

American Jewish Liberals Need to Tread with Caution

by [Ardie Geldman](#) (March 2023)



Moses and Aaron, Morris Hirshfield, 1944

In a recent [essay](#), author Jonathan Tobin's opines that "The challenge for (American Jewish) liberals is not just how to cope with an Israel led by Netanyahu, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, or to put aside the partisan [hyperbole](#) branding it as a fascist or fundamentalist tyranny. It's accepting the fact that Israel is not a Middle Eastern variant of the blue state enclaves where most American Jews live."

Tobin's essay was written in the context of Israel's present

internal political strife. What is currently taking place is clearly the country's most threatening domestic turmoil since the Israel government's controversial permanent expulsion in August 2005 of some 8,000 Jewish Israeli citizens from their homes that were spread among 21 communities in Gush Katiff, the north-east corner of the Gaza Strip.

Israel's present government was elected on November 1, 2022. It consists of, for the first time in the country's history, a coalition of all right-wing and religious parties. Almost immediately following its victory the new government set out to implement a number of pre-election campaign proposals. The most controversial of these has set off a nationwide political firestorm. It has resulted in massive weekly street protests and bitter condemnation, even predictions of economic collapse and civil war, from sectors across Israeli society.

As summarized in a Wikipedia [article](#), the proposed reforms "seek to curb the judiciary's influence over lawmaking and public policy by limiting the Supreme Court's power to exercise judicial review, granting the government control over judicial appointments and limiting the authority of government legal advisors. If adopted, the reform would grant the Knesset the power to override Supreme Court rulings by a simple majority, diminish the ability of the court to conduct judicial review of legislation and of administrative action, prohibit the court from ruling on the constitutionality of basic laws, and change the makeup of the Judicial Selection Committee so that a majority of its members are appointed by the government."

Across the ocean, over 5,000 miles away, Jews in America have joined in denouncing these proposed reforms and the leaders behind it. As among many of the Israeli protestors, the vast majority whose political views are to the left of center, American Jewish liberals predict an end to the judicial protection of minority groups among other pending abrogations of social justice. The proposed changes would make their

relationship with the Jewish state, as non-Orthodox Jews, even more contentious than at present. As the world's only "Jewish country," American Jews feel the need to see Israel reflecting their own values, liberal, inclusive and not too religious; but this is an unrealistic conceit.

Over the years I have considered a typology of the contemporary, English-speaking Diaspora consisting of three general categories between which individuals may, and do, migrate. In the first, Jews live what might be called a maximum Jewish life, a second in which they profess positive Jewish feelings but their Jewish knowledge is middling to thin and their practice is sporadic, and a third in which being Jewish has little, if any, meaning to them. How might each of these groups relate to current political developments in Israel?

Jews in the first category are not only committed to Jewish living but also to a robust and deeply meaningful Jewish future. Towards this goal, as per the expression, these Jews not only talk the talk, they walk the walk. Their Jewish commitment is reflected in almost everything they do.

Correct, this category includes mostly, albeit not exclusively, Orthodox Jews who run the gamut from cloistered charedi communities to others who are traditionally observant but who also embrace modernity.

These Jews are Jewishly well-educated in their youth and many continue their study of classical Jewish texts into adulthood; thus, they are at least semi-fluent in Hebrew. They organize their lives around the Jewish calendar. They attend synagogue weekly, if not daily. That they observe Shabbat, the holidays, the laws of kashrut and of family purity may be taken as a given. As a rule, they maintain a birth rate above the 2.1 replacement level and they abjure out-marriage. Their lives require the surroundings of a Jewish community and its institutions. Being Jewish rests at the core of their identity.

Those within this group often maintain personal ties within Israel. They have studied here for one or more years and or have children who are studying or have studied here. Some own property and plan to retire to Israel. It strains the imagination to think that anyone in this group would consider abandoning their support for Israel over the political complexion of its elected government.

Indeed, during the country's first three decades when Israel's governments were of a socialist bent, as well during the tenure of the last government in which a Muslim Arab citizen, a self-professed anti-Zionist, served as a cabinet minister, religiously observant and right leaning American Jews never threatened to give up on the Jewish state. This is because their support for and identification with Israel has always been unconditional and they remain wedded to its existence.

