



Obligation in exile: the Jewish diaspora, Israel and critique

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BOOK REVIEW

Obligation in exile: the Jewish diaspora, Israel and critique, by Ilan Zvi Baron, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 295 pp., £13.99 (hardback), £13.99 (ePub), ISBN 9780748692309

Ilan Baron's *Obligation in Exile* has certainly been published at a propitious time. The nature of the relationship between diaspora and Israel (both what it should ideally be and what it currently is) has been debated for decades. In recent years though, the nature of this debate has shifted; the question is no longer so much about whether a diaspora should exist, so much as what it "owes" to Israel. With diaspora Jewish critics of Israel growing in number and becoming more assertive – and with increasing intra-communal tension in diaspora communities as a result – Ilan Baron's book seeks to clarify what is at stake in such debates.

Baron seeks to reframe the questions surrounding the diaspora–Israel relationship as questions of "transnational political obligation." There is a large literature on political obligation, but it has focused primarily on obligation towards the state within which one resides. As Baron points out, obligations also exist outside these boundaries and the confusions and contradictions surrounding these issues are in need of clarification. Crucially, he shows that transnational political obligations do not require collective agreement and solidarity – as they can only be "expected" but not enforced – and as such they are in a constant state of contestation.

Obligation in Exile draws on an extensive series of interviews with Israeli and diaspora leaders and intellectuals, as well as an engagement with a wide range of literatures and thinkers. Baron formulates transnational political obligation both as political theory and as something that permeates into "constructions of the self." In the fifth chapter of the book, Baron argues that "it is one's identity that is primarily at stake in transnational political obligations." This is a key insight and leads one to question whether diaspora debates about Israel are actually "about" Israel at all. The sheer emotional investment in Israel (whatever "Israel" might actually mean) explains the "intensity" of the "flashpoints" in discussions over Israel in the diaspora. At the same time, transnational political obligation is curiously vague in its normative construction; for many of those whom Baron interviews, the key obligation is to "connect" or "engage" with Israel. It is this vagueness that creates complications and dilemmas when diaspora Jews criticize Israel: "... Jews are expected to relate to Israel, but if the relationship is too critical or too lax one runs the risk of being accused of failing as a Jew" (212).

Certainly in the case of the Israel–diaspora relationship, transnational political obligation has not brought either physical or existential security to Jews. In his conclusion, Baron argues that "we need to explore why Jews in the diaspora are expected to have a relationship with Israel when the answers that Israel ostensibly provided have not been achieved only in the diaspora, but in Israel too" (220). This is not a call for diaspora criticism or "disengagement" from Israel so much as clarification and soul-searching. *Obligation in Exile* is therefore a rare thing – a book from which diaspora Jews across the political spectrum can and should learn from.

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