



Peoplehood Papers 34

March 2025

The Rifts Within Israeli Society – How Should World Jewry Respond?

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Editor: Shlomi Ravid

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From the Editor

At the heart of Jewish Peoplehood lie the assumptions that Jews share a sense of collective responsibility (Areivut), and a unique ethos of contributing to a better and more humane and just world. These two core pillars provide the foundation for the Jewish enterprise and Jewish civilization.

The State of Israel was founded on these values, as articulated in the Israeli Declaration of Independence, with the promise to create a safe haven for Jews and an aspiration to be a light among the nations: "The State of Israel will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel".

World Jews supported and contributed to the State building efforts and to the development of the State of the Jewish people. As to policy, despite disagreements at times, the prevailing paradigm amongst world Jewry has been to embrace and support the decisions of the democratically elected government in Israel, and refrain from addressing or taking sides in so called Israeli internal debates. The assumption was that the elected governments represented more or less the general consensus within Israeli society.

However, in recent years and particularly since the launch of the Judicial reform, the sense that the government policies represent the Israeli consensus, seems to have been broken. Major rifts developed at the heart of Israeli society. For many Israelis, who have taken to the streets in mass protests for months, the current government positions are perceived as posing a threat to the founding ethos of the State, its democratic character, and the ethos of the Jewish people.

These developments, regardless of specific political orientation, require world Jewry to reckon with longstanding approaches to internal Israeli affairs. The pre-existing rationale of supporting the majority of Israelis and their vision for the State, is challenged in the current complex reality, by the government policies, and the public protests. Furthermore, denying the deep changes and arguments that are central to the identity of the State of the Jewish people, or refraining from addressing them, reflect poorly on the nature of the Israel-Diaspora partnership and the notion of the collective responsibility (Areivut).

We believe that world Jews should embrace a new approach. In practical terms this entails a process of acknowledging this point of crisis, followed by conversations and discussions of the issues at stake. Those, in turn, can lead to the development of updated perceptions and positions regarding the current and future visions for the Jewish State and its political decisions.

The above trajectory presents conceptual, social, communal and pedagogic challenges for world Jewry. After nearly a century of basing collective identity on the support of Israel through the support of its' elected governments, this change requires revisiting and responsibly reinterpreting the foundations of the Israel-Diaspora relations. There are legitimate concerns regarding both external and internal consequences of embracing a critical approach to Israeli policies. Not the least of them is the concern for keeping the Jewish community whole. Despite these concerns, we argue that the wellbeing of Israel is too important for the Jewish people to ignore its challenges, and that Jewish peoplehood is strong enough to have such difficult conversations.

To address this issue, we gathered a diverse and seasoned group of writers who have all been wrestling with the topic for years. What they all share is both love and sense of responsibility for the State of Israel and the Jewish people. They also all work to strike a balance between their commitment to Israel's future and their sometimes critical perspectives. Some of the questions we asked them were:

- Can world Jews who care about Jewish Peoplehood and the State of the Jewish people choose denial to cope with current challenges?
- What are some constructive approaches to the current situation?
- How does one approach these conversations considering the current cultural and social climate?
- Should world Jews be critical of Israel when its actions and policies conflict with Jewish ethos?
- What process can enable an open conversation on this topic without endangering the community?
- What pedagogic principles should be employed?
- How do we ensure that embracing pluralism as it relates to Israel (sometimes understood as accepting the whole spectrum of perspectives as legitimate) while calling for unity, does not replace the need to develop updated ethical positions regarding the fulfillment of the Jewish covenant of destiny?
- Should world Jews also support Israeli organizations and public efforts that oppose government policies?

Special thanks to all of our articles contributors. It is my sincere hope that this collection of insightful articles will open the door for a long overdue conversation across Jewish communities around the world.

Wishing us all a “Chag Cherut Sameach” – A Happy Holiday of Freedom,
and may all our hostages return home soon.

Shlomi Ravid

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Critical Engagement with Israel Builds Personal Identification and Involvement

Kenneth Bob

“There is nothing new under the sun.”

Ecclesiastes 1:9

On September 7, 1973 I wrote a letter to then Prime Minister Golda Meir on behalf of Habonim Labor Zionist Youth in my role as Mazkir (National Director). Referencing a resolution passed at the recently convened national convention, I stated that Israel was “on a path to de facto annexation of the occupied territories” and that “these policies were antithetical to Socialist Zionism.” While there was no immediate response from the Prime Minister, voices within Habonim’s affiliated kibbutz movement expressed outrage over the impudence of these young diaspora Jews. There was even talk of “disowning” the youth movement, but calmer heads prevailed.

A month later the Yom Kippur War broke out and, along with its public criticism of Israeli government policy, Habonim immediately mobilized to support Israel. In addition to producing educational materials for movement use and joining community rallies, Habonim had an essential resource to offer - manpower. Recent graduates of Workshop, Habonim’s gap year program, rushed back to their host kibbutzim to fill in for members called up to army reserve duty. Groups of volunteers were also organized to volunteer on kibbutzim that were deemed high priority by the kibbutz movement. Many of these emergency volunteers ended up permanently living on Grofit, Geshar Haziv and other kibbutzim after the war. And in January 1974, before the war ended, the first garin (Aliyah group) would be sent by the movement to resettle Kibbutz Gezer; six more such groups would join over the next 11 years.

We ultimately received two formal responses to our convention resolution. The Director General of the Prime Minister’s Office acknowledged on November 27 that the delay in response was due to the war and our letter “has been brought to the Prime Minister’s attention.” However, the more interesting communication was sent on October 10, four days after the war began, by MK Aryeh “Lova” Eliav, who had recently resigned as the

ruling Labor Party's Secretary General over these very policy differences regarding the Palestinians. He wrote that "even now it is more clear to me that my proposals were right and will be much more so after the victory that we are all praying for." He goes on to say that he sent copies of his proposals under separate cover and we should feel free to distribute widely within the movement.

I share this opening vignette to demonstrate that critiques of Israel's policies have animated Diaspora-Israel dialogue for over 50 years. Looking back, this time coincided with the memorable period that people generically refer to as the '60s, a time in the U.S. of protest, search for identity and, among Jews, reconciling their strong connection to Israel with their universal beliefs of justice and fairness.

Young Jews were finding expression through campus and community activism. New local and national organizations were emerging to address a variety of topics, including freeing Soviet Jews and protesting Arab terrorism, while addressing the Palestinian conflict and Israeli domestic issues.

The Israeli Black Panthers emerged on the Israeli scene to protest the discrimination of immigrants from Northern Africa by the ruling Ashkenazi majority. This resonated with Jewish students involved in the U.S. civil rights movement. *Sh'ma*, an upstart Jewish magazine, published *Dayenu* from a then new Black Panthers Haggadah. The text mirrors the style of the traditional song with a list of steps the government could have taken to properly absorb the immigrants. It ends with "but how long can we put up with "Dayenu?" – "Dayenu!"

On my Berkeley campus the Jewish Radical newspaper addressed these issues, both through articles written by students and translated articles by Israelis including Amos Oz, Shlomo Avineri, Amos Kenan, Mordechai (Morele) Bar-On, Shalom Lappin, Shulamit Aloni and others.

A 1973 editorial directly confronted the issues addressed in this issue of the *Peoplehood Papers*, stating that "any attempt to criticize Israeli government policies is met with hostility by the vast majority of American Jews" and that "our criticism is too often categorized as anti-Zionism, antisemitic or self-hating." The editors responded that in fact the "bonds between American Jewry and Israel are reciprocal" and if "Israel loses credibility, American Jews, as supporters of Israel, will feel it."

Around the same time "Breira: A Project of Concern in Diaspora-Israel Relations" was founded to express similar opinions within the Jewish community. Formed in 1973, it lasted until 1977, dissenting from what it saw as the hard line Jewish organizational perspective, developing in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. The group took the

Hebrew name *Breira*—meaning “alternative”—in response to the cry of *ein breira*, or “there is no alternative.” They had a tough time of it, being labeled as “anti-Israel”, “pro-PLO”, and “self-hating Jews” within the organized Jewish community.

All of these examples demonstrate that at a time of deep political and social turmoil in America, liberal Jews successfully found a way to maintain their support for Israel without abandoning their progressive values. As a result, they weren’t forced to choose one over the other and the Jewish community and Israel did not lose them. Many participants in these anti-establishment organizations went on to become Jewish federation executives, University Jewish studies department chairs and Rabbis as well as taking on other professional and lay positions in the community... along with some moving to live in Israel.

In the ensuing years, progressive diaspora Jews have developed deep relationships with Israeli social justice groups, organizations addressing Jewish-Arab shared society issues, as well as Israeli-Palestinian peace activists. All of this has strengthened, not weakened their relationship with Israel.

As we look at the current period, which encompasses the rancorous public debate over the proposed so-called judicial reforms, the tragedy of October 7 and its aftermath, including the efforts to prioritize the return of the hostages, we can learn valuable lessons from the past.

It is important to note that the majority of American Jewry, according to every survey, support a two-state solution with the Palestinians, in direct opposition to policies of the current Israeli government. Additionally, after the 2023 introduction of the judicial reforms, major American Jewish organizations exhibited public support for the Israeli protesters. And all of the liberal Jewish religious streams, in addition to other major organizations, have called on the Israeli government to prioritize the return of the hostages. Finally, in a post-October 7 study commissioned by Israel’s Ministry of Diaspora Affairs of Jewish teens from around the world on their Jewish identity, connection to Israel and experience with antisemitism, 63.6% answered that they sympathize with the Palestinian people.

Viewing such data, there is a great deal of handwringing taking place in Israel and the Diaspora about “losing our youth.” With this in mind, Israeli and Jewish communal leaders would do well to look at critical engagement by Diaspora Jews with Israeli policies, in software parlance, as a “feature not a bug.” In other words, rather than trying to avoid or silence criticism which can result in people feeling excluded from the community, this phenomenon should be viewed in a positive light. For over 50 years it is

a proven to be a constructive way for like-minded Israelis and Diaspora Jews to connect and create tighter bonds between Jews in and outside of Israel.

Lova Eliav, who became a close friend over the years, was ahead of his time in 1973 when he reached out to create a bond with diaspora Jews around a common critique of Israeli government policies. It is a model that is more important than ever to embrace in 2025 and beyond.

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A Different Take on Diaspora Jews, Israel, and Imperialism

Marc Dollinger

Imperialism is an awful word and it seems these days all too often applied to Israel. Especially since October 7, but even during the weekly pro-democracy demonstrations that preceded that fateful day, critics of Israel have called out its apparent imperial tendencies. From the left, anti-Zionists the world over hurl accusations of an apartheid state imposing its Jewish hegemonic will upon a Palestinian population deprived of basic legal rights. From the right, a Netanyahu-led Israeli government empowers uber-nationalist, racist, even fascist Jews to senior-level ministerial positions. When most of us reflect on imperialism's relationship to Israel discourse, we think about these critiques.

Yet, since Israel's creation in 1948, diaspora Jewish leaders as well as many rank and file diaspora Jews themselves have flipped the word "imperialism" to justify their official silence in the wake of Israeli transgressions, whether within Israeli society itself or in relationship to Israeli treatment of Palestinians and their call for national self-determination. Who are diaspora Jews, they argue, to impose our will on Jewish Israelis who would be the ones to bear the risk of our critique? Diaspora Jews, living in the relative security of their non-Israeli communities, must keep healthy distance from complex political, military, religious, cultural and social dilemmas that we do not face. The political culture of the United States differs from that of Israel. Therefore, American Jews should not press our Israeli brethren to act as we think appropriate. Jews in the United States should not think that we know better than those on the ground. Such thinking is tantamount to our own form of diaspora-imposed political and cultural imperialism: we know better than you and we will exert our power to make you conform to it. Instead, most diaspora Jewish leaders argue, we should defer to Israeli Jews, lest we be guilty of forcing our way, of imperializing, Israeli society. Fear of this inter-Jewish form of imperialism has animated Jewish-Diaspora relations. And with the real threats posed by Israel's successive wars, the first and second intifada, and now October 7, it has not faced much scrutiny.

