NEWS ANALYSIS

American Jews and Israeli Jews Are Headed for a Messy Breakup

Is the world ready for another Great Schism?

By Jonathan Weisman
Mr. Weisman is the deputy Washington editor of The New York Times.
Jan. 4, 2019

The events of the past year brought American and Israeli Jews ever closer to a breaking point. President Trump, beloved in Israel and decidedly unloved by a majority of American Jews, moved the United States Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May, with the fiery evangelical pastors John Hagee and Robert Jeffress consecrating the ceremony.

In October, after the murder of 11 Jews at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, President Trump went to that city to pay his respects. Members of the Jewish community there, in near silent mourning, came out to protest Mr. Trump's arrival, declaring that he was not welcome until he gave a national address to renounce the rise of white nationalism and its attendant bigotry.

The only public official to greet the president at the Tree of Life was Israel's ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer.

At a Hanukkah celebration at the White House last month, the president raised eyebrows and age-old insinuations of dual loyalties when he told American Jews at the gathering that his vice president had great affection for "your country," Israel.

Yossi Klein Halevi, the American-born Israeli author, has framed this moment starkly: Israeli Jews believe deeply that President Trump recognizes their existential threats. In scuttling the Obama-era Iran nuclear deal, which many Israelis saw as imperiling their security, in moving the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in basically doing whatever the government of Benjamin Netanyahu asks, they see a president of the United States acting to save their lives.

American Jews, in contrast, see President Trump as their existential threat, a leader who they believe has stoked nationalist bigotry, stirred anti-Semitism and, time and time again, failed to renounce the violent hatred swirling around his political movement. The F.B.I. reports that hate crimes in the United States jumped 17 percent in 2017, with a 37 percent spike in crimes against Jews and Jewish institutions.

When neither side sees the other as caring for its basic well-being, “that is a gulf that cannot be bridged,” Michael Siegel, the head rabbi at Chicago’s Conservative Anshe Emet Synagogue, told me recently. He is an ardent Zionist.

To be sure, a vocal minority of Jews in Israel remain queasy about the American president, just as a vocal minority of Jews in the United States strongly support him. But more than 75 percent of American Jews voted for the Democrats in the midterm elections; 69 percent of Israelis voiced confidence in Mr. Trump, up from 49 percent who had confidence in Barack Obama in 2015, according to the Pew Research Center. Israel is also one of the few developed countries where opinion about the United States has improved since Mr. Trump took office.

Part of the distance between Jews in the United States and Israeli Jews may come from the stance that Israel’s leader is taking on the world stage. Mr. Netanyahu has embraced the increasingly authoritarian Hungarian leader Victor Orban, who ran a blatantly anti-Semitic re-election campaign. He has aligned himself with ultranationalists like Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and a Polish government that passed a law making it a crime to suggest the Poles had any responsibility for the Holocaust.

The Israeli prime minister was one of the very few world leaders who reportedly ran interference for the Trump administration after the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and urged President Trump to maintain his alliance with the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. Mr. Netanyahu’s son Yair was temporarily kicked off Facebook for writing that he would “prefer” that “all the Muslims leave the land of Israel.”

Last month, with multiple corruption investigations closing in on him and his conservative coalition fracturing, Mr. Netanyahu called for a snap election in April, hoping to fortify his political standing.

If past is prologue, his election campaign will again challenge American Jewry’s values. As his 2015 campaign came to a close, Mr. Netanyahu darkly warned his supporters that “the right-wing government is in danger — Arab voters are heading to the polling stations in droves,” adding with a Trumpian flourish that left-wing organizations “are bringing them in buses.”

Israeli politicians — and citizens — are increasingly dismissive of the views of American Jews anyway. Evangelical Christians, ardently pro-Israel, give Jerusalem a power base in Washington that is larger and stronger than the American Jewish population. And with Orthodox American Jews aligned with evangelicals, that coalition has at least an interfaith veneer — even without Conservative and Reform Jews, the bulk of American Jewry.

The divide between American Jews and Israeli Jews goes beyond politics. A recent law tried to reinstate the Chief Rabbinate as the only authority that can legally convert non-Orthodox Jews in Israel. Israel’s chief Ashkenazi rabbi, after the slaughter in Pittsburgh, refused to refer to the Conservative Tree of Life as a synagogue at all, calling it “a place with a profound Jewish flavor.”

Already only Orthodox Jewish weddings are legal in Israel. Reform Jews have been roughed up when praying at the Western Wall. Promises to Jewish women that the Israeli rabbinate would become more inclusive have largely led to disappointment. Last summer, the group Women of the Wall was warned that if it did not remain confined to the small, barricaded area within the “women’s section,” its members would be barred from praying there altogether.

And the stalemate over Palestinian rights and autonomy has become nearly impossible to dismiss as some temporary roadblock, awaiting perhaps a new government in Jerusalem or a new leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

The two-state solution is increasingly feeling like a cruel joke. American Jews' rabbis and lay leaders counsel them to be vigilant against any other solution, such as granting Palestinians full rights in a greater Israel, because those solutions would dilute or destroy Israel's identity as a Jewish state. Be patient, American Jews are told. Peace talks are coming. The Palestinians will have their state.

In the meantime, the movement to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel grows stronger on American campuses, and new voices are emerging in the Democratic Party, such as Representatives Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, who are willing to speak openly about Palestinian rights and autonomy where other lawmakers have declined to do so.