But not all Jews in this first category are religiously observant. Certainly, there are secular Jews living in the Diaspora who consider themselves ardent Zionists and would support the State of Israel through thick and thin. Among these are the many professional Jews who serve the Jewish community. They are employed in Jewish schools, synagogues, federations, philanthropic foundations, assorted other community organizations and media. Their work environment and responsibilities often involve Israel. Whatever their personal religious beliefs or practice, whatever their level of Jewish knowledge, they recognize the importance of a strong, sovereign and independent Jewish nation state after nearly two millennia of Jews having suffered so much persecution and butchery.

Add to these ardent Jewish supporters of Israel the hundreds of thousands of Christian Zionists in North America and even more around the world. Their fervent dedication to Israel resembles that of many committed Jews.

At this point I prefer to jump to the third category. This is

a group whose growth rate implies it becoming the largest of the three within one to two generations. It lies opposite the first and is populated mainly by younger Jews of whom a considerable number are already on the threshold of total assimilation into American society. Many are in fact no longer Jewish as determined by halacha, Jewish law. They may consider themselves Jewish, but this fact is as of little practical significance to them as the color of their hair or eyes; being Jewish is merely a social category into which they were born.

In recent surveys many in this group identify themselves as being “just Jews” or “Jews of no religion.” They claim no particular Jewish community affiliation. Typically, those in this group have had little or no formal Jewish education; possibly a few hours a week until age 12 or 13 in a Reform or non-denominational Jewish school. Much, if not most, of their knowledge about Judaism and Jewish history has been acquired through mass media or popular books and films, the same as many gentiles. This has resulted in many having absorbed misinformation and, often enough, a stereotyped and negative image of the Jew.

Not surprisingly, some Jews in this category come to feel that being Jewish is a social burden, best to stay Jewishly invisible, especially at present when the trend in identity politics is to place Jews among “white supremacists.” Due to the burgeoning rate of intermarriage among those in this group, between 60 -70%, the odds are that their grandchildren will wholly blend into the American masses. Once fully assimilated, they may never learn that their predecessors, just a few generations earlier, were Jewish, even Orthodox. In his recent [review](#) in *Commentary* of Tom Stoppard’s current Broadway drama *Leopoldstadt*, Howard Husock opines “Non-Orthodox Jews are melting away into the broader society.” It comes as no surprise, therefore, that most Jews within this category would have no trouble disassociating themselves from Israel if they believe it has lost its liberal democratic

values. It is no surprise because they have never felt a special connection.

The commitment to Israel by members of the remaining, or as it were, middle, category, as compared with the first, is not based upon ideological reasons. That is to say, it is neither due to any strong theological belief nor to a conservative political orientation. However, in contrast to the least affiliated group, these Jews harbor a special feeling towards the Jewish state for whatever reason; for them Israel is not just another country. However, this amorphous feeling is what limits their attachment to Israel. Israel is important to them, but it is only one of their Jewish identity references, none of which plays a truly major role in their lives.

Because the members of this cohort are generally older, age fifty and above, many tend to relate to Israel through the hazy lens of nostalgia; their image of Israel remains the idealized pioneering country of Leon Uris's novel *Exodus*. These Jews came of age hearing stories of Israeli heroism, 1948, 1967, 1973, Entebbe. This was the Israel that for decades instilled American Jews with pride. But, they say, this is not the Israel of today. Israel has changed ... for the worse. Over the years it seems to have lost its liberal and democratic character. Israel today, they charge, denies equal rights to non-Orthodox Jewish religious denominations while Orthodox religious extremists continue to gain power in government. It oppresses the Palestinian Arabs and treats Arab Israelis as second-class citizens. It is expanding upon land belonging to another people. Israel is regularly sanctioned by the United Nations and is harshly criticized by social justice organizations for alleged human rights violations. The Israel of the 21st century, and never more so than under its new, fully right-wing government, stands in direct conflict with the liberal values of the majority of America's Jews. As these Jews see it, it is not a matter of their abandoning Israel, Israel has abandoned them.

