jewish education in the Diaspora and education about the Diaspora in Israel

Jewish education about Israel in the Diaspora does not present an up-to-date narrative regarding the place of Israel in Jewish life worldwide or regarding the complexity of the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. Furthermore, an absolute majority of students in the Israeli education system have not been exposed at all to issues related to Diaspora Judaism after the establishment of the State.

## Part 3 The clash of paradigms

The challenges in the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry (with an emphasis on American Jews) must be viewed as a clash of paradigms and reality changes that are reshaping these relations. The "coming of age" of the State of Israel alongside the establishment of Jewish communities around the world creates a reality where in practice there are conflicting, and often opposing, interests that cannot be resolved.

The first clash stems from changes in the balance of political and economic power between Israel and American Jewry. The growing economic strength of Israel undermines the conventional relationship that included economic and political support from the American side in exchange for experiencing feelings of "Jewish pride" and meaning. When it joined the OECD, Israel was no longer perceived as a developing country dependent on the economic support of American Jews, as it was in the first years after the establishment of the State, and at the same time, American-Jewish philanthropy has been focusing less on Israel and more on internal and global goals.

The second conflict stems from value-based and social changes. There is a perceptual and at times even an ethical conflict deriving from the fact that the Jews are the majority in Israel (and as such, they face the challenges of sovereignty and rule over minorities) and a minority in the US (being preoccupied with ensuring their representation and integration). In recent decades, American Jewry has been undergoing processes of integration into American society, supported by the universalist approach of many members of the Jewish community. By contrast, Israelis feel that they are under constant security threat, which has contributed to the emergence of a more conservative Israeli society. This reality creates an inherent tension in the attitude of many liberal American Jews to Israel.

Vital interests of Israelis and US Jews collide head-on more and more. For example, most Americans do not support the expansion of the US military budget, and a large number of American Jews support restrictions on military aid to Israel, as military security issues are at the bottom of their political priorities. The preference of most Israelis for security over peace contradicts the prevailing ideology of American Jews.



## Part 4

### The opportunities that arise from the current crisis between Israel and the US and world Jewry



#### Bringing the discourse to the social-public agenda

In recent years, we have witnessed a certain intensification in the public and media discourse in Israel on the subject of strengthening relations between Israel and the US and Diaspora Jews, but there is still a long way to go. Dozens of civil society and committed philanthropic organizations drive a profound social change that within a few years is likely to significantly affect the perception of belonging experienced by the Jewish society in Israel.

#### Technology

New technologies whose development was accelerated by the COVID epidemic may expand the possibilities for formative personal educational experiences through distance learning and produce a broader meeting ground between different communities.

#### New concepts of Jewish identity

Identity politics invites also an opportunity for new ties and the development of new and groundbreaking concepts of a diverse Jewish identity and connections with different populations, including American Israelis, non-white Jews (Jews of color), Jews from the FSU, and many more. The choice of many young people not to belong to the established Jewish streams may indicate the need for new alternative ways of identification.

#### Creation of a cohort of new players

The intergenerational gap in American Jewry and the undermining of the status of the traditional organizations may present an opportunity for the creation of a cohort of new players and stimulate a process of self-examination in the old institutions.

#### "New contract"

The sense of crisis in the relations between Israel and the American and Diaspora Jews is an opportunity for the Israeli government to establish a deeper and more substantial policy, and to sign a "new contract" between the parties.

#### The Jewish nation is in excellent condition

The Jewish nation is currently in the best state in its history. On one hand, the new and changing reality upsets the ties between the various communities, deepens intergenerational gaps, and widens the rift between American and Israeli Jews; but on the other hand, the realization of this potential is likely to lead to groundbreaking processes and unity between all parts of the nation.

## Part 5

### Recommendations for strengthening the relations between Israel and the US and world Jewry

#### Immediate steps:

#### Defining the relationship with the Diaspora as an element of Israel's national security

The relationship with Diaspora Jewry must be officially recognized as a component of Israel's national security by a government decision. The "consideration of the Jewish world" must be included as an integral part of the set of national considerations.

#### Work plans and allocation of resources

Public institutions, such as government ministries, the Knesset, and the local authorities, must allocate resources and develop work plans and training on Diaspora relations. The supervision of the implementation of the strategic plans must take place in full coordination with the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs.

#### Creation of a pedagogical continuum in the formal and informal education system

An educational continuum must be created in matters of Diaspora relations in the formal and informal education systems. Great wealth and variety of content, activities, educational programs, and opportunities to connect with US and Diaspora Jews remains unutilized and is not accessible to many populations in Israel, especially in the periphery.

#### Leveraging graduates of Israeli missions

Israeli society includes thousands of graduates and former activists of missions (Shlichim) with Diaspora Jews who are not involved at all in promoting and strengthening the relationship. This unrealized potential must be considered an essential resource, and a strategic plan must be devised to harness these graduates and activists. For example, the Prime Minister's Office can act as the coordinating agency between the various government ministries.

#### Diaspora Week

Activities, led by the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, must be expanded to every formal and informal educational setting in Israel and in the Diaspora.

#### Leadership programs

Visiting and training programs must be created to educate the leadership in the public service in Israel on the subject of world Jewry. Emphasis must be placed on developing a diverse leadership that represents the entire Israeli society. In addition, the professional arena should be expanded, and young leaders should be encouraged to join to lead the public and social service in Israel in matters concerning the connection with Diaspora Jewry.





# LONG-TERM MEASURES

## Strategic long-term multi-ministerial plan

Government ministries, under the leadership of the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and the Foreign Ministry, must formulate a strategic plan to promote and strengthen relations between Israel and Diaspora Jews in all relevant areas.

## Defining the role of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people for the long term

Ensuring through legislation that the initiatives that emphasize the commitment to the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people will be implemented by the Israeli government in the years to come. Actions and areas of commitment and responsibility must be cast into the abstract definition: the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people.

## Awareness: creating a public space that advocates peoplehood

Expanding the circle of journalists and public opinion leaders who deal with the issue and make it accessible to Israeli society, in Hebrew, the ongoing story of American and world Jewry. In addition, harnessing bodies, organizations, influencers, and other relevant entities to bring the story of the Jewish Diaspora to the citizens of Israel.

## Rebuilding the political and social center of American Jewry

This document is the first step toward a new view of the concept of community and the perception that Israelis and Diaspora Jews are one people. This political and social center will allow the creation of coalitions and platforms for effective discussions of controversial issues, in contrast to the current reality where there is almost a complete disconnect between the Jewish right and the Jewish left, and between many young Jews and the Jewish establishment. Platforms of this type are vital for Jewish political and social continuity.

## Strengthening of peoplehood programs in the social and economic periphery of Israel

There are cultural and class barriers that prevent large sections of Israeli society from becoming involved with the issue of the connection with Diaspora Jews. Targeted programs must be developed to create meaningful connections between communities and key activists in the periphery about Jewish peoplehood and a real connection with Diaspora Jewry, with the inclusion of these activists in key positions.