Until weekly protests began, each and every Saturday night, against the ruling government's judicial reform. Not only did diaspora Jews get to see the serious and

profound political, social, and even cultural differences among Israeli Jews but they also relived that historic question: should diaspora Jews intervene? And with that, the longstanding and fundamental differences between Jews in Israel and those living elsewhere came into full and sharp focus. Here in the United States, Jewish expression tends to follow liberal, pluralistic principles that empower each individual Jew with a rights-based approach to democracy. Cheering the U.S. Constitutional separation of church and state (without realizing how such that division de-nationalizes American Jews), Jewish leaders value a diversity of Jewish expression. Most are familiar with the major Jewish denominations, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist. Still, in the United States, we value cultural Jews, secular Jews, and even those who define themselves as “just Jewish.”

Israeli Judaism on the other hand, knows no such commitment to pluralism or a bifurcated church and state. Rooted in a Zionist history that centered the political imperatives of Theodore Herzl or the socialism of David Ben Gurion or the militarism of Zeev Jabotinsky or the religious dogma of Rav Kook or even the cultural imperatives of Ahad Ha'am, contemporary Israeli society could not be more different in its understanding of Jews, Judaism, and the role of government than those of its US-based compatriots. Secular nationalism dominates liberal pluralism. These days, messianic traditionalism challenges the very checks and balances that liberal American Jews demand as central to their communal safety. Israeli Jews, unlike American Jews, identify themselves on an entirely different Judaic continuum. The old United Jewish Appeal slogan often deployed to bring Israeli and American Jews together, “We are one,” simply proved untrue. As much as each community counts diverse Jewish expression within its ranks, Israeli Jewishness and U.S.-based Jewishness surface even deeper disconnects.

We've been playing quite the ostrich game for decades, as both Israeli and diaspora Jews stuck their heads stuck in the sand, refusing to acknowledge their most basic differences and as a result refusing to break from their non-interventionist tradition. On occasion, diaspora Jews did lift their heads up enough to recognize a difference, a conflict, a clashing of political of cultural ideals. Yet, in most every case, Jewish leadership demanded a hands-off approach, fearful that any sort of pressure tactic to bring Israeli society in line with American pluralistic democratic ideals would bring harm.

It's time to let go of that fear. It's time to advance a little American Jewish, and pluralist liberal, imperialism on a secular nationalist and religious Zionist Israel. Because only by imposing an Americanist approach to democracy in Israel can the Jewish State move past its current quagmire, address its internal democratic challenges and formulate a long-term diplomatic plan to address the Israel-Palestine conflict. The liberalism and pluralism that has defined the history and development of Jewish life in the United States should

and must play a far stronger role in Israeli politics and society. And rather than viewing this move as a diaspora imposition on Israeli society, we should understand it as a central feature of Israel's very founding, of a Declaration of Independence that promised equal rights for all its citizens.

The State of Israel, at its founding, reflected American democratic ideals. Only in recent decades has this Israel-diaspora political split intensified. In 1915, eventual United State Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis argued the essential similarities between Americanism and Zionism. "Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with patriotism, multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent," he told a group of Reform rabbis, "There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry." In this rendition, long ignored by Jewish leaders reticent to criticize anti-democratic Israeli moves, American Jews can proclaim symmetry between their Americanism and their Zionism. Brandeis himself led the American Zionist movement.

Diaspora Jewish leaders are not imposing their will on an Israeli population that would suffer as a result. They are not applying their own form of diaspora-born imperialism on a population that needs its own social and political autonomy. Instead, diaspora critics are merely affirming the Zionist dreams of thinkers, activists, and founders who understood that only liberal, pluralist, and democratic ideals can realize Israel's Zionist visions. It's time to align this history of Zionism with the current moment. Diaspora Jews, and especially their leaders, need to say so...out loud...and with uncompromising conviction.

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Caring Enough About Israel to Fight for it

Jill Jacobs

“How dare you sit in your comfortable living room in New York and tell Israel what to do?”

Every Jew living outside of Israel who dares to publicly critique the actions of its government, or its policies has heard some version of this attack—that those of us who do not live in Israel have no business criticizing it, since we’re not the ones sitting in bomb shelters or sending our children to the army.

This critique is hardly new. Lashing out in 1976 at Breira, one of the first American Jewish organizations to oppose occupation and call for two states, Rabbi Stanley Rabinowitz, then the president of the Rabbinical Assembly wrote, “It is arrogant for them to sit in their ivory towers and pass judgment, with nothing to lose by making the wrong choice.”¹

Some liberal American Jews have taken this admonition to heart. I’ve heard Jewish leaders comment that they will criticize Israel only on “internal” issues like religious pluralism or women’s rights, and not on anything related to “security.” Some fear that any criticism of occupation or of the war in Gaza only fuels anti-Israel sentiment on the left.

But it is hypocritical and counterproductive to suggest that American Jews—or rather, *some* American Jews—should keep our opinions to ourselves. Instead, caring about Israel sometimes means using critique and accountability—from that place of caring engagement—to help it live up to its democratic ideals and to secure its peaceful future among the nations.

First of all, Israel is a country, with the same international human rights obligations as any other country. The very purpose of international human rights law is to insist that human rights violations in any country concern the entire international community. Those who scold progressive American Jews for commenting on Israel had no such objections when American Jews turned out en masse to protest the genocide in Darfur, or called for an end to the genocide of Uyghurs in China or of Rohingya in Burma, for

1 Qtd in Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots* (Columbia University, 2004). 296

a Russian retreat from Ukraine, or for LGBTQ rights in Uganda. Nor should Americans, Jewish or not, object when citizens of other countries decide to boycott or protest the United States in response to its own policies. Almost every country wishes to shield its own policies from international reproach. Everyone, regardless of where they live, has the right to protest *any* government, politician or policy anywhere in the world.

Israel, like any other country, does not exist on an island in which its decisions have no impact on the rest of the world. The ongoing occupation and the war in Gaza obviously endanger both Palestinians and Israelis. But Israel's choices, like those of Iran or Saudi Arabia or Hezbollah or Hamas, also have the potential to destabilize the Middle East, with terrifying consequences for many millions of people.

The founders of the State of Israel aimed to make it a country like any other. That means treating it as equally accountable to international laws and norms as any other state. Exempting Israel from these expectations and norms ironically contributes to its perceived precariousness and lends credence to those who would delegitimize it as a temporary entity.

Second, Americans are aware that the United States has a direct impact on how Israel fights its wars. Given that Israel remains the largest recipient of US foreign aid, it stands to reason that Americans should have a say in how our tax dollars are spent, including whether and how weapons financed by and purchased from the United States are being used to fight wars and enforce occupation. Israel, unlike other recipients of U.S. foreign aid, is regularly exempted from abiding by basic transparency standards set by U.S. law, including reporting on how and where U.S. aid is used. Any Member of Congress who dares introduce a bill to eliminate this double standard and impose some transparency finds themselves labeled an antisemite, and often targeted by AIPAC in their next election. American Jews have as much right to ask for this transparency and values alignment as any other Americans.

Third, while right wing American Jews admonish the left for "telling Israel what to do," it's right wing American Jews who are actually driving Israeli policy to the right, in ways that endanger both Israelis and Palestinians. Right wing American Jews and Christians pour billions of philanthropic dollars into building new settlements, supporting violent extremist groups within Israel, and promoting an array of anti-democratic policies within Israel. The plot to strip the High Court of its power, thus effectively reducing the Israeli government to a single branch, was hatched by the Kohelet Forum, a think tank funded by American Republican billionaires sitting in their comfortable living rooms outside of Philadelphia.

When American Jews on the right call for the war in Gaza to continue, it's someone else's children they are suggesting be sacrificed for the fight. And when American Jews invest in building new settlements in the West Bank, it's someone else's children who will be dispatched to guard these settlements, sometimes enduring violence even from the very settlers they are charged with protecting. In June 2024, family members of hostages held in Gaza published a letter beseeching Jewish leaders to support a deal that would end the war and bring their loved ones home—a deal that Prime Minister Netanyahu torpedoed over and over. Few mainstream American Jewish organizations dared to publicly oppose the prime minister, even to stand with the families who are desperate to save Israeli lives.

We should also note that the Jewish right in the US had no problem opposing the elected government of the State of Israel when it came to the Oslo Accords or the disengagement from Gaza. AIPAC, which defines itself as a pro-Israel organization that always supports the sitting government of Israel, clashed with the Rabin administration and tried hard to undermine the Oslo Accords.² During the disengagement from Gaza, which included dismantling settlements there and in the northern West Bank, Israel's housing minister at the time directly called on American Jews to protest this move, and many heeded his call.³

As for the argument that public criticism of Israel fuels the anti-Israel left, we can see that the insistence that American Jews toe the line has only fueled the far left's wish to equate Zionism with perpetual occupation and war. When the mainstream Jewish community has insisted for decades that supporting Israel means supporting occupation, endless war, messianic settlement, and anti-democratic initiatives, is it any wonder that those who *don't* want to defend these policies decide that they must be anti-Zionist? Imagine if, instead, the mainstream American Jewish world had, for the past half century, modeled a Zionism that pushes Israel to live out the values of justice and equality enshrined in its Declaration of Independence, and poured billions of dollars not into occupation and settlement, but into efforts to bring about a long-term peace agreement. Perhaps Israel would not find itself enmeshed in perpetual war. Perhaps Palestinians, too, would be enjoying national rights in a country of their own. Perhaps no one in the region would regularly be sending their children off to battle.

Finally, American Jews should invest their money, time, and voice in fighting for a more just Israel because we care about the welfare about the half of the Jewish people who

2 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/01/friends-israel>

3 <https://forward.com/news/6523/minister-urging-americans-to-protest-gaza-pullout/>

live there—including many of our friends and families. We have an obligation to stand by them in their fights for equality, for democracy, and for an end to the occupation that endangers the present and future of both Israelis and Palestinians.

As an American citizen, I believe that the greatest act of patriotism is fighting for this country to do better, including ensuring the safety and rights of everyone in the U.S. regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, or religion. And as a Jew, I believe that the greatest act of love for Israel and its people is to fight for that country to do better, including ending the occupation of another people, and seeking a political solution, which is the only way for Israelis and Palestinians to live in safety. When will the American Jewish establishment start caring enough about Israel to fight for it too?]

Rabbi Jill Jacobs (she/her) is the CEO of T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights and the author of *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community* and *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition*. She holds rabbinic ordination and an MA in Talmud from the Jewish Theological Seminary and an MS in Urban Affairs from Hunter College, and a BA from Columbia University.



A Vision-Based Approach to Israel Engagement

Adam Levi

The Zionist Movement, from its inception, has been a battleground of competing visions for the Jewish future. Almost all major political trends of the last 150 years—Marxism, liberal democracy, militant nationalism, anti-colonialism, religious messianism—have all had some iteration within the Zionist movement. Before the establishment of the state, these competing movements organized political parties, built youth movements, and published newspapers to sway the Jewish public toward their vision. And despite working in direct opposition, they sat together in the democratic institutions of the World Zionist Congress and later the Israeli Knesset. While much has changed, the past five years demonstrate that we continue to live within the struggle between competing visions.

In contrast, mainstream American support for Israel demonstrates a historical reluctance to participate in such conversations. As Rafael Medoff writes in his review of *The Emergence of American Zionism* by Mark Raider, "Most American Zionists were 'stam Zionists.' They were convinced of the need for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, but not wedded to any particular vision of that homeland's future economic, social, or religious contours" (Medoff, 1998).

Within the DNA of the American Jewish communities' relationship to Israel, there exists an intentional distance - sometimes outright disinterest - from many of these more "particular" discussions about Israeli society's inner workings. Politically, this attitude manifests through bipartisan support predicated on the insistence that Israelis will determine their own fate through democratic elections. Educationally, it is reproduced as building *general identification* with Israel while expanding *Israel literacy* (history, politics, culture).

