In the second of two posts on German-Israeli relations, Felix Berenskoeetter argues that a shared commitment to the memory of the Holocaust and to Israel’s right to exist has not formed a true friendship between Germany and Israel.

When there is a meeting between German and Israeli government officials, it has become a ritual to hail relations between the countries as a friendship. In 2008, even the Economist suggested that ‘Germany is Israel’s second best friend’ (the first one being the US). Is this just nice talk? Few would dispute that the relationship is ‘special’ in some way. To evaluate whether it can be called a friendship in a meaningful way, we need some basic markers of ‘friendship’ in international relations.

Scholars have long claimed that friendship is possible not only on the personal level but also between states/nations. Yet only recently literature is emerging which looks more closely at what this involves. In my reading, friendship, and with it trust, honesty and solidarity, revolves around a shared project that both sides are committed to invest in and that provides them with a sense of ontological security. The project is based on overlapping biographical narratives, that is, a sense of a shared past and a shared future. Especially, it requires a common vision of building a better world that binds friends in creative interaction and manifests a productive relationship that benefits both. In this relationship friends regard each other as equals and practice a unique logic of reciprocity in which there is no debt but mutual trust that each side contributes as much as it can to keep the project on track. On this basis, let me offer a few thoughts on whether German-Israeli relations can be considered a friendship.

A potential shared project lies in (dealing with) the memory of the Holocaust, or Shoa. As Chancellor Merkel stated in her speech to the Knesset in 2008 “Germany and Israel are and will always remain linked in a special way by the memory of the Shoah.” Indeed, the memory is a core element of respective national identities, that is, a central component of the self-image each country holds and that allows for a sense of stability in space and time, thus providing ontological security. For Israel’s identity as a Jewish state, the Shoa is the most powerful example of a history of persecution and suffering and has become a defining element of Jewish identity as a community of fate, as a vulnerable people, as victims. Correspondingly, it fuels the commitment to create an environment that protects Jewish people from further aggression. Intrinsic to the memory of the Shoa is the perpetrator, Germany, and this memory is also a core reference for the identity of post-1945 Germany. It marks ‘Germany’ as a nation guilty of having committed (one of) the biggest crime against humanity and sets out the task to both accept this responsibility and build a ‘new’ Germany that bears no resemblance, and won’t allow a return, to the Nazi past.

So for both Israel and Germany the Shoa serves as a negative reference point. It is a memory they vow to keep alive as a warning and as a commitment to explore its causes and ensure something like it will never happen again. It is a shared history neither side wants forgotten, yet also an experience each tries to escape from. And here the two need each other. Israel’s recognition of post-1945 Germany as distinct from Nazi Germany has been vital for lending credibility to this new status. And Germany turned into a steadfast supporter of Israel’s attempt to create a secure home for the Jewish people. This appears to be a productive reciprocal dynamic.

And yet, even in the attempt to move on, the memory of the Shoa continues to tie the two nations to a past that issues a clear role distribution of victim and perpetrator. Every official visit and interaction takes place in the shadow of this memory and, unwillingly perhaps, revives this role distribution. It puts Germany in the bind to make good for past actions that can never be forgiven and, hence, to pay off a debt that can never be paid off. This inevitably reserves the moral high ground in the relationship for Israel, which can afford to take advantage of, even actively invest in, the German guilt-complex. At the same time, as Grass points out, it inhibits German political and intellectual elites to take a critical stance vis-à-vis Israel out of fear that this will be perceived as anti-semitism, which would damage Germany’s (still fragile) status as a pro-Jewish/Israeli state. Thus, for better or worse, making the Shoa the primary place of connection sustains a fundamental inequality in the relationship.

This carries over in the forward-looking element, namely the ‘never again’ commitment manifested in Israel’s right to exist, its security. At first glance there appears to be a shared project here. An obvious core concern for Israel, it is also an intrinsic part
Germany and Israel: Is It Friendship?

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