

## Reflections on Israel's Policy Towards Japan since 1952

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The historiography of Israel's relations with Japan since the establishment of diplomatic relations in late 1952 usually looks at the first forty years of this relationship as wasted years. Most of the writers ascribed this to Japan's cool and often hostile attitude to Israel caused mainly by Japan's accession to the demands of the Arab economic boycott on Israel. The simplistic explanation ascribed Japan's reliance on Arab oil as the main culprit. Virtually no attention was paid to the Israel side of the relationship, namely how Israel view Japan and what was the place of that country in Israel's diplomatic worldview.

This paper will deal with Israel's attitude and views of Japan and the policy it pursued towards that country. In the early years this attitude was best described by a cable sent to Jerusalem by an Israel ambassador to Japan who had just presented his credential to Emperor Hirohito: "In Tokyo exile I presented my credentials."

Indeed, from 1952 until the late 1980's, the lot of Israeli diplomats in Tokyo was one of frustration, suppressed anger, bitterness, resentment and often a sense of impotence bordering on despair. Their reporting to Jerusalem often reflected their feeling of being unable to elevate the relations between the two countries to some accepted level of normality. This was their natural reaction to the very chilly and at times insulting policies of various Japanese cabinets towards Israel. It was also the result of a very ambivalent view of Israel towards Japan in the years immediately after the end of the Second World War. It began with an argument in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem shortly after Japan sent a message to many nations announcing the end of the American occupation and its return to the family of nations, wishing to enter into diplomatic ties with Israel. Japan was the first country that asked Israel to engage in diplomatic ties. The issue was whether to respond positively to this request, Japan being a member of Axis alliance in the war together with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett was not in favor, perhaps fearing that diplomatic relations with Japan may open the way for similar ties with the Federal Republic of Germany. He was however fully aware that at that very time, February 1952, Israel had already begun negotiations with West Germany for Reparations. Those in favor of the ties with Tokyo argued that Israel's policy was to seek universal recognition irrespective of the nature of the government. By then Israel had full diplomatic relations with Italy and with Hungary and Romania who were overtly pro-Nazi during the war and whose governments were responsible for the deportation and murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews. The only country at the time, apart from Germany, with whom Israel refused to deal because of the fascist nature of its regime was Franco's Spain. Few in Jerusalem admitted that Spain did rescue thousands of Jews fleeing from France and other parts of Europe during the Holocaust. In the case of Japan, the issue of the Holocaust did not seem to play a major role in Japan's decision to approach Israel. In those days it was not yet known the extent of Japan's policies towards the Jews during the war that resulted in the survival of some 40,000 Jews, at least half of them in Shanghai, while their brethren in Europe were decimated. The name of Sugihara was not yet known as many of those he rescued by issuing them with transit visas to Japan in 1940 emigrated after the war to America and Australia and only few came to Israel.

Sharett's initial misgivings were overridden by the senior staff in the Israeli Foreign Ministry led by Yaacov Shimoni who specialized in Asian affairs. He had the support of Prime Minister Ben Gurion who thought Israel should be represented wherever possible to cement its legitimacy. Sharett was convinced to change his view and even deviated from his policy of reciprocity and allowed the opening of an Israeli legation in Tokyo in spite of the fact that Japan did not reciprocate by sending a resident minister plenipotentiary, but appointing a non-resident minister. Only in 1956 did Japan open a legation in Tel Aviv. It agreed to raise the level of ties to embassies in 1963.

When relations were finally established in December 1952, there was no one in the Israeli Foreign Service who had any experience in Japan, had lived in that country, spoke Japanese or was familiar with its history, culture and traditions. All of Israel's diplomats were either born in Israel or came from Eastern, Central and Western Europe. One grew up in China (Yosef Tekoa), several came from Latin American nations. Their previous experience was either in European countries but mainly in the United States, Canada and

Britain. None had any academic training in the history and languages of East Asia.

The tiny Jewish community in Japan, mostly in Tokyo and Kobe, unlike their counterparts in Western nations, had no political or economic clout, was not involved in the media, arts, politics academia and economic life of the country in which they resided. Some were permanent residents who settled after the war having taken part in the occupation regime. Few held Israeli passports, many were transients. Hence they could not be counted on to open doors and help establish contacts with the right people in Tokyo.