Of course, American Jews, like Israeli Jews, are not a monolith. Within the American Jewish population, there is a significant generational split on Israel that goes beyond ideology. Older American Jews, more viscerally aware of the Holocaust and connected to the living history of the Jewish state, are generally willing to look past Israeli government actions that challenge their values. Or they embrace those actions. Younger American Jews do not typically remember Israel as the David against regional Goliaths. They see a bully, armed and indifferent, 45 years past the Yom Kippur War, the last conflict that threatened Israel's existence.

American Jewry has been going its own way for 150 years, a drift that has created something of a new religion, or at least a new branch of one of the world's most ancient faiths.

In a historical stroke with resonance today, American Jewish leaders gathered in Pittsburgh in 1885 to produce what is known as the Pittsburgh Platform, a new theology for an American Judaism, less focused on a Messianic return to the land of Israel and more on fixing a broken world, the concept of Tikkun Olam. Jews, the rabbi behind the platform urged, must achieve God's purpose by "living and working in and with the world."

For a faith that for thousands of years was insular and self-contained, its people often in mandated ghettos, praying for the Messiah to return them to the Promised Land, this was a radical notion. But for most American Jews, it is now accepted as a tenet of their religion: building a better, more equal, more tolerant world now, where they live.

Last summer, when a Conservative rabbi in Haifa was hauled in for questioning by the Israeli police after he officiated at a non-Orthodox wedding, it was too much for Rabbi Steven Wernick, chief executive of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the umbrella organization of the Conservative movement in North America.

"I do not believe we can talk about a 'gap' between Israel and the Diaspora," Rabbi Wernick wrote in a letter to the Israeli government. "It is now a 'canyon.'"

My rabbi in Washington, Daniel Zemel, quoted the Israeli Yaniv Sagee during Kol Nidre, the Yom Kippur evening service, this fall: "For the first time in my life, I feel a genuine threat to my life in Israel. This is not an external threat. It is an internal threat from nationalists and racists."

Rabbi Zemel implored his congregation to act before it is too late, to save Israel from itself.

But Israelis want nothing of the sort. American Jews don't serve in the Israeli military, don't pay Israeli taxes and don't live under the threat of Hamas rocket bombardments. And many American Jews would not heed Rabbi Zemel's call.

Zionism divided American Jewry for much of the latter 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Those divisions remained in the early decades of the Jewish state, fading only with the triumph of the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and the peril of the Yom Kippur War.

Now many American Jews, especially young American Jews, would say, Israel is Israel's problem. We have our own.

There are roughly 6.5 million Jews in Israel. There are roughly 5.7 million Jews in America. Increasingly, they see the world in starkly different ways.

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OP-ED

Are We A Nation Or A Religion?

No easy answers or fixes to this question.

By **RABBI ELLIOT COSGROVE**
January 14, 2019, 2:17 pm

Jewish men prey at the Western Wall in the Old City on December 6, 2017 in Jerusalem, Israel. Getty Images

More than 450 members of Park Avenue Synagogue are now home from an historic mission to Israel. Celebrating Israel's 70th and the congregation's 136th anniversary, we have returned engaged, energized and connected to the Jewish State. We have also returned filled with questions and consternation, on the prospects for peace, on Israel's ability to house religious pluralism, and how to lovingly embrace an Israel that at times acts in breach of the values at the foundation of the Judaism from which our love for Israel emanates. None of us need look further than the recent pages of the New York Times or Jewish Week to read the pronouncements of an unbridgeable and perhaps irreparable divide between the two major centers of world Jewry.

More often than not, we focus on the "symptoms" of our divide – the viability of the two-state solution, the Israeli disregard for liberal expressions of Judaism within and beyond Israel, or our toxic era of identity politics on the Israeli and American left or right. While each of these issues is deserving of an airing, we would do well to probe more deeply into the root causes of our present predicament – specifically – an Israel whose Jews define themselves as a nationality, and a diaspora Jewry whose Judaism is defined as a religion.

Cast out of the land by the Romans in 70 CE, for centuries the Jewish people lived in the *Golah* (exile). Depending on the particular time and place, we were subject to anything from the good graces or persecutions of our gentile hosts. We were the consummate "other," a people that while granted an element of self-governance, was never offered the opportunity to integrate into civil society. Though we prayed for *Geulah* – a messianic return to the land, excepting

the direction of our prayer, the breaking of glasses at weddings as a remembrance of Jerusalem, and some notable individuals who went to live, die or be buried in Israel – our return was largely theological. We were Jews because we were other, as defined by us and by those around us.

The arrival of modernity and the Emancipation shattered all the assumptions of the past centuries. It didn't happen all at once or in the same way, but be it France, Germany, Russia or elsewhere – formally and informally, for the very first time, Jews were granted the opportunity to integrate into civil society. And yet, in the midst of this newfound freedom a series of new questions were introduced. If we were now citizens of our respective countries, then were we still in exile? If we were now subject to French or German law, then what becomes of Jewish self-governance? If we were no longer a separate and distinct people, then what exactly were we?

It was at this point, argues Professor Leora Batnizky, that Judaism became a religion. No longer a "people apart" Jews began to think of themselves as a religion in the Protestant sense of the word. Our rituals, festivals, houses of prayer and otherwise were understood as analogous to the religion of our gentile neighbors. It is a story that began with Moses Mendelssohn and reached its apotheosis with the Reform movement's 1885 Pittsburgh Platform that proudly declared: "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community." The turn to Judaism as a religion was not limited to the Reform Movement. Modern Orthodoxy was also a product of the Emancipation. The festival observances, dietary restrictions and otherwise – these too were framed as the religious demands of the religion of Judaism not in any way contradictory to the secular demands of the state.

