

S A P I R

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH CONVERSATIONS

THE ISSUE ON

POWER

ELISA SPUNGEN BILDNER & ROBERT BILDNER

RUTH CALDERON · MONA CHAREN

MARK DUBOWITZ · DORE GOLD

FELICIA HERMAN · BENNY MORRIS

MICHAEL OREN · ANSHEL PFEFFER

THANE ROSENBAUM · JONATHAN D. SARNA

MEIR SOLOVEICHIK · BRET STEPHENS

JEFF SWARTZ · RUTH R. WISSE

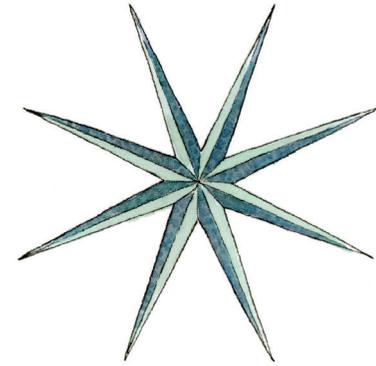
Volume Two



Summer 2021

*And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.*

—Exodus 24:10



S A P I R

Bret Stephens

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Mark Charendoff

PUBLISHER

Ariella Saperstein

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

Felicia Herman

MANAGING EDITOR

Katherine Messenger

DESIGNER & ILLUSTRATOR

Sapir, a Journal of Jewish Conversations. ISSN 2767-1712. 2021, Volume 2.
Published by Maimonides Fund.

Copyright ©2021 by Maimonides Fund. No part of this journal may be reproduced in any form
or by any means without the prior written consent of Maimonides Fund. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

WWW.SAPIRJOURNAL.ORG
WWW.MAIMONIDESFUND.ORG

CONTENTS

6 *Publisher's Note* | *Mark Charendoff*

8 BRET STEPHENS
The Necessity of Jewish Power

Power in Jewish Text & History

20 RUTH R. WISSE
The Allure of Powerlessness

34 RUTH CALDERON
King David and the Messiness of Power

46 RABBI MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK
The Power of the Mob in an Unforgiving Age

56 ANSHEL PFEFFER
The Use and Abuse of Jewish Power

Power on the World Stage

68 BENNY MORRIS
Military Might and Demographic Destiny

80 DORE GOLD
Israel Enters the Arab World

90 MICHAEL OREN
Trial and Triage in Washington

98 MONA CHAREN
Between Hostile and Crazy: Jews and the Two Parties

106 MARK DUBOWITZ
How to Use Antisemitism Against Antisemites

Power in Culture & Philanthropy

116 JEFF SWARTZ
Philanthropy Is Not Enough

124 ELISA SPUNGEN BILDNER & ROBERT BILDNER
Power and Ethics in Jewish Philanthropy

134 JONATHAN D. SARNA
The Misuse of Expertise

146 THANE ROSENBAUM
The Eclipse of Jewish Cultural Power

156 *Summing Up* | *Felicia Herman*

Publisher's Note



WHEN DID “power” become a pejorative in Jewish communal life? The concept seems to have traveled from aspiration to accusation at record speed. Those who have power, whether they are funders and federations or soldiers and statesmen, are viewed with suspicion, if not hostility, in some quarters of the Jewish community. Morality is frequently conflated with the abdication of power rather than its use.

This attitude is so at odds with our understanding of the imperatives of Judaism, and so unhelpful to those who truly wrestle with the obligations and opportunities of power, that a more substantive and thoughtful reckoning with the complexity of power seemed a worthy endeavor for our second issue.

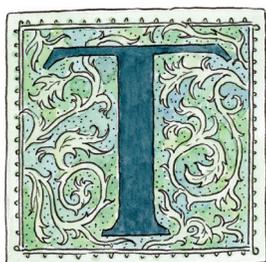
We have a sign in the Maimonides Fund office that states, “We are in the change business.” If Jewish life did not need to change, to improve, to become more resonant, our funders would have chosen a different avenue for their philanthropy. Our resources, financial and otherwise, give us an opportunity to foster such change, to try to strengthen and improve the community we care so much about. We try to be good listeners, to have humility, to not think there is

only one right way forward. But we are not under the illusion that every way forward is equally good.

Power and humility are not easy bedfellows, as many of the essays in this issue make plain. But eschewing power to satisfy some false modesty is folly. The biblical imperative to “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19) commands us to act with deliberation, as partners with the Almighty — but to act.

Power provides us with a voice. As a foundation, our grantmaking is our primary means of articulation, and we are proud of the diversity of efforts that make up our portfolio, the range of partners we work with, and the symphony of Jewish ideas that we amplify, even when those ideas are in tension with each other. SAPIR is another way we exercise that voice, highlighting issues, ideas and authors that we believe deserve broad attention. Power can be used unethically, but the abdication of responsibility is a more potent threat to the future of the Jewish community. *

The Necessity of Jewish Power



THE RELATIONSHIP of the Jewish people to power is complicated, to say the least. We are terrified by its absence, uneasy in its possession, conflicted about its use. We are accused by those who hate us of having it in inexhaustible abundance—and we are haunted by the fear that what power we do have could dry up like a puddle in summer. Historically, most civilizations have hungered for power, gloried in it, and vanished in its absence. Jewish civilization, by contrast, never had much power even in its ancient sovereign days—and then somehow endured for nearly two millennia without any power at all. Even now, Jews are at least as concerned about abusing power as we are about squandering it.