This approach proves increasingly insufficient and untenable in our current reality.

The situation in Israel today makes this position untenable. Israeli citizens live amidst crippling polarization where previously assumed 'rules of the game' erode before our eyes. Opponents label each other "traitors," "messianic psychos," and - at our worst

moments – enemies of the state. The last five years witnessed the dissolution of clear consensus as foundational principles disintegrate.

In this environment, maintaining ‘general identification with Israel’ resembles walking a tightrope rather than a firm ground to stand on.

Israel educators previously explained societal disagreements as expressions of a thriving democracy. But what meaning do such comments hold when a significant portion of Israelis spent 2023 screaming out that Israeli democracy was facing extinction? How can young Jewish students maintain a love for Israel when the current finance minister advocates to “restore the Torah justice system...[to] the days of King David,” calls himself a “proud homophobe,” and states the Palestinian “village of Huwara should be wiped out”?

Consider a scene from a recent Birthright trip. Since October 7th, groups from across the Jewish world visit Israel to connect with the Jewish people during one of our darkest hours—showing solidarity, bearing witness, volunteering, asking questions, and drawing strength. Among visits to the Nova massacre site, packing supplies for soldiers, and meeting displaced communities, many groups have met with the families at Hostage Square. What should the group’s guide explain beyond expressing empathy and identification?

Should they show videos of police violence against family members during protests? Should they share Netanyahu’s son’s statements about them? Or perhaps quote Einat Zangauker, whose son Matan remains held in Gaza, who compared her previous support for Benjamin Netanyahu to membership in a cult?

Facing this reality, we must acknowledge the traditional model **fails to meet current needs**. Jewish young people today are challenged to navigate their own relationship with Israel in an incredibly hostile environment, and our current model provides inadequate tools to do so. While *identification* and *literacy* are essential, they offer insufficient answers to the genuine questions that are shaking our country to its core. And any thinking young person will pick up on this; as they already have.

A vision-based approach to Israel enables true *critical engagement* coupled with the value of *participation* and *action*. To do so, I propose five initial directions:

1. Open and honest engagement with Israel’s challenges through frank discussions that address big questions in their totality.

2. Reframing the story of Israel as a struggle between competing visions that—while coexisting under a single democratic umbrella—represent alternative value systems that clash with one another.
3. Encouraging the analysis of such visions, with an emphasis on identification with *particular* traditions over *general* identification.
4. Facilitated meetings with current activists and leaders engaged in constructive work for Israel’s future based on their values and vision.
5. Providing young people platforms to participate constructively in the country’s advancement and direction.

The *vision* and *action*-based approach can bring forward a new understanding of *arevut* in the Israel-Diaspora relationship. Not just through mutual responsibility and help during crises, but by true involvement (*hitarvut*) in the unfolding story of Israel itself.

Adam Levi is an educator with 15+ years of creating Jewish educational experiences specializing in curriculum on Jewish identity, Israeli society, and youth leadership. A Canadian-born Israeli, Adam serves as the co-director of Hechalutz where he works to bridge Israeli and diaspora communities through critical engagement and dialogical learning.



The Breaking of Israel's Liberal Sphere and the Rise of Jewish Fundamentalism

Tomer Persico

Israel's current social and political crisis has been brewing for decades. It's not divorced from the global crisis of the liberal order, but Israel's democracy being on shaky ground as it is, and Judaism having a religious dimension in addition to a national one, make it distinct, and more perilous.

Over the last 30 years a broad realignment has been taking place in the Israeli public sphere, a transformation from a republican political arena to a fractured society of tribes, with a constant tug-of-war between divergent groups. At the same time, Israel's leadership for the last two decades, mostly personified by Benjamin Netanyahu, rules less by setting a political agenda and more by coalescing a varied alliance of forces, based on partisan interests and needs, and guided not by agreed-upon norms and customs but by ad hoc deals, power plays, and loyalty to the chief.

This process, a reversal and unraveling of the nation-building project of the secular Socialist Zionists who had established the state, has carried Israeli society back from the 'melting pot' experiment and, after passing through a short-lived era of multiculturalism in the 1990s, toward a more contested, bare-knuckles, less liberally-inclined political arena. A reversion, as it were, from republic to the pre-modern Jewish shtetl. The shtetlization of Israel.

The attempt, over the last two years and even in the midst of war, to restructure the balance of power between the branches of the state, is the dramatic climax of this process. This shtetelization, the transformation of the very meaning of "Israeliness", should not be understood as the miserable accomplishment of a certain politician or even a whole political camp. It aligns with much broader, global trends, and needs be seen as a backlash to the integration of the Israeli economy into the global market, and the extensive adoption of liberal ethics and ideals – arguably the most significant social process Israel went through since its founding.

As is well documented, since the 1980's, and increasingly in the 1990's, Israel witnessed pervasive economic liberalization, bringing it relatively rapidly into a globalized, post-industrial market headed by a vibrant Information Technology sector. The scope of

privatization was not limited to the economy, but inspired and changed the Israeli society at large, including its political culture, judiciary, and civic sphere. The reaction to this, also aligned with other states that went through such liberalization, was a traditionalist and populist backlash, witnessed since the beginning of the millennium.

From a political standpoint, the Right has claimed complete control of the executive branch since the untimely end of the Barak government in 2001. From a cultural standpoint, Israel has seen a so called “renaissance” of Jewish expression and engagement, offering types of privatized Judaism as well as a religious revival through an increasing accentuation of traditional(ized) Judaism. From the standpoint of Jewish identity, Israel experienced a rise of ethno-national Judaism, grounded in a sense of tribal belonging and devoted to a purported mission of preserving the security and prosperity of the Jewish people and their heritage. Lastly, socially and civically Israel has been divided between those who wish to continue pursuing the ideas and ideals of western liberalism and those who prefer to reject them as false, dangerous or “un-Jewish”, while aiming to reinforce and empower traditionalized Judaism.

That’s why in Israel the global crisis of liberalism and the rise of populist politics has an added menace in the form of fundamentalist religion. Our fundamentalists, not very popular among the general public, piggyback, as it were, on the much more widely supported populists, and are given immense power. They use this power to change the face of Israel, and indeed of Judaism itself.

More than the Ultra-Orthodox, Haredi public, that have long labored to disengage from the general Israeli society and seclude themselves in a life according to their own beliefs and preferences, the most troubling extreme of this phenomenon are the fundamentalist fringe of the Religious Zionist public. Here we have groups such as the so called Hilltop Youth, the Kahanist circles, the Temple Mount activists, and the general Hardal (i.e. Haredi Nationalist) public, all of which display a deep seated rejection of democratic, liberal and indeed humanist values. This is the fundamentalist part of Religious Zionism, comprising about 15% of it, which is about 2% of the Jewish Israeli public.

To give a small example, the Hilltop Youth, extremist settlers mostly under thirty, have over the last decade grown more brazen and chaotic, making clear that they do not see themselves under the jurisdiction or the state. For example, following the death of a member of this circle in a car crash after a police chase in December 2020, hundreds of them went on a rampage stretching across three months, attacking not only damaging property and wounding Palestinian villagers in nightly raids, but also smashing Palestinian cars in makeshift roadblocks, stoning members of the Israeli police and army, wounding several, and in general engaging in more than forty acts of arson,

vandalism and violent attacks across Samaria. With the rise of the current government these attacks became more bold and unabashed, as Israel has witnessed, over the year before the Gaza war, arsonist pogroms at the villages of Hawara, Turmus Ayya, Luban Sharqiya, Um Safa and other Palestinian communities, altogether hundreds of attacks with dead, wounded and much property destroyed as a result. The war has only given pretext and cover for more such acts.

There has always been a violent fringe to the Settler Movement, and it has long benefited from lax enforcement on the side of Israeli authorities. What is exceptional with this continuing series of events is that it enjoys an increasing support among Israeli leadership, exemplified most blatantly by Israel's current finance minister Bezalel Smotrich. Smotrich's statement that the village of Huwara should be "wiped out" is just an illustration of the fact that there is almost no daylight between him and the young hooligans. Indeed, he takes care to shield them from the law and support their illegal (even under Israeli law) outposts.

With Smotrich as finance minister, and with the minister of police, Itamar Ben-Gvir, being an avowed Kahanist and convicted in the past in two different cases of "support of a terrorist organization", it's easy to understand why the extremist part of the settler public feel that they have a free rein, and why they enjoy a disturbingly low level of motivation from the IDF and the Israeli police in stopping their violence, even relative to the permissive past. Under the impression of the current war the Religious Zionist fundamentalists blatantly asserted what in the past was only implied: that they simply disregard universal humanism, liberal values, and at time even Israeli law; that theirs is a Judaism that disavows core Jewish values and ideals such as the fundamental quality between all human beings and the struggle for justice; that they adhere to a limited, diminished and immoral version of Judaism.

We cannot stay silent in the face of such a threat to Israeli democracy and to our collective identity. We must unequivocally condemn such fundamentalists, reject their warped understanding of both the Jewish tradition and Zionism, and refuse to legitimize their champions, people such as Smotrich, Ben Gvir, and their political parties. In this the Jews of the diaspora must join hands with us Israelis. It's pertinent to understand that this is not only an inner political struggle in Israel, nor even a heated debate about Israel's security.

We are in a struggle for the essence and soul of our tradition. Even today Smotrich and his circles deface Judaism and present it to the world as a fanatical, violent and racist tradition. If they are able to remake Israeli Judaism in their image and likeness, diaspora Judaism will not remain intact. The face of Judaism will be deformed forever, Jews

everywhere will be ashamed of their heritage, and younger generations will distance themselves from it. We must – together – assert our values and embrace Judaism's and Zionism's humanistic and liberal heritage. Please, help us at this time, and let's make clear what we stand for.

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Committed Critique: The Right of All Jews

Matt Reingold

It is the first day of the semester and I am teaching a course about contemporary Israeli society to a group of Torontonians Jews. Their ages don't really matter - I have done the following lesson with adult learners and children as young as 12. I begin by asking them to share all of the things that they don't like about Canada. Here, too, Canada is incidental; it is where the learners live but I have conducted an identical lesson with Americans and Australians and just swap out the initial nationality.

There is nervous laughter in the room. Someone, inevitably, begins with the snow and the cold. We are Canadians after all. Next is the heat; parts of Canada can be very hot in the summer! At this point, there is often a pause. Will someone take the next step and actually say something substantive? Someone always does. High taxes, long waiting periods for healthcare services, no funding in Ontario for Jewish day schools (despite funding for Catholic schools). We are now getting somewhere. What follows, and it always happens, is a laundry-list of contemporary and historical grievances with Canada. This includes Jewish topics like Canada's refusal to grant admission to Jews during the Holocaust and the rise of antisemitism in recent years. But there are also wrongs committed to others. This includes Canada's residential school system that intentionally and maliciously denied indigenous populations of their culture and heritage or the 1981 bathhouse raids in Toronto where nearly 300 gay men were arrested because of their sexuality.

The group is now all worked up, adding other examples, but as facilitator, I call an end to the proceedings and ask a new question. In my most serious voice, I ask whether anyone is anti-Canadian. Silence and confused looks. Until someone (again, there's always someone) says something like: "why would we be anti-Canadian? Criticism is a normal part of our society". And my answer, always, is that the same holds true for Israel and our ability to criticize it.

It is important to recognize that it is not quite the same, and to help with the distinction, I want to differentiate between what I am calling voter critique and committed critique.¹ With regards to the former, this is the exclusive purview of those who exercise voting rights and therefore the ability to affect change at the ballot box. Committed critique of Israel, however, is something that all Jews have the ability to do, if they so choose. Committed critique is what happens when we care about something so deeply that when we see its potential not being lived up to, we feel the need to call it out and express our disappointment by sharing what we aspire it to be.

