

The following essay is included in the second Spirited Debate essay collection, “American Jewish Identity and Israel,” and is paired with an essay by Tevi Troy, “Four Wartime Visits to Israel Reveal a Resilient Nation.” To see all the Spirited Debate essays currently published and continue reading about the PRRUCS Religion & Democratic Renewal project, see [Spirited Debate](#).

Confessions of an Anguished Zionist

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After my husband and I returned from a visit to Israel in May, we were repeatedly asked whether we had felt unsafe or frightened. After all, just weeks before our trip, hundreds of Iranian cruise and ballistic missiles rained down on the country before they were intercepted by Israeli defenses, triggering widespread fears of an expanding conflict, while the ongoing Gaza war had sparked renewed violence in the West Bank.

Yes, I would answer, but not because of Israel’s perceived enemies. My moment of terror arose instead from what is sadly an ordinary experience in Jerusalem.

It was about 5 pm on a Saturday afternoon, and my daughter was driving us from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv so that we could attend the massive weekly protests with the families of Israeli hostages still held captive in Gaza. As she inched out of the parking lot onto the street, suddenly young boys surrounded the car, yelling and harassing, lying down on the road in front of us, then jumping up and lying down again, in a frightening, dangerous taunt.

Shabbos! Shabbos!, they cried.

On the Sabbath, streets nearby in a devoutly Orthodox neighborhood are closed to vehicular traffic, but this road was supposed to be open. No matter. These boys—perhaps 8 or 10 years old, dressed in their identifiable white shirts and black pants—obviously knew they could torment us with impunity. Two older men clad in Orthodox garb walked along the sidewalk and never intervened.

We finally made it onto the main street, and our harassers disappeared. We were rattled, and furious. Tension between religious and secular Jews over permissible behavior on the Sabbath is as old as the Jewish state, but as the Orthodox population swells in numbers and political clout, the dynamics are worsening exponentially. The antipathy between these two segments of the Israeli Jewish population—fueled by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s cynical politics and the disproportionate demands of the war in Gaza—threatens to reach the proverbial boiling point.

Jewish history has been plagued for centuries by versions of internecine conflict, most profoundly at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, which forced Jews into exile for millennia. Talmudic rabbis attributed that calamity to *sinat chinam*, a baseless, freewheeling hatred that was endemic to national Jewish life then and, in its contemporary iteration, may represent an existential threat to Israel today.

There is a corollary to *sinat chinam* closer to home that worries me deeply: a quiet, bubbling chasm between those American Jews who fully embrace the current Zionist enterprise and those who are sufficiently anguished by Israel’s government—especially its prosecution of the Gaza war—to simply turn away. I don’t fear that this polarization will become hardened and violent in the diaspora, as it may in Israel. I fear instead that more and more Jews outside of Israel, unable to bear the cognitive dissonance, unable to justify the intolerance and suffering, will minimize their spiritual, cultural, and financial commitment to Zionism or even shed it completely. They won’t be the ones encamping on university lawns or loudly shouting down political candidates—grabbing headlines and stoking unease with rhetoric and tactics that alienate the mainstream. Rather, these silent, anguished Jews will respond by pushing Israel to the margins of their consciousness and perhaps they will stop caring at all.

I don’t want to be one of them. But I struggle with how to maintain my engagement with Israel and the liberal values that define me as an American Jew. I suspect that I am not alone. In fact, I know that I am not.

The centrality of Zionism to American Jewish life has, of course, evolved since the modern movement began in the late 19th century, in concert with the nationalist awakenings of other peoples. “The key idea of Zionism is that Jews constitute a nation, and as such they have not just individual human rights but also a national right to self-determination,” Yuval Noah Harari, an author and professor of history at Hebrew University, wrote recently in *The Washington Post*.

The challenge for American Jews is blending that national right with the liberal values that most of us consider essential to the well-being of *this* nation and our continued place in it. That was not always a given. In the early days of the Zionist movement, it took someone of Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis’s stature to assure his fellow Jews that there was no contradiction between supporting liberal values in America and those same values in a Jewish state. Indeed, Israel’s 1948 Declaration of Independence is an eloquent expression of liberal ideas, guaranteeing all inhabitants of the nation sanctioned by international law with “freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.”

Over time, these shared liberal values—including equality under the law, tolerance of diversity and difference, separation of religion and state—have eroded in Israel (and certainly are threatened, to a lesser extent, here). Yes, absolutely, Israel has all the hallmarks of a democracy with (sometimes very) frequent elections, independent civic institutions, a vibrant free press, a robust civil society, and an open economy that has been the envy of the world. At least that is true for Jews living in Israel; less so for the sizable Palestinian minority residing there. Those democratic values are utterly absent for the three million Palestinians living under continued military occupation of the West Bank, now in its 57th year. The Palestinians’ own corrupt, feeble, emasculated government, propped up for decades by Israel, all but ensures that suffering will not end anytime soon—especially as the number of Jewish settlers in a territory meant for an independent Palestinian state has reached more than half a million at last count, with promises to grow.