> *"We are missing the point if we think the schism between American and Israeli Jewry is merely about the Kotel, the two-state solution, etc. It is about two fundamentally different understandings of Jewish identity."*

Our story might have ended here, except that during these very decades that one slice of the Jewish world was establishing the religious institutions of diaspora life, other Jews came to realize that the promise of the Emancipation had been revealed to be a fraud. Be it the anti-Jewish Russian pogroms of the 1880s or the famed French Dreyfus trial of the 1890s, it became increasingly clear that Jews were not really becoming full members of modern nation states – a thought realized in its full horror with the Holocaust. It would be during these years that the earliest Zionist thinkers, Smolenskin, Pinsker and of course, Herzl pronounced that Judaism was not a religion but a nation. We were a nation because we are attached to the land. We were a nation because we were attached to each other. We were a nation because the gentiles will never accept us as part of their nations. The emergence of Zionism in the 1880s wasn't just a rejection of the Emancipation or the false promises of the diaspora. Zionism was a rejection of the notion that Judaism was a religion. Zionism was a corrective to the naïve belief of diaspora Jewry that they could practice their religion under the false promise of a liberal state. Small wonder that Leon Pinsker's famous essay was entitled "Auto-Emancipation"; no longer were Jews going to wait for *Geulah*, we were taking our national destiny into our own hands.

Religion or Nationality

Two notions of Judaism: a religion or a nationality. Two roads that diverged both philosophically and geographically in the 1880s. It is not an airtight distinction: diaspora Jewry has had its prophets of peoplehood like Mordecai Kaplan, just as Israel has had its champions of Judaism qua religion like Yeshayahu Leibowitz. But for the most part, American Jews have defined their identities by way of ritual observance or non-observance, the causes of social justice and otherwise. Israelis, both religious and secular, see the world differently. Israel is a Jewish nation – one surrounded by hostile neighbors. The world is divided into an "us" and a "them" and it is through that lens by which national priorities are determined. For diaspora Jews, the whole point of practicing (or not practicing) Judaism is to demonstrate that Jews can live side by side with their gentile neighbors. In the eyes of Israelis such an approach is delusional. Be it Pinsker, Jabotinksy, Ben Gurion or Israel's present prime minister – there are only two outcomes for diaspora Jewry – anti-Semitism or assimilation. American Jews bristle at an Israel that not only fails to acknowledge their religious identities but carries out policies in breach of what they believe Judaism to be about. Israelis have neither the time nor patience to make sense of the choices of American Jews, which, with few notable exceptions like the Pittsburgh shooting, are being made in the most comfortable circumstances in which Jews have ever existed. Israelis are choosing to stop caring about their diaspora cousins, and American Jews are ceasing to defend a Jewish state whose nationalistic expressions of Judaism no longer reflect the very religion they hold dear.

It is a vicious cycle that goes on and on. We are missing the point if we think the schism between American and Israeli Jewry is merely about the Kotel, the two-state solution or the decision of the Netanyahu government to cozy up with authoritarian European governments. It is about two fundamentally different understandings of Jewish identity and the emergence of two Jewish communities which, no different than Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities, reflects the different contexts in which we function. We know we are connected. In fact, in theory we want to get along, but in practice it is increasingly difficult. Not because one community is right and one is wrong, but because we understand our Judaism in such very different ways.

There are no easy fixes. Moreover, given the hope that both American and Israeli Jewry continue in strength, we must allow for both communities to grow in their own directions. Perhaps the best we can do at this point is simply admit to the problem, acknowledge each other for who we are, listen to each other even if we don't always agree, and try not to project our own inadequacies onto our partners who are just doing their level best to deal with their own issues.

Since returning from Israel, I have been repeatedly asked – by congregants, community leaders and journalists – Israeli and American – why my synagogue did not leverage its visit to decry perceived wrongs taking place in Israel. For the moment, my answer is that when facing a family relationship in need of repair, one can choose to tear at it, or one can choose to lean in with love, earned trust and the belief that by way of dialogue one can better effectuate change.

Park Avenue Synagogue has chosen to lean in. We work for the day when American Jewry and Israeli Jewry are able to retrieve a common language, a day when we acknowledge our shared past and shared destiny, a day when we realize that Judaism is both a religion and a nationhood. It is a redemptive day not yet upon us, but it is a day worth fighting for. As a wise person once said: "If you will it, it is no dream."

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First Person Plural

Rabbi Josh Weinberg
January 2019

" שַׁלַּח עַמִּי וְיַעַבְדֻנִי:"
"Let my people go, so that they can worship me"

But Are We A People?

Moses certainly thought so, as he establishes firmly for the first time in history that we are in fact a people
The great challenge of Jewish life in North America is to live in the balance between acceptance into American (or Canadian) society and to the maintenance of Jewish identity. Actually, that was our grandparents' challenge. Today very few Reform Jews have trouble fitting into American life or adapting to the culture. But when it comes to the notion of Jewish peoplehood, it is a harder concept to internalize. Any 6-year-old who ever went to Hebrew school can echo the words of this week's parsha to say, "Let My People Go" (often followed by an automatic refrain of "No, no, no, I will not let you go…"). But do they really get what that means? Do they know that when they say "we" it puts them squarely in line with 4000-year tradition, culture, theology, ethnicity and set of beliefs, morals, and law?