Though voter critique is likely off the table for most diaspora Jews, committed critique is not. Some may question by what right diaspora Jews can critique a country where they do not live or have citizenship. Others may worry whether granting permission for this type of critique will lead to rejection of Israel. First, I return to my opening vignette and the puzzlement of my Canadian learners at being questioned whether they are anti-Canadian because they dislike a Canadian politician. Critique is not a gateway to rejection. Second, I point to the Israeli press. There, editorials by left-wing, right-wing, Arab, ultra-Orthodox, and secular Israelis can be found and they are full of strongly worded critiques of any given policy or statement. No rational person would question whether an Israeli editorialist's right to exercise a dissenting voice is tantamount to rejection of Israeli national identity. Instead, the ability to do so is a central tenet of a healthy democracy such as Israel's. Furthermore, perhaps of even more value is the notion that committed critique gives the disenfranchised or the less-enfranchised the ability to hope and to imagine a different Israel from the one where they currently live. The same ability must also be true for how diaspora Jews think and talk about Israel.

When diaspora Jews encounter parts of Israel that they disagree with but are prevented from entering the discourse because they are in the diaspora, they are left with a frustration that is sterile in nature. This is a frustration that leads nowhere other than disempowerment, disengagement, and disillusionment. Barred from having a stake or the right to see Israel as anything other than what its voters have enacted, how could diaspora Jews with sterile frustration ever see the latent possibilities that reside in Israel and its society. How can they ever feel genuinely invested in Israel if all they are expected to do is rubber stamp whatever Israel does even when they disagree? This is a recipe for disaster.

¹ There is also, of course, destructive critique. This critique is designed to tear down and ruin. Though it certainly exists in Israel discourse, it is not the subject of this piece as my focus is on critique that emerges from a place of care and curiosity.

But when our communal and educational institutions - synagogues, schools, camps, supplementary schools - teach Jews to care deeply about Israel, and they also reveal to these Jews their right to also share a vision for what they want Israel to be, worlds become opened. If we want Israel to be a fixture in diaspora Jews' lives, we cannot limit them to accepting Israel only as-is. By showing them the complexity and diversity of Israeli society and sharing with them that they also have entry tickets into that discourse space as members of a global community of Jews who also care about Israel, we expand the realm of possibility of what Israel can be. With this approach in mind, when Jews are frustrated over why Israel is not the country they want to exist, sterile frustration becomes creative frustration. This is a frustration that can lead to negotiation, understanding and world building. It recognizes the value of multiple voices and the interconnected relationship between diaspora Jews and the state of Israel. Creative frustration fashions not just one Israel, but many Israels, overlapping and competing versions of the country that begin in the imagination, but which can spill out into reality, birthing the country anew with different iterations of the Jewish national home. It is limitless and complex and beautiful. And when Jews participate in this type of fruitful dialogue about Israel, or really about any topic of Jewish interest, they cement their place amongst the Jewish People, a community that spans spaces, places, and times.

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World Jewry, Zionism and the State of Israel

Sid Schwarz

The relationship between world Jewry, the Zionist movement and the State of Israel has never been simple and it has a long history. In 1897, Ahad Ha-Am (aka, Asher Ginzberg) published an essay in *Ha-Shiloah*, the Hebrew monthly he edited from Odessa, entitled, “The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem”. In the essay, Ginzberg argued that, as important as it is to have people settle in the *Yishuv* (the term used for pre-State Israel) it would be a mistake for Zionists to write off the millions of Jews who lived in the Diaspora and who would never make *aliyah*. He argued that the creation of a Jewish homeland must never become, strictly, a political endeavor. Rather it was a spiritual endeavor. As such, the land of Israel (and the national entity that he and other Zionists hoped would emerge) must find ways to tap into the great spiritual heritage of the Jewish people, scattered throughout the world, so that the new national entity would become a unifying force for world Jewry.

How far we have strayed from this vision! Today, Israel is more a source of division in the Jewish world than it is a source of unity. Sociologists have been tracking the growth of a phenomenon labeled “distancing” for some time now, a term used to describe Jews who no longer see Israel as a central component to their Jewish identity. More recently, we have seen Jews create non-Zionist and anti-Zionist groups like Jewish Voice for Peace and many Jews have become active in Students for Justice in Palestine, the organization that has been largely responsible for sponsoring anti-Israel protests on college campuses, including harassment of Jewish students. Many Jewish parents, who grew up identifying with the State of Israel, now have millennial children who see Israel as an occupying, colonialist power that is engaging in a genocide against the Palestinian people. On matters related to Israel today, we are a people divided.

For much of Israel's history, there has been a struggle between spiritual Zionism and political Zionism. Because Israel has had to defend itself against hostile Arab neighbors for so much of its history, the advocates of political Zionism have continued to have the upper hand in that struggle. Diaspora Jews are valued primarily for the way they can influence the U.S. and other western nations to offer economic, military and political support for Israel. The message Diaspora, pro-Israel groups get from Israeli

political leaders is essentially: Leave the policy decisions to us and lobby your respective governments to remain steadfast allies of Israel.

The international climate today is one that sees democratic values under assault in the face of autocratic, nationalist political leaders. Israel has its own version of that in PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who has formed a governing coalition with religious and anti-democratic political parties. The organized Jewish community will continue to support the state of Israel as it reacts to the atrocities of 10/7 and the Iranian-sponsored military and political assault on Israel's existence and legitimacy in the international arena. But, just below the surface, many Jews are increasingly alienated by an Israeli government that ignores appeals to the humanitarian needs of Arab civilians in Gaza and, now, Lebanon, and which prioritizes the prosecution of a war in Gaza over a political deal that might release Israeli hostages from Hamas.

Judaism and the Jewish people have a long and rich history of championing the values of justice and peace/*tzedek v'shalom* and helping to make those values manifest in the world. There are many in Israel who have raised the banner of *tzedek v'shalom* since the founding of the State. And yet today, those voices seem to be drowned out by those who believe that Israel's future can only be guaranteed by military might and a form of nationalism that privileges Jews over non-Jewish citizens of Israel. Ahad Ha'am was not the only early Zionist who feared that a state without Jewish values at its core would betray 3000 years of Jewish history.

Unfortunately, the State of Israel has never been able to operationalize an aspirational idea that has been around for more than 100 years—allowing the values of Judaism and the voices of diaspora Jewry to inform the way the State of Israel is governed and led. Frankly, given the fact that Israel has yet to even write and endorse a constitution for the country after 77 years, makes it seem next to impossible to conceive of a way to allow Jews, who are not citizens of the country, to have some say in the affairs of the State of Israel. And yet, a small experiment in which I was involved may point a way forward.

When Ephraim Katzir was the President of Israel (1973-78) he wanted to elevate the discourse about Zionism and the future of Israel above partisan politics. He knew that Zionism was deeply rooted in the history of the Jewish people and was born in the rich intellectual ferment of European Jewry. He started to convene some of the greatest minds and spirits of Israeli society at *Beit Hanassi*, his Presidential Residence in Jerusalem, on a regular basis. He called it The President's Study Circle on World Jewry. There, Israelis with no political office or governing authority, discussed and debated the future of Israel and the Jewish people.

The success of these seminars at *Beit Hanassi* enabled Katzir to convince the World Zionist Organization to provide staffing and some funding to seed a project called the Continuing Seminars on Zionist Thought in major Jewish communities all around the world. By the mid-1980's, seminars engaging leading Jewish intellectuals existed in New York, Boston, Toronto, London, Paris, Cape Town and Caracas. Each Seminar met regularly, with members writing papers and, other members, acting as respondents. I was invited to organize an ongoing Seminar in Philadelphia in 1983, which met for several years. There even was an international conference held in Caracas, Venezuela in 1989, convening representatives of all the Continuing Seminars, which I was privileged to attend. It was truly awe-inspiring to sit with Jews from all over the world, committing their time and intellectual capital to the question that Ahad Ha-am addressed in his 1897 essay. I remember thinking: How lucky we are to have the State of Israel and how fortunate it is that it could inspire a conversation that spanned both geography (e.g. the seminars on different continents) and history (e.g. centuries of Jewish longing for a homeland).

The Jewish people is not lacking in brain power. Nor does it lack for the resources to create think tanks, international conferences, and publish books and periodicals. What is lacking is an invitation by the Israeli government to make the Jewish people true partners in the State of Israel. Not just funders, and not just lobbyists of their governments, but true partners. As we see from the worldwide surge in anti-Semitism this past year, the fate of Jews in the world is intimately tied to decisions made by Israeli political leaders in Jerusalem. If Israel is to become a true center of the Jewish people, it must empower and partner with the Jewish people in a very tangible way.

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The “New” Jewish Problem and How to Solve It

Barak Sella

October 7th brought Israeli society back to discussions of “conceptual collapse” (*Hakonseptzia*), a term previously reserved for the shock of the Yom Kippur War. The intelligence failures [revealed by IDF](#) and [Shin-Bet investigations](#) exposed a collective blindness despite clear warning signs. As with most strategic surprises, all the information was there, we just failed to connect the dots.

But this blindness is not uniquely Israeli. Until October 7th, many believed we were living in Judaism’s golden age. Jewish population numbers approached pre-Holocaust levels. Israel had become an economic and military powerhouse. American Jews enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and influence.

Yet, the immediate aftermath of October 7th shattered the illusion that American Jews were insulated from these shocks. [The surge in antisemitism across U.S. campuses](#) and public spaces blindsided Jewish institutional leadership, which had largely dismissed warnings that anti-Jewish sentiment was inching toward mainstream legitimacy. While violent right-wing extremism was taken seriously, left-wing antisemitism was often downplayed.

American Jews quickly realized that October 7th wasn’t merely an Israeli tragedy but an attack on Jewish identity itself. As Franklin Foer wrote in his widely-discussed essay “[The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending](#),” this exceptional era of safety and prosperity is unraveling not just for Jews but potentially for the liberal social order they helped establish. The fundamental surprise that struck American Jewry suggests a new, risk-filled chapter not just for Jews but for American society itself.

The tether between the fate of American Jews and the welfare of America at large has been a staple of American Jewish life. This is perhaps the most prominent feature of the American Jewish story—a community that not only successfully embraced but practically wrote the American dream. The Jewish challenge in the “Golden Medina” has always been the tension between two forces—assimilation and isolation. The economic and political conditions of the United States allowed Jews to thrive, creating a unique challenge—how to become fully American without losing Jewish identity. Some fully

assimilated, others established insular communities. The mainstream Jewish world sought a middle path, and in the early 20th century, it found a compelling answer: Zionism.

In 1915, Louis Brandeis laid out this vision in "[The Jewish Problem: How to Solve It.](#)" Brandeis argued that Zionism was not only compatible with American patriotism but an essential expression of it. "Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with patriotism," he declared. "Every American Jew who aids in advancing the Jewish settlement in Palestine... will likewise be a better man and a better American for doing so. Indeed, loyalty to America demands rather that each American Jew become a Zionist."

Brandeis's formula was brilliant: it framed American Jews' connection to the Jewish homeland not as a divided loyalty but as an expression of American pluralism. America was a tapestry of nationalities sharing a common civic identity while maintaining cultural connections to ancestral homelands. Through this lens, supporting Jewish national aspirations strengthened rather than compromised American citizenship.

Despite American Zionism's proven success, this vision mutated over the years. The Jewish community's initial hesitant support for Israel intensified dramatically after 1948, and especially after 1967, when Israel evolved from one aspect of Jewish identity into its sacred centerpiece. Brandeis's American Zionism, originally conceived to enhance American citizenship, mutated to a point where support for Israel became the defining feature of American Jewish identity.

Unwavering support for Israel served as the linchpin of American Jewish identity, ushering a Jewish Golden Age, but not everyone was on board. As Israel grew in power and with the collapse of the peace process, the Jewish far-left intensified its efforts to sever the bond between American Jews and the Jewish state. [The controversial documentary "Israelism,"](#) which has stirred debates since Oct 7 while presenting a distorted narrative full of half-truths, highlights two uncomfortable realities: American Jewish institutions have often avoided confronting the realities of military occupation, while Jewish education has developed an outsized focus on Israel. Yet, while the filmmakers identify legitimate concerns, their proposed solution—substituting the romanticization of Israeli identity with another romanticization—that of Palestinian identity—fundamentally misreads what young American Jews are looking for.