These ambivalent attitudes regarding power are not just defining aspects of Jewish identity. They are also, in many ways, ennobling ones. For much of the world, power is a simple idea: The more of it, the better. For Jews, power has always been a difficult idea. Judaism is perhaps the first and arguably the finest

sustained attempt to subordinate power to morality—to insist that right makes might, rather than the other way around. From the time of the prophets, Jews have made the critique of power a canonical aspect of our tradition. The quintessential Jewish prophet, Nathan, is the one who rebukes the quintessential Jewish king, David.

The Jewish view of power, elaborated over the centuries, forms the basis of much of what we today consider elementary aspects of civilized behavior. “Thou shalt not destroy,” *Bal Tashchit*, comes down to us from Deuteronomy. Maimonides counseled armies to besiege cities from three sides only, so as to give non-combatants the chance to escape from the fourth. “We are to learn to deal kindly with our enemy,” enjoined Nachmanides, the 13th-century rabbi.

As in biblical and medieval periods, so, too, more recently. It was a Dutch Jew, Tobias Asser, who in 1873 co-founded the Institute of International Law, for which he later won a Nobel Peace Prize; an Austrian Jew, Alfred Fried, who co-founded the German peace movement in 1892; a Polish Jew, Raphael Lemkin, who initiated the UN’s Genocide Convention; a Polish-English Jew, Joseph Rotblat, who was arguably the leading figure of the postwar anti-nuclear movement; an English Jew, Peter Benenson, who started Amnesty International in 1961; two American Jews, Irving and Dorothy Stowe, who co-founded Greenpeace in 1971; and another three American Jews—Robert Bernstein, Jeri Laber, and Aryeh Neier—who founded Helsinki Watch, known today as Human Rights Watch, in 1978.

What all these figures had in common was a shared horror at the abuse of power and a conviction that those abuses could be curbed by arousing public conscience. They were, in their way, latter-day prophets, secular in their religious observance but spiritually rooted in Jewish ethics, history, and sensibility. Contemporary social and political life is impossible to imagine without their work.

Yet it's also impossible not to take note of two facts, one tragic, the other ironic.

The tragedy is that none of these groups have made a decisive impact. The politicians and generals who took Germany to war in 1914 were not hampered by their domestic peace movement. The nuclear powers have rarely done more than pay lip service to the “No Nukes” activists. And Bashar al-Assad is neither shamed nor deterred by outraged press releases from human-rights groups. The gap between conscience and action remains as wide today as it was at the dawn of the human-rights and international-law movement.

The irony is that many of the organizations and institutions founded by Jews (or inspired by Jewish principles) have dedicated themselves with curious intensity to attacking *Jewish* power. In April 2021, Human Rights Watch issued a report accusing Israel of practicing apartheid. The antinuclear movement often makes a fetish of a “nuclear-free Middle East,” an ill-disguised euphemism for wanting to strip the Jewish state of its insurance policy against a second Holocaust.

Or maybe this is no irony at all. In her seminal 2007 book, *Jews and Power*, Ruth Wisse notes that the Hebrew prophets “linked a nation’s potency to its moral strength, putting the Jews on perpetual trial for their political actions before a supreme judge.” If power is, by its nature, morally suspect, then Jewish power, vast or slight, will inevitably arouse Jewish criticism, fair or otherwise.



There has always been an allure to powerlessness. It means freedom from the personal and political burdens of responsibility, the moral dilemmas of choice. In an age in which victimhood is often conflated with virtue, it has social cachet. To be powerless is to be pure. To be pure is to be innocent.

But innocence comes at a price, one that has been particularly

Judaism is perhaps the first and arguably the finest sustained attempt to subordinate power to morality—to insist that right makes might, rather than the other way around.

terrible for Jews. Nineteen centuries of expulsions, ostracism, massacres, blood libels, torture, and systemic discrimination led to Zionism, which was, very simply, a movement and demand for sovereign Jewish power in the Land of Israel. Had that demand been met a decade sooner, it might have prevented, or at least greatly mitigated, the horrors of the Holocaust. That the State of Israel was born, raised, and remains under fire isn’t a sign of the failure of Zionism. It’s a reminder of its necessity.

So, too, is the fact that Jews in the Diaspora no longer feel quite as safe as they once did. Tolerant, pluralist, justice-oriented, law-based liberal democracy was supposed to be the superior alternative to life in an impoverished and embattled Jewish state. Yet with each passing year, the argument becomes harder to make, in Europe and North America alike.