Moses affirmed that the descendants of this familial dynasty had now transformed into an actual People, a Nation, who worships a single God. This might have been obvious through the generations, but over the past century, it has become less so. Mordecai Kaplan, in his 1934 magnum opus, declared that we were, in fact, a civilization, although he feared that Jews in America were not necessarily acting like it.
Today's situation begs two issues – one micro, one macro.:

1. The macro issue is that we don't all affirm the description, despite our ability to quote the text. We don't all see ourselves as being part of one people with a shared sense of past, present, and future and a joint fate and destiny.

2. For those that do adopt the peoplehood mantle, we may be facing a monumental crisis between the two largest segments of our nation (עם/אומה) – Israel and North America.

Jonathan Weisman's recent piece in the New York Times sadly only tries to exacerbate the situation offering little constructive advice or hope, while repeating oft-heard anecdotes. He offers examples that those of us who have not been hiding under a rock are well aware of. Yes, Israel and its Government are increasingly moving to the right, and American Jews are not. Got it. That's not to say that the issues are real, and a recent discussion of a response to some of the criticism coming in around Birthright Israel touched the very core of American and Israeli Jewish identity.

Writer Peter Beinart threw down the gauntlet with this fairly blunt and direct accusation:
"For several decades now, non-Orthodox American Jews have been conducting a mass experiment. They have raised children radically ignorant of Jewish texts and tradition in a country that offers Jews radical acceptance. The result: Radical assimilation. What's heartbreaking isn't that young American Jews choose to assimilate. It's that many can't even make an informed choice because they don't know enough about Judaism to know what they're giving up."

In response to Beinart, Daniel Gordis, in a somewhat more characteristic invective, explained a few days ago that the basic difference is as follows:
"American Judaism and Israeli Judaism are, by this point, very different animals.

One is universal and one particular, one focuses on Judaism as a religion while the other sees Judaism as nationality, one largely exempt from the messiness of history, while the other is the product of a movement that expressly sought to restore the Jews as players into the complexities (and ugliness) of history."
He goes on to lecture American Jews as to how we must alter the way we see and approach Israel, leaving us with the feeling of inadequacy, to put it mildly.

Whether you're a Beinart fan or hasid/a of Gordis, their words echo a similar sentiment (Despite their larger disagreement), that North American Jews today might not be able to echo Moses' plea and speak of "My People" in the first-person plural.

So, what are we going to do about it???

If we are a people, then let's act like it. Let's start by making sure that we all have a basic understanding and familiarity with our collective narrative. Let's learn our language (Hebrew), know our customs and traditions, and be clear on what our joint mission is. As those who chose to actively maintain their existence outside the State of Israel, I would say that Zionism starts at home knowing who we are, where we came from and where we are going. Let us be players on the world stage of Jewish history with all its complexities and join in building our collective future.

In one of his landmark works, the late Amos Oz once commented that:
"I am a Zionist in all that concerns the redemption of the Jews, but not when it comes to the 'redemption of the Holy Land'"

Before Moses reached the Land he was all about the People. Land is important but first Let Our People grow.

Shabbat Shalom,
Josh

The American 'Zionist' assault on Israel

Less hubris and more interest in why Israelis think what they do would go a long way to helping this relationship survive

DANIEL GORDIS
JAN 8, 2019, 9:58 PM
The Times of Israel

"American Jews and Israeli Jews Are Headed for a Messy Breakup," a column by Jonathan Weisman announced in the *New York Times* earlier this week. He's probably right. But only "probably." The relationship does not have to crash, if both sides can acknowledge the profound ways in which the world's two largest Jewish communities are profoundly different, and cease imposing their own worldview on the other. To heal this rift, both sides are going to need to accept that we are invariably going to continue disappointing each other, because American Judaism and Israeli Judaism are, by this point, very different animals. As I describe in my forthcoming book, *We Stand Divided: Competing Visions of Jewishness and the Rift Between American Jews and Israel*, they now rest on almost entirely different foundations. One is universal and one particular, one focuses on Judaism as religion while the other sees Judaism as nationality, one largely exempt from the messiness of history, while the other is the product of a movement that expressly sought to restore the Jews as players into the complexities (and ugliness) of history.

Ultimately, both Israel and American Jews will have to change much about their views of and discourse about the other. At this moment, though, I want to focus on the ways in which American Jews need to rethink their discourse about Israel, since this side of the equation was much in evidence both in Weisman's column and in another piece week, by Peter Beinart, in the *Forward*.

As part of the IfNotNow-instigated brouhaha about Birthright, Beinart issued a characteristic warning this week: "Birthright Will Fail If It Doesn't Evolve With Young Jews," arguing that Birthright trips do not offer a balanced picture of the conflict, which in turn will lead many young American Jews to ignore the program. Now, to be clear, I have never worked for Birthright, have never been on a Birthright trip, and am not in any way privy to their curricular conversations. But here is what I do know. Many children of friends of ours, sophisticated and thoughtful young people, have been on Birthright trips, and have had life-transforming experiences. They did not feel that they'd been brainwashed or worked over – they just fell in love not only with the State of Israel, but with Judaism writ large. Also, for the record, I like Peter Beinart. He's intelligent and I believe he's being honest when he says he cares about Israel. For a while, Peter and I did a podcast together in which we modeled how two people who disagree deeply can engage in respectful dialogue. (We've also debated each other a few times, and are doing it again on February 7 at Harvard Hillel.)

