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# Eric Fleisch, Checkbook Zionism: Philanthropy and Power in the Israel-Diaspora Relationship

Mira Sucharov

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**Eric Fleisch, *Checkbook Zionism: Philanthropy and Power in the Israel–Diaspora Relationship* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2024), 250 pp., ISBN:9781978819948.**

The question of American Jews, money and Israel always has been a fraught one. But Eric Fleisch has managed to take a clear-eyed, scholar's lens to the topic, at least on the question of the role of Diaspora (especially American) Jewish philanthropy in understanding diaspora–homeland relations. Specifically, Fleisch is interested in how these two entities—American Jewish donors on the one hand, and the State of Israel on the other, negotiate agenda-setting, independence, voice and influence. Included among his questions are: “what happens (or should happen) in [...] cases when the priorities of a homeland and its diaspora donors diverge? Who should determine how donated money to a sovereign country should be spent” (4)? Connected to these aims are the themes of “partnership and power sharing” (6). The result is an engaging and illuminating study that will be of interest to scholars of international relations, diaspora studies, modern Zionism, and American Jewish philanthropy.

Checkbook Zionism is the term Fleisch uses to describe a prominent aspect of the relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel, spotlighting what he argues is a longstanding view by Israelis of the role many American Jews play in the relationship. This somewhat derogatory term when used by Israelis, at least, reflects the pure (and perhaps, by now, dated) Zionist ethos of aliyah, or immigration, as representing the apex of Zionist commitment. But American Jews, he points out, see “no shame” in the idea of expressing their connection to Israel through their pocketbooks.

Fleisch has situated the book in the international relations literature on migration and diaspora studies, and specifically international development literature; the latter, he stresses, helps fill the research gap given how incipient the current research agenda on diaspora philanthropy is. He justifies his case carefully—both the “historical longevity” and the “depth of affinity” between American Jews and Israel. He is also extremely thoughtful regarding his methodology: he has selected sixteen Israeli NGOs to profile, all of which focus on the same issue (the Israeli settlement project in the West Bank). But he has found a range of ideological diversity among them, such that eight of the organizations he profiles promote settlement-building and expansion, and eight oppose it.

The book is extremely well-researched, taking readers through the historical and institutional mechanisms that led to what we understand the philanthropic channels to be today, namely the rise of the federated system, through the United Jewish Appeal in the US operating in concert with the Jewish Agency in Israel. Fleisch traces how two sets of ideas about the relationship around agenda-setting gave way to Chaim Weizmann's vision: namely that American Jews should allow Israel to set

allocation priorities. And this worked spectacularly for the first forty years of Israel's existence: in the 1970s and 1980s, Fleisch notes, American Jews were giving one billion dollars (in today's dollars, adjusted for inflation) annually to the UJA or its equivalents. This meant that the funds allocated to Israel were nearly all to be used according to the Israeli government's desires.

But by the 1980s and 1990s, Fleisch shows, American Jews began shifting their giving away from the federation model and towards independent charities. This enabled them to bypass the struggle over priority setting in creative ways. The result was a more tailored way of giving that allowed, and has continued to allow, individual American Jews to express their values more forthrightly. A key question Fleisch thus addresses is whether this move to direct giving has reshaped power relations between Israelis and American Jews. Through interviews with Israeli NGO leaders, Fleisch finds that the answer is no. These NGOs, he argues, still "hold the cards in the relationship—closer knowledge of Israel, a platform and reputation that allows them to frame issues, and a proactive desire to use their power to stay one step ahead of a donor base it does not especially respect and believes it can manipulate" (149–150).

Using the case of settlement NGOs is thus an inspired one, enabling the reader to see how American Jews succeed in speaking to diametrically opposed views about Zionism with their wallets. It was also an example of invention born of necessity: the philanthropic landscape, as Fleisch discovered, had stretched the imagination with thousands of organizations vying for Diaspora donor dollars. And he has made innovative methodological choices as donor identities, he found, were difficult to access. Instead, he focuses on leaders of the Israeli NGOs and decision makers at the corresponding American charities. All this research nimbleness suggests how useful the book will be to scholars of all qualitative-method stripes who might find that the data they think they need to tell a story of a particular dynamic might seem to be out of reach.

Intriguingly, Fleisch finds that both sets of NGOs (both pro- and anti-settlement) portray themselves to prospective donors "as an underdog struggling against much bigger and better-funded adversaries. The work of each," he continues, "is presented to potential donors as the last line of defense that is upholding a certain vision of Israel otherwise on the verge of falling apart...." (176). What this suggests is that in the field of donor relations, power is a concept that is framed and manipulated.

There are two areas that could be further explored. One is how representative the case of the American Jewish donor class vis-à-vis Israel is compared to other diasporas. Although often thought of as the quintessential Diaspora, the Jewish case differs from nearly every other diaspora. This is because, with the exception of Israeli emigres, American Jews did not immigrate to America from Israel. (The Palestinian

American case might have some intriguing parallels as well as differences, though the numbers are much smaller and their emigration is a couple of generations more recent than American Jews; plus, the target of their donations, if they are donating to Palestinian charities is not—yet—an independent state.) A second area for further investigation could be whether and to what extent Israeli emigres to the US (191,000 according to the US census) differ from their non-Israeli, but still Jewish counterparts in their charitable practices. In sum, *Checkbook Zionism* is an outstanding study of an important and underexamined topic in Israel/Palestine studies and diaspora studies. And in its meditation on power, it raises a host of intriguingly related questions that help to anchor this book in some of the most pressing issues in transnational history and contemporary politics.

**Mira Sucharov**

Carleton University