The disconnect between Israel’s directional swing to the right propelled by the expanding influence of nationalist, religious settlers and the center-left politics and faith practices of the majority of American Jews has been building for years. So has the disconnect between that reliably liberal mainstream and the Jewish communal establishment dependent on the right-wing wealthy donors it

purports to represent. Back in 2010, the journalist Peter Beinart wrote in *The New York Review of Books*,

Particularly in the younger generations, fewer and fewer American Jewish liberals are Zionists; fewer and fewer American Jewish Zionists are liberal. One reason is that the leading institutions of American Jewry have refused to foster—indeed, have actively opposed—a Zionism that challenges Israel’s behavior in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and toward its own Arab citizens. For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism’s door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead.

At the time, Beinart was excoriated for his essay. Now it seems prescient.

For a while, Hamas’ horrific terror attack on Israel upended everything. American Jews like myself awakened on October 7, 2023, to a sickening new reality: that even Israel, with its sophisticated defense system and technologically advanced military, could not ensure the safety of its citizens. Murder, rape, and torture were visited upon innocent civilians living near the Gaza border, or partying at a music festival. The victims were disproportionately young; some were avowed peace activists; some weren’t even Jewish. No matter. Scores of kidnapped men, women, and children remain imprisoned deep in Hamas’ labyrinth of tunnels, designed to store weapons and human shields, not to protect their own people.

Initially, much of the world grieved alongside Israel, telegraphing support in a flurry of blue-and-white messages, solidarity marches, public statements of woe and resolve. The Israeli government was caught flat-footed and humiliated by its manifest security failures, and into this shameful breach stepped a stunning display by civil society—ordinary citizens who seemed to know in an instant how to help one another, mourn for one another, feed, clothe, house, care for one another. Inspired by this civic energy, American Jews rushed together in common purpose. The divide between Jew and Jew momentarily disappeared.

And even in the immediate aftermath of October 7th, when Israel launched its defensive war and former allies abandoned their Jewish friends, the sense of cohesiveness remained. We found ourselves similarly targeted and inextricably connected. Jewish peoplehood—the clichéd catchphrase of the establishment—suddenly seemed real. Israel regained its place in the center of our diasporic identity.

A Pew Research Center survey released in April found that an overwhelming majority of American Jewish adults—93%—believe that the way Hamas carried out its attacks was unacceptable. More than three-quarters of Jewish adults surveyed, including a majority in every age group, said that Hamas’ reasons for fighting Israel were *not* valid. Nine in ten shared a favorable view of Israelis (though only 54% had a favorable view of the government). Nine in ten also said that discrimination against Jews in the United States had increased.

But beneath this apparent uniformity lay noteworthy generational divisions. Jewish adults under age 35 were far more likely than their older co-religionists to be critical of the Israeli government and the way it has conducted the war in Gaza. Younger Jews were also more likely to express favorable views about the Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority than their elders. Moreover, on many questions, there was a gradual change in attitudes among age groups and even some surprises. For instance, a slightly higher percentage of Jews over 65 (68%) favor U.S. humanitarian assistance to Palestinian civilians than even Jews under 35 (64%).

This survey was conducted in February. Since then, the war in Gaza has claimed many more casualties, humanitarian suffering has persisted, international agencies warn of famine and the spread of disease, and Israeli hostages remain in captivity. As of this writing, deadly fighting punctuates the border between Israel and Lebanon and there is the threat of further violence in the region. In poll after poll, most Israelis do not support their own government. I understand why.

I acknowledge that my broader concerns about the future of Zionism in America emanate from my own anguish and internal conflict.

I am an avowed Zionist who came of age when Israel felt like an endangered, precious miracle. I remember reading Leon Uris's best-selling book *Exodus* as if it were a morality play: Israeli Jews were righteous (and handsome) heroes while Arabs were dishonest villains. The Six-Day War emblazoned Israeli prowess and pride on our American consciousness, and by the time I visited Israel myself, first in college and then on my honeymoon, my connection to the land and its people was secure.

It still is. But with age, time, and changing circumstances, my discomfort has grown. Much the same way that as a white American, I have come to better understand the structural sources of racism that persist today, I have had to grapple with the foundational hypocrisies that continue to torment Israel. How can a democracy include second-class citizens? How can it brutally occupy another people for more than half a century? How is it that a Jew born in Queens can easily rent an apartment in Jerusalem, but a Palestinian born in Jerusalem cannot? How can the start-up nation maintain a security system in the West Bank that continually humiliates Palestinians just trying to go about their lives? How can a nation founded on religious freedom grant veto power to one slender group of Jews—the Orthodox—and dismiss the others, including the liberal denominations that represent most American Jews?

And how can a military dedicated to moral behavior preside over the unspeakable crisis in Gaza today?