But in many ways, Beinart's column reflects a fundamental decision American Jews are going to have to make when it comes to Israel. They will have to decide what matters to them more, Israel's welfare or their own good standing in their progressive American circles. Though he would of course say that he disagrees, I believe that Beinart is more committed to the latter. That is why he takes a complex issue, oversimplifies it and assumes that the only reasonable read of the situation is that held by American progressives; and then, since he knows that Birthright cannot accommodate his demand (and because he sees Birthright as part of the American Jewish establishment of which he is relentlessly critical), he essentially threatens to join the crowd seeking to destroy it. Beinart argues that changing Birthright's curriculum "is necessary because taking Diaspora Jews to Israel without giving them the chance to hear from Palestinians who live as non-citizens under Israeli control in the

West Bank is dishonest and immoral." And he has a proposal. "The alternative is simple: Take Birthright kids to meet Palestinians in the West Bank."

But Beinart is being disingenuous when he says the solution is "simple." Which Palestinians does Peter think Birthright participants ought to meet? Palestinians in the West Bank are no more monolithic than Israelis or American Jews. Does he want them to hear from Palestinians who will tell them that they'd much rather live under Israeli occupation than the corruption of the Palestinian Authority (there are, indeed, such people), or Palestinians who will tell them that ending the occupation is but the first step on their drive to ending the State of Israel? Or does he want them to hear from Palestinians who insist on ending the occupation but have no desire to destroy Israel? What percentage of Palestinians are *those* people? How does Peter know? On the basis of what would Beinart have Birthright choose? Those who represent the majority? Or those who mirror Beinart's progressive yet "Zionist" values?

And what does Beinart think that Birthright participants should learn about the occupation? "Birthright should let settlers explain why they enjoy swimming pools and irrigated lawns while the Palestinians down the road make do with a few hours of water per day." That, we are expected to accept, is an objective take on the matter? Why is Peter's wholly and obviously partisan view any more justifiable than someone else's equally partisan view? (Beinart is also factually wrong. It is in Gaza where water is limited, but there are no settlers in Gaza or anywhere near it. Settlers are in the West Bank, which is on the other side of the country, not "down the road".)

Which settlers should Birthright participants meet? People who live in Efrat? Shilo? Karnei Shomron? Amonah? Those are four very different kinds of settlers, in very different sorts of places with different implications for Palestinian statehood. Does Beinart also think that Birthright participants should meet with leaders of Commanders for Israel's Security, a left-leaning group of security experts who advocate not building on the other side of the separation barrier, but who in no way think that "ending the occupation" is an option today? (A brief summary of their plan is on pages 6-9 of this document.) Or does Beinart disagree with CIS? And if he does disagree with them, that's because … why? Because he knows more about Israel's security needs than those who have commanded Israel's security forces for their entire careers?

How are we to explain the intellectual sloppiness? Perhaps it's because American Jewish progressives, with IfNotNow at their helm, have decided to destroy Birthright, and Beinart would rather join the crowd than try to lead them back to a responsible position. Or perhaps (as he notes) it's because he finds Sheldon Adelson so distasteful that he wants any program that Adelson funds taken down?

Adelson is, without question, a divisive personality. But is that reason enough to destroy a program that has brought hundreds of thousands of young American Jews to have a meaningful engagement with Israel? Instead of destroying Birthright, why don't Beinart, IfNotNow and others raise the tens of millions of dollars it would cost to run an alternative program? If 70% of American Jews vote Democratic, one can only assume that there is much more money to be raised from the American Jewish left than there is from the right. So why does that money not get raised? The reason has to do with the particular form of Zionism characteristic of much of the American Jewish left (there are obviously many exceptions), of which Beinart is an exemplar.

Peter, of course, is hardly alone in this Israel-bashing-as-Israel-helping sport. In the course of his *New York Times column* and his prediction that the relationship between American Jews and Israel is on the rocks, Jonathan Weisman (the author of a very interesting recent book on American anti-Semitism), quotes Rabbi Daniel Zemel of Washington, DC. For the record, once again, I've known Rabbi Zemel for years, admire him and like him, and know how deeply committed he is to Israel. But even with Rabbi Zemel, the tendency to want Israel to be what American Jewish progressives envision for Israel (rather than what Israelis seek) leads to more

of the Israel-bashing-as-Israel-helping tendency. Weisman writes that on Yom Kippur, “Rabbi Zemel implored his congregation to act before it is too late, to save Israel from itself.”

A Reform Congregation in DC should save Israel before it is too late? Does no one see the hubris (and the humor, frankly) in such a suggestion? Who are these people who are being urged to save Israel? Can they read the op-ed page of a Hebrew newspaper? Since they cannot, and since the vast majority of the Hebrew press is not translated into English, why do they imagine that they know what’s best for Israel without being exposed to what millions of Israelis think, without access to Israeli discourse on the subject? (Not speaking Hebrew is no crime, of course, but should it not engender at least some humility when it comes to speaking about Israel?) American progressives imagine that they have what to teach liberal, secular Israelis because they are… more intelligent than Israelis? Better educated? More moral? More deeply committed to Israel’s decency?