But above all, in Israel's foreign policy agenda in the early 1950's, Japan was a very low priority in spite of the fact that by 1955 its Gross Domestic Product reached the prewar level. In 1964 Japan hosted the Olympic Games and by the early 1970's Japan became the second leading economic power in the world. In spite of these very impressive achievements, Japan could not supply the three key items Israel needed in its early years – immigrants, arms and money. Immigrants came mostly from European and Middle Eastern countries, few from North America and those who immigrated from the Asian continent came from Iran and India, several thousands from China, mainly after the final collapse of the Nationalist regime in 1949. Obviously, given Japan's pacifist nature and constitution, it could never become a source of weapons for Israel, neither was it in a position to provide economic aid. It began its own foreign aid programs to countries it occupied before and during the Second World War only since the mid 1960's. Israel had no case for seeking reparations from Japan for war crimes as it did from Germany. Even later testimonies of crimes committed by Japanese troops against Jews in occupied Indonesia during the war, did not result in claims against Japan.

Until 1957 Israel was deeply absorbed in its own struggle for survival. Until 1956 Japan was not yet a member of the United Nations and thus spared the need to vote on Israel related issues in the international body. After its admission to the UN, Japan's voting record on the Arab-Israel conflict was consistently against Israel or abstaining. The most painful abstention for Israel was Japan's abstention on General Assembly Resolution 3379 of November 1975 equating Zionism with racism. Japan was the only pro-Western democracy that abstained and that hurt. It strengthened the view of some Israelis that investing much effort in Japan, mainly in the media and political circles was a waste of time.

There was one Israeli leader who was convinced that Japan was destined to become a major world power and urged the recruitment and training of a cadre of future diplomats who will specialize in the languages and culture of East Asian nations. Prior to his resignation in June 1956, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett was instrumental in sending a number of young diplomats to study Chinese and in one case, that of the writer of this paper- urged him to pursue Japanese studies. But even Sharett was received with marked coolness by the Japanese emperor, prime minister and foreign minister when he visited Tokyo in the fall of 1956. But by then he was no longer the foreign minister.

In the late 1950's and throughout the decade of the 1960's Israel decided to devote much effort and energy to developing close ties with the emerging third world nations mostly in Africa. That became the focus of attention during the ten years of Golda Meir's tenure as foreign minister (1956-1966). Japan certainly did not count as a third world country and was not in a position to help Israel financially in its work in Africa as did the United States and some European nations who funded some of Israel's foreign aid programs. Thus during the decades of the 1950's and 1960's Israel seemed to be satisfied with treading water, realizing it could not sway Japan's policy and the harsh reality of the growing dependence of Japan on Arab oil.

Tokyo was seen as a backwater capital to many in the Israel Foreign Service. A stint in Tokyo at the time was not seen as assuring future promotion. On occasion it was difficult to persuade senior diplomats to serve in Tokyo. Apart from one, all of Israel's ambassadors to Japan have come from the ranks of professional diplomats. None of them spoke Japanese. True, several ambassadors had previously served in Japan in lower positions and knew the country well. Lack of ability to speak Japanese meant inability to appear on radio and television without translation. To this very day, no Israeli ambassador who served in Tokyo, ever advanced to become ambassador in the more coveted and prestigious embassies such as Washington, London, Paris or Berlin. None was promoted to Director General at the Foreign Ministry. At best several of them became Assistant Director General for Asian affairs. Only two were economic experts – Moshe Bartur and Ya'acov Cohen.