Recent polling reveals that despite deep concerns about Israel's actions in Gaza—with [42% of American Jewish teens](#) believing Israel is committing genocide and [67% believing Israel's actions are making life harder for Jews](#)—the vast majority remain deeply connected to Israel. October 7th clarified an inescapable reality: American Jews cannot simply disconnect from Israel, even if they are deeply critical of its policies.

October 7th made it clear to American Jews that they have no choice but to be connected to Israel. Historically, traditional antisemitism offered an escape: during the Inquisition, conversion could save a Jew. In the Nazis' racial version of antisemitism, Jewishness was inescapable. Today's "new" antisemitism fuses both—every Jew is presumed complicit in Israel's actions, with only one path to absolution: convert. Wear a keffiyeh, drape yourself in a Palestinian flag, chant *Free Palestine*, and denounce Zionism, and you may be accepted. Once, being a liberal Zionist was enough. Now, that position is exiled from progressive circles. The demand now is total rejection. Most American Jews, even the deeply critical ones, refuse this ultimatum. Whether they like it or not, their fate and Israel's remain intertwined.

That said, Israel is no longer the struggling state that American Jews must support unconditionally. It is a regional power with remarkable achievements alongside serious flaws. The younger generation experiences Israel primarily as a strong, culturally vibrant nation, not primarily through the lens of existential peril or Holocaust memory.

This shifting reality demands a new identity framework. Without one, young Jews won't necessarily turn against Israel—they may simply drift away, no longer seeing it as a source of inspiration. Recent Gallup polling [shows Israel has become the most polarizing country for Americans](#)—with 83% of Republicans viewing it favorably compared to just 33% of Democrats. Given that most American Jews vote Democratic, they are caught between a rock and a hard place. If this trend continues, the Jewish-Israel relationship may come to resemble that of other diasporas—less a deep, defining connection and more a distant cultural tie. For the next generation, Israel may no longer unite Jews but instead become just another country to which they feel a vague, occasional attachment.

American Jews stand at a crossroads, caught between growing alienation from American society and an increasingly strained relationship with Israel. This is the "New" Jewish Problem. Many feel pressured to choose between two extremes: downplaying their connection to Israel in pursuit of a more "peaceful" American life or embracing Israel while feeling increasingly disconnected from the country they call home. This tension is fueling a resurgence of Jewish pride movements—an encouraging reaffirmation of identity, but also a potential path toward insularity. While these movements strengthen ties to Israel, they risk fostering a type of "Jewish Nationalism" that deepens the separation between Jews and broader American society.

Brandeis can offer us a way forward. If we accept Zionism as an essential part of American citizenship, we must not only strengthen connections to Israel but also focus on rebuilding the American Jewish identity and revolutionize American Jewish education. It is absurd that American Jews can quote Ben-Gurion and Rabin but not Brandeis and

Kaplan. American Jews know plenty about Israel's 77 years but very little of the over 370 years of the history of American Jews in North America. To sustain a meaningful connection to Israel while maintaining their place in American society, Jews must return to Brandeis's original conception: approaching Zionism through Americanism.

This means cultivating a conception of Jewish peoplehood that centers on the Jewish people, not the State of Israel. Israelis will be Israelis, and Americans will be Americans, but we will all be Jews. This requires educational reform that develops an authentic and independent American Jewish identity alongside Israel engagement and simultaneous calls on Israelis to strengthen their connection to American Jewry, to the people themselves, not just their wallets.

If American Jewish institutions want to keep young Jews engaged, they must move beyond a narrow pro-Israel approach and embrace American Zionism, which, as Brandeis put it, is "idealist, but it is also essentially practical." Glossing over Israel's flaws or avoiding hard conversations doesn't build loyalty—it breeds disillusionment. A more open, self-assured Jewish education—one that acknowledges complexity rather than shying away from it—won't weaken support for Israel. It will make it stronger, more resilient, and, most importantly, real.

Zionism does not mean unconditional support for the Israeli government. It calls on both American Jews and Israelis to "lead earnestly, courageously, and joyously in the struggle of liberation." Only a return to Zionism based on strengthening American identity can allow the next generation to rediscover its path—maintaining a connection to Israel while forging a renewed sense of meaning to American Jewish life. This, in turn, can usher in a new golden age for the most significant and successful Jewish community outside the borders of the Holy Land.

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Reimagining Jewish Citizenship in Perilous Times: A Call for a Clear Articulation and Standards for Jewish Civics Education

Yona Shem-Tov

We stand at a pivotal moment in Jewish history, one that demands a clear and bold re-articulation of what “Jewish citizenship” means in the 21st century. As Jewish communities around the world confront deep polarization, rising anti-Semitism, and shifting political landscapes, the absence of a shared framework for Jewish civic education has become a critical void.

Israel stands at a defining crossroads as it enters its fourth quarter-century of existence, reeling, as are Jews worldwide, from the harrowing events of October 7 and its aftermath in the most brutal, existential war in its history. **At the time of this writing, there are 59 hostages still being held by Hamas.** Israel finds itself surrounded by hostile nations and Iranian-funded proxies committed to its destruction, while simultaneously navigating historic normalization agreements with several Arab countries, signaling both the persistent existential threats it faces and the evolving regional dynamics that offer new opportunities for diplomacy and stability. Internally, the country grapples with deep fractures: a growing crisis over the mandatory army draft for its Haredi population, the 20% of non-Jewish Arab citizens who continue to navigate their complex place within the state, and the State’s continued sovereignty over millions of Palestinians in an enduring intractable conflict. Israelis recently elected one of the most right wing governments in its history, igniting fierce debates over divisive policies relating to democracy, governance, and national identity, and the prosecution of the war.

Meanwhile, American Jewry faces a new and uncertain chapter in Jewish life marked by the question of whether its Golden Age has come to an end. Anti-Semitism is rising from both the far right and left, and there is increasing conflation of anti-Israel, anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic sentiments. Simultaneously, a segment of the younger Jewish population feels disenfranchised and disconnected to the Jewish community. At the same time, the post-10/7 realities have infused a surge of renewed interest and engagement in Jewish communal life. These are not peripheral challenges and opportunities; they are defining realities of contemporary Jewish existence. Our conceptions of Jewish peoplehood must embrace these complexities head-on, fostering informed, critical,

and engaged Jewish citizens who are prepared to navigate and shape the future of the Jewish people.

Now more than ever, we must articulate fundamental principles of Jewish citizenship, ensuring that Jews across generations and geographies—both within Israel and beyond—understand and share a sense of the responsibilities, privileges, and challenges that come with being part of the Jewish people. This requires not only intellectual rigor but also an educational strategy that fosters inspiration, engagement, literacy, and a deep commitment to Jewish peoplehood.

A New Paradigm for Jewish Engagement with Israel

The time has come to redefine the way Jewish communities engage with Israel, forging a paradigm that contends with the realities of today and fosters a deeper, more meaningful relationship with Israelis and fellow Jews. This approach must address the fundamental questions that shape Jewish identity today, creating a foundation for engagement that is both intellectually rigorous and deeply connected to Jewish values.

At its core, this new framework must begin with a renewed exploration of **Jewish peoplehood and citizenship** in a transnational world. What does it mean to belong to the Jewish people today? How do concepts of obligation and responsibility inform our collective identity? These questions must be at the center of Jewish education and discourse, ensuring that Jewish identity is understood not only in national or religious terms, but as part of an enduring and evolving civilization.

A central pillar of this paradigm must be a clear and unflinching conversation about **Israel as a sovereign Jewish state**—its moral and political responsibilities, its role in shaping Jewish identity, and the ways in which global Jewish communities can and should engage with it, and vice-versa. This discussion cannot be divorced from a serious reckoning with **the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**, where literacy in both history and sociology is critical. Without a nuanced understanding of the conflict's origins, evolution, and competing narratives—including an honest engagement with Palestinian perspectives—Jewish education will fail to prepare future generations for informed, meaningful engagement with Jewish life, not to mention, Israel.

Moreover, this paradigm must grapple with **the intersection of Jewish identity and political ideologies**. Jewish values have long interacted with broader ideological movements, from socialism to liberal democracy to religious nationalism. What tensions arise when Jewish commitments meet the complexities of contemporary politics? How do we navigate these challenges without compromising either our values or our integrity?

Equally important is confronting **the evolving challenges of anti-Semitism** in both historical and contemporary contexts. From ancient prejudices to modern political movements on both the right and the left, antisemitism must be understood in all its forms, alongside strategies for combating it effectively in today's world.

Finally, no meaningful engagement with Israel—or Jewish life itself—can ignore **the importance of internal Jewish pluralism**. Jewish civilization has always been defined by a diversity of thought and practice. Strengthening Jewish peoplehood requires fostering a culture that respects and embraces different approaches to Jewish identity, ensuring that ideological and religious differences are a source of richness rather than division.

Back to The Fundamentals of Jewish Civic Education: Building Blocks for Commitment to Content and to *Real*, Not Imagined, Community

The overarching goal of Jewish civic education should be to cultivate a **literate, knowledgeable, meaningful** and engaged relationship with the *real* Jewish world as it exists today. That means moving beyond mythologized narratives and embracing the complexity of Jewish history, identity, and political realities. This vision for Jewish civic education must be structured around distinct and critical educational lanes:

- **Hebrew Language Education:** We are in need of a massive recommitment and investment in Hebrew language education across all Jewish educational settings and ideally in some coordinated fashion. Fundamentally, fluency in Hebrew is essential to engaging deeply with Jewish culture, beliefs, music, literature, and debate. Learners must, at the very least, be minimally proficient in the language of the Jewish people, otherwise they have opted to stand outside of it before they have even had a chance to be a part of it. Understanding conversational Hebrew should be the lowest barrier to entry to consume, engage with, and debate the core issues facing contemporary Jews, not to mention Israel's politics, people and culture. Our institutions have loosened the expectation that “serious Jews” can converse in the Jewish language and by doing so, we leave them standing on the outside. We must unflinchingly reinvest in Hebrew fluency.
- **Historical Literacy:** A deep understanding of Jewish identity requires a rooted knowledge of the past. The complexities of the present can only be fully grasped when we trace the historical forces that have shaped them. This is why Jewish history education must be reclaimed as a foundational, prioritized commitment in all of our educational environments— it must be the floor of our expectations, not a “nice to have.” A literate and knowledgeable Jewish individual requires fluency in the full arc of Jewish history, spanning Antiquity, the medieval period, and early modern

times if we are to have any hope of equipping future generations with the tools to understand the challenges facing Jews today.

- Every Jewish educational space must re-center a structured, rigorous approach to Jewish historical literacy. It must include without limiting it to, nor narrowly focus on, the emergence of Political Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel.
- A full and unflinching engagement with history demands that we also confront competing narratives, including Palestinian claims of the “Naqba,” contested territories, and the debates around various political solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is an undeniable reality that the State of Israel was established on land that was also envisioned as a Palestinian state. Pretending that avoiding these historical and contemporary debates “protects” or “educates” our students is not only misguided—it is a dereliction of our responsibility. True education does not shy away from controversy and complexity; it engages with it directly, equipping learners with the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the world with intellectual honesty and historical integrity.
- **Centering Existential Debates and Understanding Israel’s Sociological Fabric:** Every serious Jew must understand the sociological fabric of American Jewish life, and of Israel’s—its ethnic, religious, linguistic, and political diversity, including fluency with the 20% of Israeli society that does not identify as Jewish, as well as the populations over whom Israel exercises sovereignty. This demands direct engagement with the debates that reflect Israel’s complexity, rather than superficial narratives. Jewish education must embrace—not avoid—the most pressing and contentious discussions shaping Jewish and Israeli society today. Instead of ceding these conversations to activists or extremists, Jewish education should provide structured, thoughtful engagement that allows students to explore multiple perspectives, analyze competing claims, and grapple with difficult realities - and offer them a chance to think through their own conclusions. A serious Jewish civics educational agenda would define the core debates of our time, and invite Jews of all ages and persuasions to be part of these critical conversations.