How well do these people know the country they’re being asked to save? What can they say about the ideological worlds represented by readers of *Haaretz* and *Makor Rishon* and what animates the worldviews of each? Can they name five Jewish communities along the Gaza border and speak about how they’re different? How *those communities* see the conflict? They cannot, of course, and as very few have spoken at length to people trying to raise their families in Sderot or Sha’ar HaNegev, they have no real idea what life is like there. And what does their rabbi want them to actually do? If 82% of Israelis now define themselves as center-to-right-wing (which Shmuel Rosner’s new book – sorry, in Hebrew only – says is the case), how can American liberal Jews save Israel without subverting the will of Israel’s majority? At the same time, though, how can American Jews both boast about Israel’s robust democracy and also decide to override it in the name of their American, suburban, progressive ethos? Does what Israelis want not matter? Is Israel’s democracy not sacred? Or is it simply less sacred than the moral comfort of American Jewish progressives?
Though I believe that their suggestions (revise Birthright’s curriculum and have American suburban Jews save Israel) are misguided, one can, and should, at least acknowledge that Beinart and Zemel both care about Israel and believe that what they are doing is best for Israel.

That, though, cannot be said for more extremist elements in the American progressive community, where positions that are ostensibly meant to make Israel “better” are clearly just camouflage for a desire to do Israel harm. No group embodies this better than IfNotNow, which, as a recent New York Magazine articlenoted, had participants say Kaddish for Palestinians who were killed by Israeli soldiers along the Gaza border. ““We do not organize Kaddish prayers for ‘Arab terrorists’ or ‘Hamas members.’ We say Kaddish and mourn the unconscionable Israeli violence on Palestinian protesters,” one of INN’s leaders said to *New York Magazine*. Many of the young people who are involved in or leaders of INN are bright and sophisticated, the graduates of America’s finest colleges. So it is rather astonishing that they did not apply any of the critical thinking skills that got them into college and then through it to bear on this issue. If the killing of Palestinian protesters along the Gaza border (which is unquestionably sad) is so obviously “unconscionable Israeli violence,” why did the Israeli political left not protest? Why were even Meretz and Labor mostly silent after many Gazans were killed at the border? Do American Jewish progressives ever ask themselves what they know that Israelis do not? (The Israeli left understood that allowing the fence to be toppled would immediately endanger the lives of thousands of Israeli civilians, and sadly, understood that lethal force was necessary to protect Israel from agents of Hamas, no matter how young they were.)

Do these young American Jewish progressives believe that they are more progressive than Israeli progressives? (They cannot know, of course, because they cannot read and understand what Israeli progressives write.) Do they believe that they are more moral than the Israeli left? Do they know better than Israeli leftists what’s better for Israel?

Or, more likely, is it that bottom line they care about their progressive credentials much more than they care about Israel? (Recall, by the way, that IfNotNow do not refer to themselves as Zionists and refuse to endorse the idea of Jewish State.)

It is, of course, absolutely the right of American Jewish progressives to have those priorities. But it is also Israelis' right to ask themselves which American Jewish voices are genuine partners. Those who think that all "settlers" are the same, who want to make the occupation the focal point of Israel-discourse, are not genuine partners. Those who tell their congregations, who cannot read Hebrew, who have not spent a night in a bomb shelter, who insist that the occupation end even though Israel's left-leaning commanders all believe that cannot happen now, are not partners. Those who say Kaddish not for hundreds of thousands of Syrians killed by Asad or Kurds killed by Turkey, but for those who endangered the Jewish state by threatening to take down the border fence, are also obviously not partners.

They're posturers, for their own American progressive socio-political agenda, and Israelis intuit that. To heal the rift of which Weisman correctly writes, there is much that Israelis will have to change about themselves and the ways in which they view and assess Diaspora Jewish life. By the same token, though, if American Jewish progressives want Israelis to be in dialogue with them, it is time to end the assumption that the repository of morality, wisdom and decency resides exclusively on the Western edge of the Atlantic. A lot less hubris and bit more interest in why Israelis think what they think would go a long way to making sure that somehow, in some manner, we help this relationship survive.

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HaAretz Opinion

To Save Their Troubled Marriage, Israel and American Jews Should Consider a Trial Separation

Their romance was made in heaven but now they're living in the past – and on borrowed time

Chemi Shalev

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Frozen out by Israel, repelled by Trump, U.S. Jews find more in common with Palestinians
Are U.S. Jews going to become political orphans?
Pittsburgh massacre underscores the dilemma of American Jews

Can we talk?

Let's pretend Israel and American Jewry are like a married couple. Ignore my gender assignments – he is Israel, she is American Jews – though I happen to think that in this case, they're apt. No matter which side of the family you come from - or identify with – no one can deny that their union is in trouble and going from bad to worse.

For many years it seemed like a love story from a fairy tale. He was brave, brash and handsome, like Paul Newman. She was rich and smart, a Jewish American princess, and what she lacked in beauty she made up for in unbridled worship for the very ground he marched on. It took them awhile to warm to each other – they kept at arm's length for their first 19 years – but after June 1967 they fell into each other's arms like long lost lovers. It was a match made in Jewish heaven, people said, with pride or with enmity, but mostly with envy.

For 30-40 years they were one of the world's foremost power couples. He was the knight who couldn't bother to shine his armor; she was his Queen Esther in the king's court. The dynamic duo put on a show like no one else: His every whim was her command, and both of them liked it that way. She knew that her attachment to him elevated her in the eyes of her peers. He knew that without her he'd have to stand in line in Washington like everyone else, instead of cruising on the fast lane to unparalleled power, money and influence.