Nations, like people, are complex and inherently contradictory, and my questions about Israel do not diminish my steadfast belief in the case for its existence or my loyalty and gratitude to its citizens who put their lives on the line to ensure its future. But throughout my professional career, such questioning has gotten me into big trouble with other Jews, and my experience is reflective of the prevailing notion that to challenge Israel (and its government) is to challenge Jewishness itself. One can flout the foundational tenets of Judaism—its laws, rituals, and obligations—and remain within the communal tent. But the wrong words about Israel can land you in exile.

Critique of one's own people entails risks, and I agonize over the consequences. After all, I don't live in Israel, or vote there, or fight there, nor must I contend with the terror that frequently stalks everyday life. Regarding Israel, American Jews like myself must be humble. (So must Israelis and

their leaders when it comes to interfering in our domestic politics.) We also must be cognizant of the way that our words and voiced frustrations can be used against other Jews, particularly at a time of heightened antisemitism.

But what has happened there in the last few years under Netanyahu's increasingly extremist reign, and now during what seems like an endless, disastrous war, lifts this fraught dynamic to troubling heights. I am torn apart. I had long believed that engagement with Israel, from whatever perch you choose, is an essential feature of modern Jewish life. And I have walked the walk. My children all attended Jewish day school, where assemblies opened with the American and the Israeli national anthems. (Accusations of dual loyalty are spurious—I am an American first and always.) Besides, Israel alone in its tough neighborhood shared our liberal values and still does to a degree. The connection once seemed easy and obvious.

Now it does not. While I have no data (yet) to prove this, I believe that it's not just younger generations, led by firebrand faculty and their impressionable students, who are questioning this connection. It's also more people like me.

My late father, who was raised a strictly Orthodox Jew, confessed once that he wished he could share his parents' complete faith but he could not. I feel the same, sad way when trying to re-imagine the place of Israel in the American Jewish firmament. For many it will remain a North Star, a guiding, inspirational light unto the nations, deserving of unquestioning, steadfast support and love, an essential element of identity. Just as my grandparents didn't question their inherited beliefs and obligations, many American Jews will continue to consider Israel the first and perhaps only star in their universe.

I might wish otherwise, but my worldview is much more complicated, my allegiance repeatedly challenged. And yet I don't want to look up and see only an empty sky; Israel simply cannot fade away into the darkness. Nor do I want to sink into apathy and despair, or watch my community become even more polarized and dysfunctional. The Jewish universe must expand to hold multiple perspectives. Erecting boundaries, labeling dissenters, and employing litmus tests demonstrably

doesn't work—and often leads to further alienation. The only way to prove to Israel-questioning Jews that their questions are legitimate is to legitimate their questions.

Rabbi Aaron Brusso of Bet Torah in Mount Kisco, New York, wrote a smart essay for the Shalom Hartman Institute in June arguing for a more open conversation about Zionism with college kids. “What would it look like to really talk about Zionism not just as an identity but as an idea?” he asked. “An aspirational idea still in process that can't be captured by a politician or a policy or a moment . . . Maybe we would free it from those who want to turn it into a pejorative, free ourselves from having to defend everything done in its name, and open up a conversation of curiosity with our children.”

I'd go further. This open conversation cannot only be directed at college students; it must embrace any Jew grappling with this miraculous, maddening Zionist idea. How does one maintain a state for the Jews that can be a state welcoming anyone? How can Jewish security be maintained without succumbing to Jewish supremacy? These are questions to which American Jews, because we are a tiny minority in this country, may actually have something to contribute.

Jewish institutions must be brave and confident enough to stop policing words and deeds, to stop deciding who is a good Jew and who is not; they must abandon their assumptions that they know what's best for Israel when it's quite clear that right now Israel doesn't know what's best for itself. And we in the diaspora, who find ourselves being blamed for the actions of a nation we care about but do not control, cannot succumb to *sinat chinam*. We must learn to accept that within our families, our synagogues, and our communities there will be a range of views about Zionism—some of which pain us deeply—and that's okay.

To ignore the existence and the accomplishments of the first sovereign Jewish nation in the modern era is foolhardy. Israel is there; it is home to half the world's Jewish population; its ancient, magnetic pull on our spirituality and historical consciousness remains. Just because it is extraordinarily difficult to embrace right now should not mean that we here in America turn our backs. Neither should we turn our backs on each other—even though it is a struggle to find commonality with the kids harassing us on the street in Jerusalem, or for that matter, the Jews yelling hurtful slogans in campus protests.

One of the benefits of belonging to a people existing for millennia is that these challenges have appeared again and again through history. Of course, the circumstances are never quite the same—it's been centuries since Jews had political and military power in their own land—but they are close enough to offer guidance. When faced with examples of *sinat chinam*, the rabbis taught that the response should be *ahavat chinam*: replacing hate with love. Baseless, groundless, freewheeling love.

Learning this does not erase my discomfort or my anguish, nor does it prompt me to relinquish my core liberal values. But it does offer a path forward. If, as Rabbi Brusso teaches, we think of Zionism not as an identity but an idea, an aspirational idea, then I can begin to distinguish between a sometimes-ugly reality and the beautiful dreams behind it.

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