Special Addendum: A Call to Action to Deepen Engagement with Liberal Jews in America

The American Jewish community is witnessing a surge of interest in Jewish life, with many initiatives successfully engaging younger and liberal Jews. However, many of these initiatives either sidestep Israel altogether or approach it in ways that do not address the hard issues head on. This gap leaves a critical dimension of Jewish peoplehood unaddressed. If we fail to engage this constituency in thoughtful, nuanced, and values-

driven conversations about Israel, we risk losing them to ideological frameworks that lack the depth and historical grounding of Jewish peoplehood. Jewish civic education must rise to this challenge, integrating the democratic, ethical, and justice-oriented principles that resonate with liberal Jews while providing a space for honest and sophisticated exploration of Israel's past, present, and future.

Jewish Citizenship for a New Era

Jewish citizenship, especially in perilous times, requires a commitment to education that is rigorous, honest, and inspiring. If we fail to provide a structured and meaningful framework for Jewish civic education, we risk further fragmentation and alienation among Jewish communities worldwide.

By fostering nuanced, literate, and engaged Jewish communities, we can cultivate a future where Jewish identity is not merely about survival, but about thriving. We must reimagine an educational framework that invites next generations to not only inherit but to actively shape the Jewish world of tomorrow.

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Back to Basics: Critical Moments in Israel-Diaspora Relations

Jeffrey R Solomon

The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations....We appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the age-old dream-the redemption of Israel.

14 May, 1948

The Jews of the United States, as a community and as individuals, have only one political attachment, and that is to the United States of America. They owe no political allegiance to Israel. In the first statement which the Representative of Israel made before the United Nations after her admission to that international organization, he clearly stated, without any reservation, that the State of Israel represents and speaks only on behalf of its own citizens, and in no way presumes to represent or speak in the name of the Jews who are citizens of any other country. We the people of Israel, have no desire and no intention to interfere in any way with the internal affairs of Jewish communities abroad....As democrats we can all agree, in the most friendly way, to differ on some points while rejoicing in the many others in which we are in complete agreement.

Letter from D Ben Gurion to Jacob Blaustein, 2 October 1956

"The Jewish people are one family, and we must stand together, regardless of where we live....As Prime Minister of Israel, I feel a deep responsibility not just to the citizens of Israel but to Jews around the world. We must ensure their safety, dignity, and connection to our homeland."

Binyamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel

WASHINGTON-Prime Minister Netanyahu has wrapped up a meeting with Evangelical American community leaders in Washington....Netanyahu is not currently scheduled to meet with American Jewish leaders, with whom he has had a rockier relationship over the years.

The Times of Israel, February 3, 2025

As has been documented through the Peoplehood Papers series, there are significant complications in defining the parameters of "Jewish," both in Israel and the Diaspora. As we face a generational challenge to so much of what we hold dear in this relationship, we need to understand that this Government is redefining its relationship to the body politic of Israel, and, no less, the larger Jewish world. Using President Rivlin's framing of the four tribes within Israel, we see how this right wing coalition is built on division. Whether stepping back on issues of culture and language or attempting to diminish the healthy checks and balances presumed in liberal democracy, the Israeli public is under threat and has clearly expressed its concerns. At the very same time, the Government has eviscerated its relationship with Rivlin's fifth tribe: the Jewish Diaspora. There is little evidence that the Government cares about the relationship, as evidenced by the recent time spent with American Christian leaders while not meeting with American Jewish leaders, the abrogation of a carefully designed compromise on prayer at the Western Wall and the appointment of a language-clumsy Minister of Diaspora Affairs, who consistently demonstrates his lack of understanding or commitment to Jewish peoplehood.

Our shared history is filled with amazing examples of the miracles that can occur when Israel and Diaspora Jews align. Just ask the 900,000 participants in Taglit/Birthright Israel, whose commitment to Judaism, Israel and the Jewish people was transformed by the experience. Ask the olim from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Syria and Yemen, none of whom would be there were it not for multinational diplomatic and economic efforts led by Israel and Diaspora Jewish communities.

This amazing alliance is rooted in the principles of Zionism; the Zionism so artistically crafted in the establishment documents. It is those shared Jewish values that have redefined global Jewish thought and behaviors to place Israel in the center of Diaspora education. Yet, despite almost eighty years of a miraculous rebirth of the nation, both as a political entity and a sociological one, gross political calculations have placed it under existential stress.

I, for one, bought into the triangle implied in the Declaration: liberal democracy, fairness and peace. While not a citizen and very clear about my limitations as a Diaspora Jew to be but a limited partner in the Zionist enterprise, I have both agency and a voice in expressing my expectations for the State. We need to become more serious about the mechanisms that exist in which we can undertake those expressions.

In the past several years, any number of initiatives have emerged to bring Israelis and the Jews of the Diaspora closer. Among these are the work of the Ruderman Foundation, ENTER: the Jewish Peoplehood Alliance, The London Initiative, Global Jewry. An active Jewish Peoplehood Coalition exists in Israel. ANU, the Museum of the Jewish People, is working diligently to achieve more in this arena. Yet data indicate that things are moving in the wrong direction.

Among the steps required to change this reality include:

- Building the teaching of the Diaspora into Israel educational curriculum;
- Creating global standards for peoplehood education in all Jewish education (see 18x18, and effort to identify the eighteen principles that every Jewish 18 year old in the world should know, as managed by M2 in Jerusalem);
- In the Diaspora, treating the teaching of Israel less like a Jewish Disneyland and more like the layered reality it is;
- Expanding dramatically mifgash opportunities at all ages so that the family gets to know one another;
- Creating a meaningful “Reverse Birthright” so that Israelis understand the rich Jewish life and communities that exist outside of Israel.

As with all debates for the sake of Heaven, we need to engage with honesty and respect, but with the certainty that, as with most families, disagreement need not lead to disunity. Our shared history, values and destiny will overcome any arguments of the moment. But agency and voice must be a prerequisite for a loving global relationship.

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A Divided People: World Jewry and the Internal Crisis in Israeli Society

Nadav Tamir

A dangerous and widening chasm is emerging between the Israeli government and liberal Jews worldwide. This chasm reflects profound questions about Israel's democratic and Jewish identity and poses a challenge to Jewish peoplehood that can no longer be ignored.

A Growing Rift

For decades, Jewish communities around the world viewed Israel as a unifying project, a beacon for Jewish survival and shared values. However, recent developments, such as the attacks on Israel's judicial independence, the rise of the politics of Jewish supremacy, and policies promoting annexation and segregation, have caused significant disillusionment among many Jews outside Israel, who still understand what it means to be a minority.

Many Jews, particularly in the U.S., feel alienated by the departure from the founding ideals enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence, which was a crucial element in their identification with Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people.

Most Jews around the world identify with principles of "Tikun Olam"—social justice, pluralism, and compassion—while Israeli politics increasingly prioritize nationalism, religious orthodoxy and territorial expansion. This divergence has strained the bonds that once united world Jewry.

Recent voting patterns lay bare this divide, in which many Jews in Israel are increasingly alienated from the key trends of the largest Jewish community outside Israel in North America. While around 70% of American Jews supported Kamala Harris in the last presidential election, surveys indicate that 80% of Israeli Jews preferred Trump.

The widespread support for Trump among Israelis, which disregarded the antisemitic currents surrounding him and his disrespect for democracy, is a symptom of a deeper trend. As Israel becomes more isolated and the threat of international tribunals looms, it becomes easier to find solace in the embrace of those who "launder" their xenophobia and authoritarianism through their "support" for the Israeli government. Thus, populist leaders such as Orbán in Hungary, Le Pen in France, and Wilders in the Netherlands are celebrated by Israel's right-wing government.

The mostly liberal global Jewish community sees itself as being at the forefront of the fight for democracy and against rising antisemitism. They are very concerned by the anti-democratic sentiment and antisemitism propagated by members of the Trump administration and by its supporters in the white supremacy movement around the world.

They also feel shock and betrayal at antisemitism in the margins of the progressive movement, which has manifested itself in demonstrations and acts of violence against Jews since October 7th. At the same time, many are horrified by how the Israeli Right resorts to 'cancel culture,' wielding accusations of antisemitism against those who express legitimate criticism of Netanyahu's government's policies, or against those who are simply ignorant about the Jewish connection to "Eretz Israel."

Challenges for World Jewry

The current crisis in Israel presents a challenge for World Jewry. Should Jews outside Israel speak out against policies they believe contradict Jewish values? Can they do so without being seen as opposing Israel itself? These questions are particularly pressing as the traditional relationship between Israel and the Diaspora has evolved.

Historically, Jewish communities have offered unconditional support for Israeli governments, particularly during times of conflict. Israel was once a poor and weak state, stretching out its hand in peace. At that time, unconditional support made sense. Today Israel is a military superpower and has one of the strongest economies in the world. Moreover, Israel rejected peace proposals such as the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and left moderate Palestinians high and dry while financially supporting Hamas. It became more evident since the traumatic events of October 7th.

A Call for Engagement

World Jewry must recognize its responsibility in this moment of crisis. The principle of "areivut hadadit" (mutual responsibility) obligates Jews to care for one another, transcending national borders. Silence in the face of Israel's internal challenges risks undermining the very essence of Jewish peoplehood. Practical steps for engagement include:

Acknowledging the Crisis

Diaspora Jews must acknowledge the profound divisions within Israeli society and their implications for the global Jewish community.

The conflation of support for Israel with an endorsement of its government's policies alienates many Jews. Just as Jewish organizations are vocal when it comes to religious

pluralism, they should allow a pluralism of views regarding the challenges to the future of Israeli democracy and the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian people.

Most Jews outside Israel believe that just as Israelis can oppose their government, diaspora Jews can be pro-Israel while opposing Israeli government policies. Refusing to accept this distinction marginalizes many Jews and leaves Israeli liberals deserted.

Exercising Political Influence to Impact Foreign Policy: Liberal Jews should learn from the right-wing how to impact the positions of their governments on Israel and advocate for policies that support Israel as they envision it—democratic and at peace. They should not be discouraged by the tendency of Jewish organizations to avoid politics, which in practice means maintaining the current destructive trends.

Supporting Israeli Civil Society

Many Israelis are actively fighting to preserve their nation's democratic and Jewish character. Liberal Jews around the world should support these efforts and partner with Israeli initiatives aligned with these values. American or Hungarian Jews, for example, who are fighting for their democracies against populist leaders, should work shoulder to shoulder with like-minded Israelis.

A Path Forward

Strengthening the mutual engagement of Jews inside and outside Israel requires a renewed commitment to shared liberal values. This involves embracing criticism as an act of love and concern, not as a rejection of Israel. By building on shared values, world liberal and progressive Jewry can strengthen their connection with Israel while advocating for its democratic and Jewish future.

This moment calls for courage and clarity. Jewish communities worldwide must act decisively to ensure that Israel remains a homeland that reflects the values of justice and human dignity. Only by working together as liberal Jews – Israelis and non-Israelis - can we uphold the vision that has guided us for generations and ensure a future rooted in shared purpose.

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Between a Whisper and a Megaphone: Supporting Young Israeli and American Jews in Speaking Heart to Heart

Becky Voorwinde

In my work with young American Jews, I've come to observe that many describe questioning as an essential aspect of being Jewish. Yet, even as they cherish the rabbis and teachers who instilled in them a Jewish love of asking questions - *ma nishtana?* - there's one domain these same young people often report that they've been discouraged to question - Israeli politics and Israeli internal affairs.