He'd always been cocky, with good reason, but over the years his attractive self-confidence morphed into obnoxious arrogance. Despite periodic failures and tragic accidents, 70 years of overall success went to his head. He turned holier than thou, rebuffed reproof, wallowed in victimhood, labeled his critics anti-Semitesand was mortified when she, of all people, seemed to echo some of their sentiments. He wanted her to remain dutifully compliant, to do exactly as she's told and to keep the checks coming, as always.

He couldn't hide his disdain for her newfound independence. He rejected all her appeals and requests to change the fundamentals of their relationship. She demanded equality and recognition, but soon after he met her half way, he changed his mind and reneged. It's not appropriate now, he told her: The status quo will do just fine.

Her liberal friends protested his crude behavior and he, in turn, reacted with scorn, finding new allies to take their place. He was increasingly seen in the bad company of his thuggish buddies, Viktor, Rodrigo, new-kid-on-the-block Jair and worst of all, Donald,the real estate tycoon. He can't resist Donald. Donald showers him with gifts, promises the world and takes on his enemies, especially that constant complainer, Mahmoud, who doesn't know how lucky he is to be locked in his basement.

She detests Donald. She thinks he is a bully, a racist and a closet anti-Semite. She can't stand any of Donald's friends, either, whether they are attracted to him by nature or are simply kowtowing to find his favor. Even

though it's been going on for at least two years, she can't stand the fact that her own mate, the darling of her youth, is Donald's best friend in the whole wide world, He lauds him at every opportunity as his best mate ever and tells the world that Donald is the best thing that's ever happened to him.

Donald and my friends like me for what I am, he responds, and what's more, they never complain. They can tell black from white, with no grey between them. They stand up for me. They're more of a family to me than you can ever be, he once shouted. And if that wasn't bad enough, when they badmouthed her hoity-toity values, he turned a deaf ear and pretended not to hear. When she raised the alarm, and even after her relatives were gunned down in Pittsburghby a murderer who lived in Donald's back yard, he said she was being hysterical.

He no longer bothers to keep up appearances. I don't need you anymore, he tells her. To add chutzpah to the insult, he started going out in public with his Evangelical mistress, her long time nemesis, who he'd courted on the sly. He's not ashamed to strut around town with his new lady; they are the new toast of the town now, while she stays home and sulks. My girlfriend does everything I ask her to, he explained. She's intimate with Donald just like his wife once was with Barack and George and Bill. And she never complains of headaches. Some people say he promised his lady-love that he'd eventually convert and they'd be married, though that could be only a rumor, spread by his girlfriend.

His friends say it's all her fault. She was a hippie in the 60's but forgot to grow up. She's turned into a tiresome knee-jerk liberal, supporting whatever noble cause comes her way, even those espoused by his worst enemies. She is hopelessly naive, clueless about the tough neighborhood he lives in and the rough and tumble ways needed to survive in it. After years of behaving like a good wife should, he tells his underlings, she's turned shrill and demanding, nagging and complaining, expecting him to change instead of accepting him for what he is.

Her friends are having none of it. He's like the proverbial wunderkid, they say: The wunder is gone, but the juvenile remains. He expects her undying devotion to remain intact, as if he hadn't changed completely. Sure, he's still ingenious and enterprising and making a mint off his hi-tech investments, and he can still ward off house invaders like no one else, but he no longer aspires to be a model citizen, or champion of justice and human rights, as he was perceived before. Instead, he's turned into a self-aggrandizing macho man who lashes out at anyone who dares question his behavior. He even has a special friend, Gilad, who prosecutes those whose criticism goes too far.

Both of them are living in the past. She dreams of the suntanned pioneer and dashing sabra dream-boy of her youth. He yearns for their days of yore, when she marveled at his every word and delighted in throwing money at his every whim. But those days are long gone, never to return. They were like ships passing in the night, as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, heading for silence and darkness.

If there is a fleeting ray of light in the gathering clouds, it comes from the mutual recognition, after years of denial, that their marriage is on the rocks. Both are going through the motions of inviting intervention that might lead to reconciliation. But it's a pipe dream, because without changing fundamentals – which both are loath to do - they are bound to grow ever more estranged from each other.

If all else fails, a trial separation might help. Instead of trying to resuscitate a marriage that's on life support, a clean break could help them get over their past and deal with their present. He could hang out with his new friends and see where it gets him. She could finally devote her time and efforts to herself: Years of unselfish dedication to his needs made her neglect herself and her own core values. Instead of catering to his whims, she could nurture her ties with those, including his own tenants, who share her views.

If it won't help, at least it can't hurt. Israel and American Jews are living on borrowed time. Their relationship is based on memories of a glorious past, fear of an uncertain future and a firm but unfounded conviction that a break-up is unthinkable. If he gets into serious trouble, as he's wont to do with alarming frequency, she'll still

be there for him, misgivings and all, but that will only postpone their inevitable crash. Their differences are irreconcilable. The end might be nigh. If they were a married couple, they would already be consulting with their lawyers and preparing to file for divorce.