One area that both countries focused on in those difficult years was the cultural sphere. Japan began to grant scholarships to Israelis who attended Japanese universities, learned the language and some became world renowned Japanologists. Even after a number of Israeli scholars established their name, among them Professors Ben-Ami Shillony, Ehud Harari, Jacob

Raz, Rotem Kowner, Irit Averbuch, Rachel Shaul, Nissim Otmazgin and others, there was no interest on the part of the Foreign Ministry to appoint them to Japan either as ambassadors or at least as press and information or cultural attaches. Little effort was made by Israel to persuade Israeli media to appoint full time correspondents in Japan. Japanese media opened permanent offices in Israel only after the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

The key question often discussed in Jerusalem was what could and should Israel do in order to combat the anti-Israel policies of Japan mainly in the economic sphere. One was to do nothing hoping that radical changes in the Middle East would create a new reality that will lead to an adoption of a more friendly Japanese policy. This is what happened in the late 1980's. The second option was to go public and embark on a campaign in Japan itself to point out to Japanese public opinion that the policies of its governments were misguided and even worse, immoral and unethical. This was ruled out as risky and counterproductive. Unlike in Europe and in North and South America, one could not discuss the Holocaust as most Japanese had no clue what happened to the Jews in Europe and preferred to focus on their own Holocaust, two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The third option was to mobilize the American administrations and even more so the American Jewish community to take up this fight. This was attempted with little success. In one instance massive American pressure did prevent Japan from suspending diplomatic relations with Israel in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. This had nothing to do with American Jews. The Arab states threatened Japan with stoppage of oil shipments and demanded they end ties with Israel. Japan almost caved in and was considering cutting off diplomatic ties with Israel in November 1973 when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger intervened. He did so not because he thought the Japanese move was misguided, but he feared that if Japan severs ties with Israel, this could become a roller coaster leading many other nations to do the same thus completely isolating Israel in the international arena. An isolated Israel would then resist all his efforts to forge new arrangements between Israel and Egypt following that war. He feared that his entire strategy would collapse and threatened Japan. The Japanese solution was typical – it decided to maintain diplomatic ties with Israel but called on Israel to implement Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967 that outlined the foundations for peace in the Middle East, among them the withdrawal of Israel from territories occupied in the recent conflict..

Attempts by Israel to mobilize American Jewish organizations to fight the Arab economic boycott by urging Jews not to travel with Japan Air Lines and buy Japanese products failed miserably. In the mid 1980's Israel was successful in mobilizing an American businessman, Wally Stern, to convince some members of Congress that the boycott harmed American interests. But there was a price to be paid. In the 1980's there was a resurgence of anti-Semitic literature in Japan. Some of it was attributed to growing anti-Americanism under the guise of anti-Semitism. There was fear that the old canard – that the Jews controlled the American and the international economy and media would resurface as it did in the 1920's and 1930's.

Many efforts to mobilize successive American administrations to use their influence and bring an end to Japanese adherence to the Arab economic boycott were also unsuccessful. No American administration was prepared to promise Japan that in case the flow of Arab oil would be halted for any reason, the United States would step in and provide for Japan's oil needs. Besides, there were many tensions between Japan and the United States in the era of "Japan Bashing" and "American Bashing" on the part of the Japanese in the 1970's and 1980'. Washington did not see the urgent need to fight Japan on the economic boycott. It was satisfied by sending notes explaining that boycott ran against American interests and could back fire.

The chilly relations during the "bad forty years" could also be seen in the absence of high level visits by Israeli and Japanese leaders in Israel and Japan. Moshe Sharett traveled to Japan in late 1956 when he was out of office. The first serving cabinet member from Israel who visited Japan was Commerce and Industry Minister Pinchas Sapir in 1958. Foreign Minister Golda Meir visited Japan in March 1962, her only visit to that country during her ten years as foreign minister. Foreign Minister Abba Eban visited Tokyo in March 1967, the only time during his eight years in office. Chief of Staff Zvi Tsur came in 1962 to be followed four years later by Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin. But this did not signify any military relationship between the Israel Defense Forces and the Japanese Self Defense Forces. The next Israeli high level visit was that of Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir in 1985.

Until 1988 no Japanese cabinet minister ever visited Israel. The first Japanese foreign minister to do so was Susuke Uno, in June 1988, but his visit was insulting. Of the twelve hours he was in Israel, four were spent in a Palestinian refugee camp Daheisha near Bethlehem. Thus, between 1952 and 1988 relations between the two countries were cordial but there was never

much warmth. Israel's policy was as a result accordingly. Since some of its efforts to inject warmth into the relations were not met with success and some were openly rebuffed, it lost the zeal to propose various development projects and other mutual cooperation ideas and continued to maintain the nature of the ties on a very low profile. Japan adhered to mutuality. Any move that could be interpreted as pro-Israel was at once followed by a pro-Arab move. The visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens to Japan in 1989 was followed almost at once by a similar visit of Yasser Arafat.