Some young American Jews find this taboo around questioning Israeli affairs to be logical and others find it limiting. For those who find this taboo logical, they most commonly see the role of American Jews as one of supporter and protector - avoiding topics that would be insensitive to the unique security and geopolitical challenges that Israelis face. For those who find this taboo limiting, they most commonly see the role of American Jews as one of truth tellers - focusing on themes of justice and inclusion. The tone of discourse is drastically different depending on the attitude one holds: Respectively, one uses a whisper, the other a megaphone.

However, in the eyes of most Israelis, the authority to opine is one-directional. If you ask them whether they believe American Jews should *also* have a say in Israeli affairs, they typically say no. But, if you ask most young Israelis whether Israeli Jews should have a say in Jewish American affairs - for example, a public condemnation of intermarriage or assimilation - they typically say yes. Perhaps these attitudes about who can opine on what issues are rooted in a cynicism towards the role that conversation can play as a catalyst for change. Instead, "having a say" is seen as armchair speculation - a form of judgment without any productive outcome.

This paradox of who and what can and cannot be questioned has proven especially tricky when conducting joint educational programming for young Israeli and young American Jews. We must be vigilant in how we design these encounters in order to avoid two extremes - on one end, conversations that are unfettered and insensitive; on the other end, conversations that lack substance and purpose. To ensure that these encounters are focused on topics of importance - we must prize candor and honesty in

both directions and we must provide participants with the necessary skills and mindset to have productive conversations.

As educators we must encourage and support American Jews and Israeli Jews to speak heart to heart.

In our educational work at The Bronfman Fellowship, we approach encounters between Jewish Americans and Israelis as a meeting of equals. For four decades, we have brought together young Jewish leaders from North America and Israel with an aim towards long-term relationships and to cultivate a sense of *areyvut* (mutual responsibility).

Here are several approaches that we have developed and adapted over the years, in order to foster a more honest and trusting dynamic between Israelis and Americans.

1. **Seek and offer greater context.** In 2019 we changed the name of our joint seminars from "*Mifgashim*" to "Context Seminars." We realized that much of what we were providing in these joint seminars is a wider perspective – greater *context*. Successful joint encounters are ones in which each participant can gain greater understanding of the "other", while also more clearly understanding their own society.

The new title of these seminars signals to participants that they should seek to understand the context from which someone else is speaking and that they should aim to explore the background and context of complex topics and issues as a prerequisite for greater understanding and problem solving.

The word context comes from the Latin for "to weave together," a powerful metaphor for the work of Jewish pluralism: to create an intricate quilt that reflects and beautifies the many distinct threads that make up the Jewish collective, without tearing any connections nor valuing some above others. The *weaving together* is the task of Jewish peoplehood.

Our joint seminars are situated within the explorations and travel that each cohort undertakes in both their own home country and the other country. When our Israeli fellows visit the US each spring, they visit Jewish communities that look very different from their own and hear from guest speakers who challenge their perceptions. Because they have accessed more context about the Americans' realities, they are primed for richer and more energetic interactions with their American peers.

For example, I recall an especially poignant discussion at a Context Seminar when an Israeli fellow, who had been raised all his life to believe that Reform Jews are one step away from leaving Judaism, referenced being challenged by seeing the vibrancy of Central Synagogue in Manhattan and meeting with Rabbi Angela Buchdahl. This then reopened a conversation about personal status in Israel. Whereas months earlier

in a conversation with the Americans, this Israeli fellow resisted the conversation, he now listened closely and sensitively as an American fellow of patrilineal descent explained her pain in not being “counted” as Jewish at the Kotel. His overall opinion did not change; but changing minds is not the goal. The enhanced context enabled him to feel and express empathy for his American friends and to better understand how personal status issues in Israel also impact American Jews.

2. **Emphasize asking questions and listening.** If you believe that the person you are speaking with is your equal and worthy of care, then you must find a way to speak honestly with that person while limiting moralizing or judgment. Likewise, if you trust that the person speaking to you is your equal and sharing from a place of care, then you must find a way to listen to them without defensiveness or judgment.

“Listening in a way that creates trust means opening oneself - one’s inner world - to the voices and experiences of others. And, by doing so, taking the risk of being changed by coming to know them,” (p. 142) writes Carol Gilligan and Jessica Eddy in their essay *“The Listening Guide: Replacing Judgment With Curiosity.”* We have developed a series of workshops that provide participants with tools for listening and asking questions, allowing them to practice and develop these skills before the joint seminars. We directly address the immense responsibility and risks associated with listening and give participants the space to recognize the rewards that can come from deep listening.

Our participants also practice asking one another open-ended questions. The power of open-ended questions transformed an especially difficult group conversation in the summer of 2023, during Israel’s democracy protests. The discussion began with our Israeli students sharing their opinions on the proposed Supreme Court reforms. These were complex and challenging issues for Israelis to make sense of and discuss with one another. The Americans asked open-ended questions as a follow-up, many of which had the beauty of coming from a wisely “naive” standpoint. For young American Jews, these issues can sometimes appear clearer because they’re looking at them from afar with less emotional weight. This led to intense but helpful cross-talk between the Israelis as they tried to answer the Americans together.

A powerful moment came when an Israeli in favor of judicial reform who spoke limited English struggled to translate his complex idea. An Israeli who strongly opposed judicial reform jumped in and carefully translated, checking back multiple times to make sure she was felicitous to his intended meaning. She seemed to have more empathy for the “other side” as a result of struggling to make clear his point. And, after the session she told one of our educators that she didn’t think a conversation like that would have been civil or even possible between the Israelis

had the Americans not been there to add more openness and curiosity. It was a beautiful moment of pluralism at work.

3. **Explore shared stakes.** The dynamic between those who live inside and outside Israel has been both fraught and essential throughout Jewish history. Sometimes the power between them has been more or less equal; at other times, it has been asymmetrical.

Fellows study together examples and sources from throughout Jewish history. They explore the question of authority and power, center and periphery, and dependency and interdependence as they compare Talmudic stories from the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. They analyze the famous exchange between Jacob Blaustein and David Ben-Gurion from the 1950's. And they grapple with art, literature and poetry on topics of shared interest. Through these sources we invite participants to directly discuss questions like: *Do American Jews owe political allegiance to Israel? How much responsibility does Israel have for American Jews? What expectations do we have of one another today? What kinds of legitimizing do we seek of our Jewish identities from others?*

Inviting participants to search for a new paradigm for the relationship between Israeli and American Jews empowers them to develop a sense of responsibility towards the future of the Jewish people. It gives permission to see these relationships as ever evolving and to see themselves as part of this story, so they can create a vision for what it can be in the future.

Towards a New Dynamic: Heart-to-Heart

Since October 7, Jewish communities worldwide have been grappling with profound pain, fear, and division. For many young Jews, the old paradigms of discourse between American and Israeli Jews no longer fit. They are searching for something deeper—an opportunity to understand, to ask hard questions, and to build trusting relationships. Strengthening the skills of listening and question-asking in advance of and during encounters between Israelis and Americans allows participants to gain more context and understanding and enhances a willingness to take into consideration the needs and experiences of others when solving the problems of today and shaping a future with creativity, resiliency and the value of Jewish peoplehood.

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Repairing Israel's Internal Rifts: Why it Should Matter to World Jewry

Dov Waxman

In Israel's early decades, it seemed, at least from afar, that its small society was highly cohesive, remarkably so given the diverse origins of its mostly immigrant population. But as Israel's population has grown, so too have the divisions within Israeli society. Nowadays, far from appearing unified, Israeli society looks more like a collection of different 'tribes,' each wary of the other and occasionally outright hostile. A decade ago, in 2015, Israel's then-president, Reuven (Ruvi) Rivlin, famously described Israeli society as comprising "four tribes": secular Jews, religious Zionists, ultra-Orthodox Jews (Haredim), and Arabs. Rivlin called for greater social unity and warned that growing rifts between these tribes threatened Israel's democracy and economy and even the very future of the country. Unfortunately, since then these rifts have only continued to widen and relations between the different tribes have become even more fractious and combustible. The shock, horror, and trauma that all Israelis experienced as a result of the massacre perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, 2023, brought about a brief moment of unity and shared grief, but this was soon overtaken by angry recriminations over responsibility for the worst security failure in Israel's history and by bitter disagreements over the Netanyahu government's conduct of the subsequent war in Gaza. Even the excruciating plight of the Israeli hostages held in Gaza could not unite Israelis as they increasingly argued over whether to continue the war until Prime Minister Netanyahu's promised "total victory" or accept a ceasefire agreement with Hamas that would free the hostages. And the steadily growing number of Israeli soldiers killed in Gaza along with the prolonged mobilization of reserve soldiers further strained social relations in Israel, as some segments of Israeli society, notably religious Zionists, bore a greater burden and paid a higher price in lives than others. Longstanding resentment towards Haredim—who mostly do not serve in the IDF—has intensified, and Israeli-Jewish attitudes towards Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel (who also do not serve in the IDF) have worsened, with young Israeli Jews in particular expressing high levels of hate and fear toward Arabs.

For Jews living outside Israel, who are increasingly worried about rising antisemitism in their own countries, Israel's internal rifts may appear to be none of their business or

at least not something they should worry about, let alone address. Although the vast majority of world Jewry remains emotionally attached to Israel and cares deeply about its future, this concern has rarely led them to focus their attention or resources on Israel's social divisions. Most Jews around the world either continue to uncritically and unconditionally support Israel politically and financially, or channel their efforts into defending Israel's embattled democracy or promoting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Only a relatively small number of Jewish philanthropists and foundations give their money to non-governmental organizations promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence among Israeli citizens (mainly to organizations devoted to improving Arab-Jewish relations in Israel).

It is past time for global Jewry to overcome this widespread tendency to ignore or neglect Israel's internal rifts. Whatever reticence they may feel about involving themselves in Israeli domestic affairs, Jews outside Israel must recognize that ongoing societal polarization in Israel threatens the country's future and everything they care about. If you care about peace, human rights, and democracy, then you cannot ignore the deepening divisions in Israeli society because they undermine Israeli democracy and make Israeli-Palestinian peace harder to achieve. For Israel to become a stable liberal democracy and have peace with the Palestinians, its internal rifts must be narrowed if not healed.

Just consider the fact that by 2040, Arabs and Haredim are projected (by the country's Central Bureau of Statistics) to constitute the majority of students in Israeli schools. These two groups, who currently comprise roughly one-third of Israel's ten million population (this figure does not include the approximately 3.26 million Palestinians in the West Bank who effectively live under Israeli rule), are the poorest and least integrated in Israeli society; more than a third of them live below the poverty line. They are not Zionists, and they are widely perceived by other Israelis to be demographic threats, and in the case of Arab citizens to be security threats, and in the case of Haredim to be threats to the lifestyle of secular Israeli Jews. If the divide between these two groups and the rest of Israeli society—a divide that has only sharpened since 10/7 and the outbreak of the Gaza War—is not reduced, Israel's impressive economic growth and its already eroding democracy will be imperiled. Unless Arab-Jewish and religious-secular relations improve significantly, therefore, Israel's prosperity and democracy are seriously at risk.

As Israel's nearly six-decades-long occupation of the West Bank becomes ever more entrenched, the independence of its judiciary and media threatened, and the rule of law increasingly eroded, addressing the rifts within Israeli society may seem to some to be a distraction from tackling these worrying developments. But Israel's internal rifts are closely related to all these developments, and they cannot be countered without

addressing them. Societal divisions fuel polarization, erode trust in institutions, and exacerbate political conflicts. Left unattended, they can even sow the seeds for civil war, as the experience of Israel's neighbor, Lebanon, tragically attests. While Israeli society is not yet as fractured as Lebanon's, the current trends shaping Israeli society should concern anyone who wants to avoid the 'Lebanonization' (or even 'Balkanization') of Israel.

