Tourist trap: When religion is identified with nation

by James M. Wall in the September 11, 2002 issue

The Jewish Agency for Israel reports that in 2000, 6,460 North American Jewish teenagers traveled to Israel on what *Newsweek* recently described as formative trips "to cement Americans' connection to their religion." This year, with the region torn by violence, that number dropped to 200. What does this mean to the Jewish religion? To some Jewish leaders it means that the "Israel experience," which *Newsweek* calls "a central part of American Jews' identity," will not be available to the current generation of teenagers.

Hannah Janal was one of the young American Jews who traveled to Israel earlier this year, and her experience is an indication of why some Jewish leaders lament the drastic drop in young first-time travelers to Israel. Janal was the guest of Birthright Israel, a group that pays the bills for 19- to 26-year-olds who want to visit Israel. She reports that before her trip she was a "High Holidays" Jew, attending synagogue only on the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur. After returning from her January trip, however, she wants to "stand up and sing out how much I love Israel. I care so much. I love it."

Dedication is desired in any religious tradition, but the tone of the *Newsweek* report, which quotes many tour promoters, links faith to land so tightly that one finds oneself asking what happens to a religious tradition when it becomes identified with a nation state. Such a close identification of Israel with Judaism guarantees a strong emotional connection between faith and state. Is this a good thing?

Polls indicate that American Jews are overwhelming in their support of the state of Israel regardless of its current policies. "My country right or wrong" is an emotion normally reserved for one's native land. Indeed, prior to 1948, American Jews engaged in an intense debate. Zionists who were passionately committed to the formation of a state as essential for Jewish survival argued with non-Zionists, who feared that such a close identification of faith and nation would lead to idolatry and

divide the loyalties of Jewish-Americans between the U.S. and Israel. Non-Zionists believed that the historic faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ran the risk of becoming subservient to human rulers, those “kings” the early prophets decried as a threat to the faith.

The United States was shaped by religious traditions, but it is a democracy and not a theocracy. Except for the occasional overzealous politician who sees God and flag as the same, this nation accepts its human limitations and recognizes that the judgment of God is appropriately rendered on all that is done in the so-called national interest. Israel, although not a theocracy, is a nation self-designated as a homeland for Jews. It is, therefore, obligated to acknowledge its indebtedness to Judaism.

As we have learned from generations of interfaith conversations, it is always risky to speculate from the outside on why any religious group does what it does. But conversations between religious traditions do not keep us from raising questions about our own conduct as believers and citizens. Nor should we look away from the conduct of others who are both believers and fellow citizens.

It is appropriate, therefore, to ask why so many American Jews and so many Christian supporters of Israel remain silent about policies and practices of Israel’s secular leaders that continue to damage Jew and Palestinian alike. Is it because Israel has become a nation above criticism by the American public and the American political leadership? If so, this absence of criticism is an ominous realization of the sin of idolatry and divided loyalties that non-Zionist Jews predicted would follow the formation of the state of Israel.

When tours for young Jewish-Americans lead participants to identify their faith with a fallible state, both the state and the faith are ill served. Many American Jews know this better than do outsiders to the faith. Some of them look back on the Zionist debate within Judaism prior to 1948, and wonder how to regain some of the vitality of that debate. For many in the younger generations, however, those debates are irrelevant. Their history began with the Holocaust, that time of horror from which Israel (whose nationhood was in the planning stage long before World War II) emerged as an historical reality.

Israel is still able to offer to the world a nation that is a beacon to all and a leader in the ethical tradition of its ancient prophets. But this will not continue if American

support for Israel remains so emotionally linked to personal faith traditions—Christian or Jewish—that no questions about or criticisms of Israeli conduct are permitted.

The debate over Israel’s existence is over. But it is not too late to reflect on Israel’s future. To do that we should begin with this admonition from the prophet Micah: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”