The Jews in this middle category are at a crossroads; they may need to make a choice that will most likely be influenced by their social milieu. Many may choose loyalty to their liberal values over support for an Israel that they view as having become problematic; their impermanent emotions will give way to the surrounding zeitgeist. Others, however, while they voice their dissatisfaction, will nevertheless stay the course. They will maintain their principled support for Israel in the hope that something will happen, sooner rather than later, to bring down the current government and that its successor will be more acceptable in their eyes.

One can understand the angst of those who might choose to walk away, but to what end? What will they have achieved? For as much as the State of Israel owes to the Jews of the Diaspora, and to the Jews of America in particular, in return for their many years of enormous financial and tireless political support, at some point during the last two decades Israel has moved beyond this dependency. The familiar patron/protege era is behind us. While the continuing support of Diaspora Jews is certainly welcome, it is no longer existential.

This opinion is contested by many Jews outside of Israel. They cling to an atavistic view common among Jews who are old enough to remember Israel's formative years. Long-time Jewish supporters of Israel have difficulty accepting that the umbilical cord of financial support connecting the North American Jewish community has shriveled and that the Jewish state, like most established countries, is now capable of survival by dint of its own resources.

According to the Accountant General of the Finance Ministry, Israel recorded an impressive budget surplus of \$2.8 billion in 2022, or 0.6 percent of GDP. Extrapolating from a 2015 joint study by researchers at Indiana and Tel-Aviv universities, the total amount of philanthropic donations contributed by North American Jews to the State of Israel in 2022 was just under \$2 billion dollars, i.e., less than one-

half of one percent of Israel's GDP. Clearly, by employing greater economic discipline and more judicious budgeting, for example, increasing government allocations in the areas of health, education, social welfare and culture, the State of Israel, after some adjustment, could wean itself away from even this Diaspora support.

Israel continues to benefit through relations with the American government (though no longer in the form of Third World-type financial aid), but whatever American intervention the country receives is part of a complex relationship in which the United States is deeply partnered with Israel and in some cases even dependent upon it. And for all the many barbs directed at Israel by the EU, Israel remains closely involved in many ways with many European governments and institutions. Ditto for African and Asian countries.

And then there are the Abraham Accords that are already bearing fruit in a number of areas and which we Israelis have good reason to believe are just the beginning of a reset in our relations with our Arab neighbors. Iran, yes, remains an existential threat, but American Jewish support cannot help us in that department. In fact, most Israelis are of the opinion that the now moribund Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the "Iran Deal," so strongly promoted by the Obama Administration and widely supported at the time by America's Jews, posed a real threat to Israel. And speaking of political support, it pains me to say that the most fervent North American advocates of the Jewish state today are conservative Christians, not our Jewish co-religionists.

What would be the consequences if most of America's Jewish liberals were now to distance themselves from Israel? Well, what would not happen is any fundamental changes in the goals set by Israel's present government, other than changes that might be brought about due to pressure from Israelis themselves. Israel and its western allies are too entangled in joint defense, intelligence, science and technology and

economic ventures for these partners to offer anything more than verbal criticism as a response to the issues that are now a source of discontent for many America's Jews.

In my opinion the consequences would be mostly to the detriment of these Jews. Whether or not they acknowledge it, Israel remains their strongest link to something authentically and meaningfully Jewish. Israel has become a dynamic classroom for many thousands of young North American Jews whose Jewish education is markedly deficient. The ability of the "Israel effect" to bolster the Jewish identity and raise the knowledge level of young Jewish adults has been demonstrated over and over again through Birthright and other Israel programs. Would turning away from Israel mean also giving up on Birthright? How would American Jews then realize their Jewishness—through Tikkun Olam? Gentiles also practice Tikkun Olam, only under a different name; there is no Jewish patent on doing good in the world.

I remain doubtful that the dark scenario predicted by many will materialize. While it is still possible that more American Jews, liberals and those to their left, will now decide to disassociate with Israel, if they haven't already done so, I believe that most of America's Jews, those who profess to still care about being Jewish, will employ caution and realize that the State of Israel, in spite of the current political challenges, is the strongest connection they have to their people, past, present and future.

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