Zionism's race from the bottom

The depravity of using a convicted killer in an election campaign must spur articulation of a morally better Zionism

Yehuda Kurtzer
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Hebron shooter Elor Azaria (left) alongside Likud MK Yaron Mazuz (Facebook video screenshot)
The astonishing campaign video for Likud deputy minister and Member of Knesset Yaron Mazuz – which enlists Elor Azaria, whose only qualification as a public figure is his conviction on the charge of manslaughter for shooting a disarmed and wounded Palestinian man lying on the ground in Hebron – represents a new low in the competitive field of Israeli hyper-nationalistic politics. It also constitutes a new high water mark in politically sanctioned anti-Palestinian incitement, up from Prime Minister Netanyahu's famous alarmism about the turnout among Palestinian citizens of Israel in the 2015 elections. More devastating than the rhetoric of Mazuz's campaign stunt, however, are the possibility that it succeeds, and the underlying ideological forces that it reflects. It is tempting to blame politicians for fanning the flames of dangerous populism, but it is always the populace that is the willing and enabling sovereign.

It is critical that supporters of Israel grapple with the ramifications of this campaign for the story that we tell about Israel. In general, I disdain the common ritual obligation that members of a faith tradition, an ethnic group, or a political community are expected to condemn the villains and outliers in their midst as a display of good faith towards others, and to establish credibility for their own contrasting sincere moral or political claims. We all belong to such expansive networks and communities, and inhabit fluid identities and ideologies; how can we be held accountable for the actions of others? Why must we assume of others that the villains in their networks speak in their name?

I do not accept that either Azaria or Mazuz represent me in the world – as I do not assume my friends in other faith communities are 'represented' by their worst co-religionists – and I do not believe that it is legitimate to use Azaria and Mazuz to make a broader normative claim about Zionism's failure. Zionism is not inherently implicated by the worst expressions of its politicians; that cannot be the standard under which any country, religious group, or ideology can abide. Dangerous and violent expressions of an ideology are useful for us to understand how to create boundaries around our beliefs, and as cautionary and instructive instruments, but it is too convenient to use such expressions to question the basic legitimacy of complex ideological systems from which they originate.

Nevertheless, I believe it is important that we raise our voices publicly in protest against this cynical political stunt, because this now-common ritual obligation of denouncing the villains in our midst has integrity on those few occasions when those who are trying to speak in our name are actually our formal representatives. This criterion of leadership has animated the controversies in the Jewish community in America about 'rotten compromises' in coalitions and alliances on right and left, and perceived complicity with anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic ideologies. And now we are forced to ask: What happens to the integrity of our deepest political commitments when the most public ambassadors of Zionism – even if self-appointed – are dangerous moral failures?

When we ask this question – when we are capable of confronting Zionism's failures – we lay the foundation for a Zionism morally superior to the ones we see on display from our politicians and the ones that are subject to widespread opprobrium. We demonstrate that all political movements run the risk of falling short of their ambitions, and that we are obligated to be morally vigilant in the pursuit of our political destinies.

In this case, in addition to the prima facie moral turpitude of using a convicted killer as the poster child for elective office, the cynical embrace of Azaria is deeply counterproductive to the narrative that Israel attempts to tell about itself in the world. Two of the State of Israel's most common advocacy talking points are about the superior moral quality of its army, and about how Palestinians sanction and celebrate violence. These are aspirational stories that the society seeks to tell about itself, that are then reinforced by anecdotes of images of self and other that further entrench them as normative beliefs. And indeed, the very prosecution of Azaria helped corroborate these advocacy myths, as did the condemnations of Azaria that came from certain sectors of the defense and military establishment, and especially in President Rivlin's refusal to grant a pardon. When Israel adheres to its own code of ethics, and when reasonable majorities condemn its violators, then the shocking exceptions can help prove the rule.

The idea that Azaria now is seen as a useful political totem – an icon handpicked by a politician – undercuts the story Israel wants to tell about itself in the world, transforms the narrative with which the IDF seeks to represent itself, and devastates the efforts to combat Israel's growing moral delegitimization. The only ways I can understand this is that some emboldened percentage of the Israeli populace believes that it is inexorably locked in a zero-sum conflict with the Palestinians which justifies all violent interactions, and that Israel is*already*in a state of global isolation such that no battle for earning international legitimacy is winnable or worth fighting. These are both stunningly shortsighted conclusions that I desperately hope can be reversed, for the sake of the land of Israel and all its inhabitants.

And of course we know that nationalisms of all form have easy pathways to jingoism and constitute slippery slopes to racism and other discourses of moral superiority wherein the central nation's political enshrinement can come at the cost of the erasure – through invisibility or violence – of the "others" in their midst. The Mazuz moment, and its parallels and antecedents in Israeli political life, are sadly predictable.

The challenge of our time, for the many Zionists nauseated by this campaign and what it implies about what is electorally desirable in Israel, is to advance an alternative vision for Jewish nationalism that routes itself*through* democratic principles, human rights, and the principles that underlie Israel's exemplar code of military ethics. This will likely fail if it constructs itself as in opposition to the basic commitment to nationalism that Israelis see as essential for the maintenance of their security and social fabric. The burden for Israeli society is to construct a nationalist vision that is robust enough to Israel's founding principles, conscious of the risks involved with moral slippage, and, most importantly, still capable of winning general elections.

The challenge for those of us far away, desperate to support an Israel committed to these values, is to continue to articulate the logic and passion for this Israel we imagine, in spite of and in repudiation of politicians like Mazuz. Our Zionism must demonstrate his to be a fundamental betrayal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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