However, as mentioned above, the most successful aspect of the ties between the two nations were on the scientific and cultural levels. As noted, a growing number of Israeli scholars studied in Japanese institutions of higher education, many of them on Japanese government scholarships. Japan Foundation was very generous in its support of Japanese studies in three Israeli universities. Japanese studies were launched in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the mid 1960's but took a major leap forward in the early 1970's when scholars who studied in Japan returned home. The study of Japanese culture and language prospered under the leadership of Professors Shillony and Harari in Jerusalem. Tel Aviv University launched its Japanese studies program in the early 1990's under the leadership of Professors Raz and Serper. Haifa was the third Israeli university to enter the field under the leadership of Professor Rotem Kowner. The focus on cultural exchanges was easy to achieve because it shied away from politics. When it came to cultural relations with Israel, the Japanese government did not have to check with the Arab Economic Boycott office in Damascus to obtain their approval. As if to compensate for their cold economic ties with Israel until the late 1980's, Japan recognized the very high level of Israeli scholarship. That was expressed in the number of Israelis who won Imperial medals and citations and one even the prestigious Japan Foundation Award.

When and why did all this change? Mainly because of the onset of the Arab-Israeli peace process since 1977, especially after the visit of Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the signing of the Camp David Framework Accords in September 1978, the ensuing Israel-Egypt peace treaty in March 1979. Yet it was still difficult to convince Japan that a new reality was created in the Middle East and that its policy was not only wrong but also outdated and wholly out of touch with other key nations. But slowly, as noted by former Ambassador Ya'acov Cohen, the pro-Arab period in Japan's

foreign policy was slowly coming to an end in the late 1980's and relations with Israel began to warm up.

The change occurred very slowly not so much as a result of new Israeli initiatives regarding Japan but because of the new international and regional reality which included the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, the unification of Germany, negotiations between the two Koreans, the collapse of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the rise of the United States as the world major power, the first Gulf War followed by the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. This was followed in 1993 by the signing of the first Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority followed in October 1994 by the signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. Japan realized it could not remain behind. This also coincided with Japan's economic crisis that began in 1990. Another major reason for warming up ties with Israel had to do with the establishment of full diplomatic relations between Israel and China and Israel and India in January 1992. Japan could no longer pursue a rigid and often dogmatic pro-Arab policy. In any case, the Arab Economic Boycott fell apart and Japan was no longer bound by it.

The new spirit was seen in more frequent high level visits such as the attendance of President Chaim Herzog in the funeral of Emperor Hirohito and in the coronation of Emperor Akihito. Prime Ministers Maruyama and Koizumi visited Israel and these visits were reciprocated by similar visits to Japan by Prime Ministers Rabin, and later Netanyahu and Olmert. Visits by foreign and other ministers became more frequent and were no longer rarity. The trade figures jumped impressively, the number of Japanese cars sold in Israel rose significantly, so did the Hebrew translations of Japanese writers led by Haruki Murakami. Israel began to figure more prominently in the Japanese media and much attention was paid to its thriving hi-tech industry in addition to Israel's many achievements in medicine and agriculture. An Israeli medical team that traveled to Japan after the March 2011 Fukushima earthquake and tsunami won much respect and its work highly appreciated. The Israel embassy in Tokyo has now become a coveted post for Israeli diplomats. The government of Israel is now pursuing more aggressive economic policies, encouraging Israeli exports to Japan. Israel also encouraged Japan to participate in the peace process and to be involved in multilateral economic enterprises such as the development of the Arava Valley.



To sum up, as the first harsh forty years receded into memory, we are now well into the second era, one of good and much warmer relations, better cooperation and deeper understanding. We can now speak finally of normal relations between the two nations - what Professor Shillony has called the two successful outsiders.

For further reading:

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