It is not only Israel's future that is at stake. The values and interests of world Jewry are also at stake. What happens in Israel and what Israel does profoundly impacts the lives of Jews around the world, as the global surge of antisemitism since 10/7 and the beginning of the war in Gaza demonstrates most clearly. Thus, Jews outside Israel not only have a responsibility as Jews—based on the core Jewish principle enunciated in the Talmud, "Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh" (all Jews are responsible for one another)—to influence Israel's future because the largest Jewish community in the world resides there, they also have the right to do so because they will likely be affected by developments in Israel. They simply cannot afford to be passive observers of the fragmentation of Israeli society. Instead, world Jewry must invest its energy and resources to prevent this fragmentation and help heal Israel's social divisions.

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The Challenge of Multiple Narratives and Identities

Sheila Weinberg

We are in uncharted territory. I have two identities that mark my life – being a Jew and being an American. To be a Jew has meant, for many decades, to nurture and support the State of Israel. To be an American has meant to critique the country of the United States and call it to a higher standard.

Why the discrepancy? Several reasons. The United States in my lifetime has been the great power. It has fought aggressive wars, lauded itself as the richest and most powerful nation in the world. Hence, I understood, with many in my generation, that our task was to call our country to task on racial inequities, patriarchy, excessive militarism, poverty and economic injustice. I was active for civil rights. I marched against the Viet Nam War, the Iraq War, the War in Afghanistan. I stood up for the rights of woman and LGBTQI. I acted to protect immigrants. I advocated and marched to reduce the risk of nuclear war and the environmental destruction of the planet.

Perhaps I was emboldened to call out the United States because I knew that I wasn't really an American. Even though my parents were both born here as was I, my primary identification was as a Jew. Being a Jew for me called forth ethics and ideals that I wanted to impart to the US. However, the US was not my homeland. Not really.

I was born in 1946. This is the year that followed the killing of one and a half million Jewish children. I identified deeply with those children. I was taught and felt that only an independent state of our own, a state of the Jewish people, protected by a great Jewish army, could defend Jews into the future. I remember sitting in Hebrew school when I was 12 or 13 and reading the book of Genesis when God promises a land to Abraham, this land, the land of Canaan. I heard that in my innermost guts. That was the State of Israel – my true homeland.

When I was 16 and graduating high school, I begged my parents to let me take what we now call a "gap year." In Israel. They let me do it and it was a wonderful and extremely confusing year. It was 1962. In a sense it foretold some unfolding dilemmas. As a Conservative Jew, there was no counterpart for me in Israel. You could be either Orthodox or secular. I couldn't be either at that time. That lessened the depth of my

devotion to Israel, in favor of the burgeoning activism of the 60's in the US. I resonated to JFK when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what can you do for your country?" To me that meant, how can I bring the values of serving others into reality. My Jewish passion for justice and peace became my primary identity but I could act it out on a universal plane.

1967 brought Israel back into my consciousness. It was a time of great anxiety about the existence of Israel. It was a profound call to action. My husband and I arrived in Israel on the 6th day of the Six Day War to volunteer in a kibbutz that sat below the Golan Heights. A secular kibbutz. This felt right to me. Although I wanted to, we couldn't stay beyond a few months because my husband might have been drafted in the Vietnam War if he let go of his student draft deferment. Another interplay of Jewish and American identity. In those days I joined the jubilation at the annexation of Jerusalem, the return of Judea and Samaria and the amazing Israeli victory and the sense of freedom it offered. Memory of that summer in Israel fueled our Aliyah in 1972 with our two-year-old daughter. From the pinnacle of 1967 we met the valley of tears following the 1973 War.

While we returned to the US in 1974, my entire work life until today has been in the Jewish community. I reconnected with spirituality through the teachings of Martin Buber and Mordechai Kaplan. Kaplan's rejection of the concept of Jews as the "chosen people" allowed me to integrate the universalism of seeking justice for all, based on human equality, and my particular identity as a Jew.

In Israel, in the years after 1967, the various efforts at peace unraveled, the State of Israel came to be led by believers in Jewish chosenness -religious nationalism, the desire to annex and rule the Palestinians grew, and acceptance of militarism as the only valid strategy prevailed. Each of these trends felt antithetical to my Jewishness as an American. Each trend distanced me from Israel, but I continued to love and treasure Israel, the people and the land. I studied there. I visited. My son made Aliyah at one point and was married there.

Ultimately, I discovered a path that made sense to me. I recognized that there were many Israelis who were uncomfortable with the shifts brought about by the occupation. As an American I needed to bond with those people who were in conversation with Palestinians - Israelis who realized that violence was not the way forward. Violence only breeds more violence. Hatred breeds hatred.

I was fortunate to discover a group called "Combatants for Peace." The group was founded in 2006 by Israeli and Palestinian former fighters who decided to uphold the power of non-violence. They met with each other and told each other their stories.

They had to do very intensive spiritual work to resist the fear and anger that the other's story evoked. They were committed to see the other as telling a valid narrative. They acknowledged the existence of more than one narrative. Us- good, you-bad. They practiced seeing the other person as equal, endowed with uniqueness and infinite goodness. In a sense they embodied the rejection of chosenness which is a corollary of racism.

My husband and I joined the first trip the Combatants sponsored in 2018. We met both Israelis and Palestinians and visited some of the places where they were doing joint activism, where they were helping Palestinians gain access to water, or protecting them from attacks by Jewish settlers or building playgrounds for Palestinian children. We heard their stories, and we were deeply moved. When we came home, we shared their stories and eventually developed the Philly chapter of American Friends of Combatants for Peace. We took some local folks on another trip in 2022. We brought some of the Combatants to our community. Lately we had to make do with the Palestinian on zoom for lack of a visa through the American government.

I feel proud to support these courageous men and women. The depth of their encounter with each other inspires my willingness to challenge the Israeli government. These people are living the reality on the ground. I am willing to have them guide my activism as an ally and a supporter. I feel that with the work of the Combatants for Peace I have a pathway to integrate my Jewish values, my love of Israel and my status as an American Jew. I still feel the ancestral fear of insecurity as a Jew. There is a voice that understands the idea that only our military might will protect us. Ultimately, I know that is short sighted, but I am not an Israeli. I do not have the last word. It is very challenging to weave the various strands of these compelling identities into a seamless fabric. I follow my heart to align with those on the ground who share my values and whose courage I so admire.

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A New Model for Israel and the Diaspora

Josh Weinberg

The massacre of October 7, 2023, not only left the State of Israel reeling from the trauma and devastating losses that left no one unscathed but had a large ripple effect throughout the Diaspora communities as well. Many individuals and organized communities immediately swung into action holding vigils, raising money, sending equipment, and lobbying foreign governments to maintain their support. The emergency campaign of the Jewish Federations of North America alone raised over \$850 Million dollars in support of the rebuilding and resettlement efforts so desperately needed. Beyond the efforts to lend support from abroad the magnitude of the attack, and the reaction of the progressive community led many to seek out Jewish community and explore their connection to Jewish peoplehood. Often referred to as October 8th Jews, more and more unaffiliated or unconnected Jews felt a sense of connection. They sought out Jewish learning, the need to be in person at events and services, and even conversion rates increased.

However, none of that is surprising or a new phenomenon. This type of response to crisis much more parallels the response to wars in the past when Diaspora Jewry responded by mobilizing their support and finding inspiration in Israel's struggles. The reaction of the Diaspora community post-October 7 is a remnant of what I will call the "Old School" Israel-Diaspora relationship. This is primarily based on the approach of the father of cultural Zionism, Ahad Ha'am (1856-1927). Ahad Ha'am was convinced of the permanency of the Diaspora, but he believed in the need for a center that would counteract the atomizing tendencies of a scattered worldwide existence.

To Ahad Ha'am, the creation of such a center was a necessity for Judaism, even if there were no poverty or anti-Semitism. In the villages and cities of Palestine, Jews would lead a full life in the spirit of the Jewish national tradition, and this would exercise a revitalizing spiritual effect on the Diaspora.

For that reason Ahad Ha'am called it a spiritual center, "a refuge not for all Jews who need peace and bread," he wrote in 1907, "but for the spirit of the people, for that distinctive cultural form, the result of a historical development of thousands of years

which is still strong enough to live and develop naturally in the future if only the fetters of the Diaspora are removed.”

What would or should a “new school” approach to Israel and the Diaspora look like? For starters, the question is less about whether or not Diaspora Jews should be able to dictate policy in Israel. No, Diaspora Jews, by and large, do not vote in Israel, do not pay taxes, and do not serve in the army. Thus, they should not have a say in official state matters or specific policies. But, the State of Israel and the Zionist enterprise is a project of the entire Jewish people, and so the question of Diaspora influence should be on a different scale.

Diaspora Jewry should be able to have influence on Israeli society in the same way that Israeli society has influence on Diaspora Jewry. So nearly eight decades we have been operating on Ahad Ha’am’s model in which we champion the verse from the book of Isaiah “כי מציון תצא תורה” – “From Zion Torah shall go forth”. Israel has sent thousands of *shlichim* (emissaries) to far flung Diaspora communities to both encourage Jews to come to Israel on *Aliyah* and to provide a sense of Israeli authenticity to foster connection and forge relationships with the Land, People, and State of Israel.

A disciple of Ahad Ha’am, the philosopher Simon Rawidowicz suggests a different model. Rather than one singular spiritual center with radii flowing out from the center to the communities of the world, He suggests two or multiple focal points based on the ancient model of Jerusalem and Bavel.

What are the models that have been successful in Israel, and what models for engaging, creating, and sustaining Jewish life in the Diaspora could be relevant for Israel and vice versa?

“Two that are One,” however, must not be understood as a one-sided obligation; each must mutually recognize the other. The Diaspora of Israel must build the State of Israel with all its strength, even more than it has in the past seventy years, and the State must recognize the Diaspora as of equal value, and an equally responsible co-builder and cocreator of all Jewish life.”

His model, that of an ellipse, suggests that Israel and the Diaspora are on equal footing and have mutually beneficial experiences to offer one another. The Diaspora has much to learn from Israel about Jewish creativity and continuity, but Israel also has what to learn from the Diaspora. Many Israelis have awakened to two realities:

1. After 77 years of existence, having a Jewish State does not inherently mean having a Jewish community, or even a Jewish identity. And that paying taxes to the State will not necessarily provide for one's spiritual and communal needs.
2. The polarizing dichotomy between "Religious" (read: Orthodox) and Secular, no longer answers the needs of the mainstream.

What we have been watching and fostering in Israel is the steady rise of organic *Kehilot*, communities or congregations of people coming together to pray, celebrate holidays and lifecycle events, and take care of one another in their times of need. Jewish communities outside of Israel have created, developed, and constantly reinvented vibrant Jewish communities in a privatized economy. This is the model that Diaspora Jewry will export to Israel.

Our Reform Movement in the Diaspora has been criticized for what some call "Tikkun Olam" Judaism – which is perceived to emphasize the universal aspects of Judaism over the particular. Let's imagine for a moment that Israeli Jewry adopted this "Tikkun Olam" Judaism model. First of all, let it be said that Israel has done more to repair the world internally and externally than many other nations, and we have a lot to be proud of. Israel has the highest per capita percentage of NGOs in the world and has contributed tremendously to many different areas of science, medicine, technology, environmentalism, and more.

With that, many Israelis do not see Judaism as a foundation for morals and values but rather a more tribal or ethnic identity. Liberal movements in the Diaspora can impact Israeli society in ways that go beyond policy and funding sources. The new model is about connecting Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews, learning from each other's experiences, and applying lessons of morality and similar issues albeit in different contexts.

The new model is less about defining clear boundaries on what non-Israelis can/should influence in Israel. Still, rather it should be about how we foster a greater sense of Jewish connection, a renewal of our values and commitment to Jewish peoplehood, and from our place of particularism to reach the universal. The Diaspora is no longer the barren wasteland of suffering bereft of content or spirituality. The creativity in areas of ritual and prayer, systems for caring for one another, learning, and organizing are worthy of translation into the Israeli context. The next generation of Israelis and Diaspora Jews will need to come together to tackle the challenges that we collectively face as Jews and as humans.

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