

# Freed East Bloc Nations Rush to Embrace Israel

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As totalitarianism crumbles in Eastern Europe, a fascinating pattern has begun to emerge. Hand-in-hand with promises of political and economic reform, new governments in one Warsaw Pact country after another have declared a third, more surprising, objective: the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel.

One notable expression of this phenomenon came on New Year's Day, when Czechoslovakia's new president, Vaclav Havel, delivered his inaugural address. Along with a moving plea for the rebirth of his country's national spirit, Havel called for the restoration of ties with the Jewish state.

The new leadership of East Germany, which has never had relations with Israel, did the same a few weeks earlier. As the Berlin Wall, not to mention their political system, literally disintegrated around them, both Prime Minister Hans Modrow and Communist Party chief Gregor Gysi were moved to announce their country's desire to normalize relations with Israel.

Around the same time, Israel's Vice Premier Shimon Peres paid an official visit to Poland, where leaders of the new Solidarity-led government pledged to restore diplomatic ties early in 1990, a promise that came on the heels of Hungary's decision to re-establish full relations.

Why this sudden burst of interest in Israel at a time when these new regimes in Eastern Europe find themselves on the brink of political and economic ruin? While Israel has historically conducted an effective, though limited, foreign aid program, its ability to contribute to Eastern Europe's revitalization is marginal at best, and hardly accounts for the priority these countries have assigned to improving relations.

The most obvious explanation is money. The East Europeans realize that rebuilding their shattered economies will require significant amounts of financial aid from the West, especially the United States. And they believe, not without reason, that the road to Washington's pursestrings runs through Jerusalem. Israel, after all, is the largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance; its American friends comprise the engine that annually drives the foreign-aid bill through Congress. Getting in their good graces is considered a prerequisite for receiving a piece of the foreign-aid pie.

A second, less obvious, reason to pursue relations with Israel is a symbolic one. Perhaps no policy is more closely identified with the old communist order in Eastern Europe than the decision by most of these states to sever relations with Israel during the 1967 Mideast war. Promising to reverse that policy provides the new regimes with a quick and effective means of distancing themselves from their failed predecessors, thereby enhancing their

legitimacy in the eyes of their own populations as well as in the West.

One should not dismiss a third explanation for Eastern Europe's new-found enchantment with Israel, one that is less instrumental in character. Struggling to cast off the totalitarian yoke in favor of freedom, Eastern Europe's reformers seem genuinely impressed with Israel's success in establishing a vibrant, functioning democracy in the shadow of war's constant threat. Perhaps better than their Western counterparts who were born into democracy, Eastern Europe's new leaders understand the precariousness of the democratic experiment and, therefore, the remarkable achievement that is Israel.

Similarly, they have less difficulty appreciating the deep moral distinction between a democratic Israel, warts and all, and the dictatorial regimes that surround it. And if they need any reminder of the difference, they have only to look to Romania, where PLO, Libyan and Syrian agents were reported to have fought side-by-side with the security forces of the tyrannical Ceausescu regime.

The ongoing thaw between Israel and the East Bloc does confront us with a provocative irony. Over the past two years, as Israel's traditional friends in the West have raced to distance themselves from its policies in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel's former enemies in Eastern Europe have sought to move closer to it. The coming year will almost surely see this process continue as other states in the Soviet orbit restore relations with Jerusalem. It is no accident that they will do so in conjunction with their heroic efforts to bring democratic freedoms to their own societies. That fact should make us all stop and think as we view the day-to-day human tragedy of events in the Middle East.

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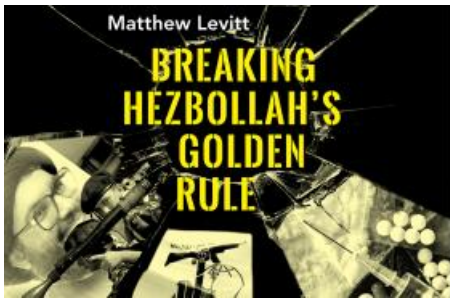
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