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## Fundamentally Freund: Hyphenated Israelis

By MICHAEL FREUND  
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Giving those living abroad the right to vote here is a good place to start in strengthening their bond to this country.

Nearly a century ago, US president Theodore Roosevelt ascended the stage of Carnegie Hall in New York and created a stir. Thundering passionately as only he could, Roosevelt launched a memorable assault on the idea of multiple national loyalties, making a forceful case against diluting the concept of American identity.

“There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism,” he famously declared in his 1915 speech. “Americanism is a matter of the spirit and of the soul. Our allegiance must be purely to the United States. We must unsparingly condemn any man who holds any other allegiance.”

I couldn't help but think back to Roosevelt's words this week after the proposal put forward by Israel Beiteinu to grant Israelis living abroad the right to vote.

At first glance, the plan does elicit a reflexive distaste. Our heart tells us there is something inherently wrong with the idea of people who do not live here being able to shape our government.

On the surface, it smacks of democracy by remote control. If a person is not invested in the outcome beyond an emotional attachment, and does not directly bear the consequences of his choices, giving him the vote seems like an affront to the rest of us who do live here. In that respect, it also seems to contradict the spirit of Zionism by extending Israeli political rights to those who have chosen to go elsewhere.

THAT, AS I said, is the heart speaking. But I think the head tells a very different story. To begin with, the world of 2010 is not the same as that of 1915. Indeed, increased global mobility and cross-border technologies have weakened the bonds of national identity, all but making Roosevelt's pronouncements obsolete.

Consequently, an increasing number of countries around the world have been extending the right to vote to their citizens living abroad, recognizing the inherent value in strengthening ties with expatriates.

In the US, Congress passed a law in 1985 called the Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Rights Act. As its name implies, it granted all US citizens residing abroad the right to vote in federal elections. British citizens living elsewhere have been able to vote in UK balloting since the mid-1980s, while Switzerland granted overseas Swiss the right in 1992. Spain, Sweden and Poland have followed suit, along with a host of others.

A number of countries have even taken the matter one step further and granted seats to expatriates to give them representation in their national parliaments. For example, Portugal's and Italy's parliaments, as well as the French senate, all reserve seats for citizens residing abroad. As Prof. Peter Spiro of Georgia Law School has noted: "There seems to be a clear trend toward more expansive voting privileges for external citizens, and the facilitation of the exercise of those privileges." This trend, he argued in a 2006 article in the New York University Law Review, "requires a changed conception of citizenship and nationhood, as political membership decouples from territorial location."

In other words, it is possible nowadays for people to develop and maintain multiple associations and attachments. States are increasingly cognizant of this, leading many to expand the rights and privileges of their citizens abroad in an effort to keep the bond with their motherland alive.

Obviously, when it comes to Israel, the question raises the tender and highly emotive issue of *yordim*, those who have left the country. But we shouldn't necessarily allow our emotions to overwhelm reason.

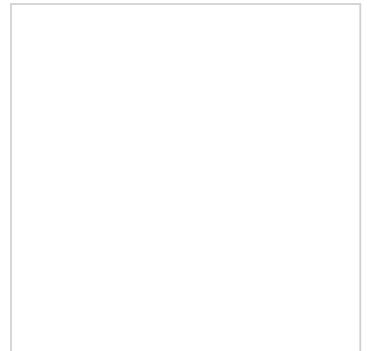
TO BEGIN with, nonresident Israelis already have the right to vote, which they can exercise simply by getting on a plane and visiting for election day. Clearly, the same objections raised by critics against allowing Israelis abroad to vote apply equally to such "electoral tourists." Yet no one is suggesting that *their* right be taken away, and rightly so.

Moreover, the law does not bar Israelis abroad from contributing to Israeli election campaigns, supporting candidates or backing political parties. So the talk about not allowing them to influence the outcome of the voting just does not hold weight.

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, there are currently over half a million Israelis living abroad. Many, in effect, have become "hyphenated Israelis," developing competing loyalties. But they are still Israeli, and we should do everything we can to strengthen that part of their identity. It is in our interest, as a nation and a people, to forestall the further dilution of their link with the Jewish state.

To be sure, Israelis who choose to live abroad have elected to cast their fate elsewhere, for whatever reason. But the choice we face is whether to write them off or seek ways to strengthen their bonds to this country, in the hope that one day they or their children will return.

However much one's heart might be leaning toward the former, logic and reason dictate that a more inclusive response is the way to go. And giving them the right to vote seems like a good place to start.



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