What passes for Jewish “power” in the West—wealth, influence, and institutional position based on individual merit—isn’t really power at all. It is *status*. It requires the acquiescence of a non-Jewish majority. It lacks the implicit threat of force. When real political power is held by Jews in the United States—whether it is Chuck Schumer as Senate majority leader or Antony Blinken as secretary of state or J.B. Pritzker as governor of Illinois—it is for purposes that are not themselves Jewish.

Jewish status also offers diminishing returns in an era of diminishing trust in institutions and growing hostility to wealth,

In the new game of ideological musical chairs, Jews may soon find they have nowhere to sit when the music stops.

influence, and the very concept of individual merit. Success is a double-edged sword when “privilege,” no matter how fairly it was earned, becomes a synonym for evil. Jewish status can be revoked at any moment, for any reason. It is a sandcastle built at the water’s edge.

Some readers may find it improbable, if not preposterous, that it could ever be taken away again, at least in the United States. Other ancient Jewish communities, also robbed of their place in countries in which they once thought of themselves as safe, doubtlessly felt the same way: the Jews of Portugal until their expulsion in the 1490s; the Jews of Germany until their annihilation in the 1940s; the Jews of Egypt and Iran until conditions became intolerable after Nasser and Khomeini came to power. In the past 20 years, Jewish life in Europe, whether in Sweden or France or Britain or Ireland, has started to feel intolerable, too.

As for the U.S., May 2021 may be remembered as the moment after which American Jews never felt entirely safe again. In the midst of the fighting between Israel and Hamas, a friend in Jerusalem—more alarmed by what was happening to Jews in the U.S. than in Israel—reminded me of Lenin’s observation, “There are decades when nothing happens; and there are weeks when decades happen.”

It wasn’t just that Jews were being hunted and assaulted in Times Square or West Hollywood. This had happened before, in Pittsburgh and Poway and Jersey City and Monsey, in ways that were far worse. The horror lay in the fact that so few of Ameri-

ca’s institutional leaders—the same university presidents, civic leaders, and CEOs who have been nothing if not outspoken in their denunciations of racism, sexism, transphobia, Islamophobia, anti-Asian hate, and so on—could bring themselves to condemn this rampaging anti-Jewish violence, and even then, only in the most cautious of terms. If antisemitism was once, as Norman Podhoretz put it in the 1980s, the “hate that dare not speak its name,” *anti*-antisemitism is now the decency that dare not speak its name.

The trend will likely get worse. Jewish security in the West has always rested on a set of social values and assumptions that are now being systematically undermined—on the right, through increasing hostility to the ideal of an open society; on the left, through increasing hostility to the ideal of an open mind. On both sides, too, there is a turn to conspiracy thinking, a suspicion of success, a vituperative hostility toward elites, a fetishization of racial identity, and an increasingly Manichaeic worldview that sees life as a battle between the virtuous and the wicked, based on criteria over which individuals have little or no control.

Whenever illiberalism overtakes politics, including democratic politics, the results never augur well for Jews. In the new game of ideological musical chairs, Jews may soon find they have nowhere to sit when the music stops.



For decades, the core Jewish critique of Israel has been that a Jewish state is bad for the Jews.

The critique has taken many forms. Israel (so the arguments go) would be too small and weak to survive: demographically outnumbered, militarily undermanned, geographically squeezed, religiously and culturally alien to its region. Israel would be too poor: nearly the only state in the Middle East with no oil or natural gas to speak of, boycotted by its neighbors, wedded to a socialist ideology that gen-

erated more inspiration than success. Israel would be too tribal: a tiny country riven by terrible divisions between Jews and Arabs, the religious and the secular, left and right. Israel would be too Jewish: a home for backward Middle Eastern Jews and Haredi Jews who would turn Israel into an Iranian-style theocracy. Israel would be too greedy: a country that would try to swallow the Palestinians territorially and be swallowed by them demographically.

More recently, the critique is that Israel is too strong for its own good—and for the good of the Jewish soul. Some American Jews on the ideological left feel ashamed of Israel: ashamed that it hasn't created a Palestinian state, that it continues to build settlements, that it uses what they see as excessive military force against its enemies, that it fails to empathize enough with Palestinian suffering, that it has forged strong ties with morally unsavory foreign actors (from evangelical Christians to Donald Trump), and so on. Many of these Jewish critics wear this shame as if their own moral reputations and personal well-being rested on it. Implicitly, they buy into the antisemitic slander that every Jew is on the hook for the misbehavior—real or perceived—of any Jew.

As with Mark Twain, reports of Israel's impending demise have so far been greatly exaggerated. But the critique of Israeli strength deserves a closer look on two grounds, one factual, the other philosophical.

The factual question is whether Israel is really abusing its power. "Abuse" is in some ways a subjective term, in the sense that many factors weigh on whether the use of force is excessive. Are there plausible alternatives to using force? Is it restrained by considerations of domestic law and respect for innocent life? Is it proportionate to its objective, and is the objective worth the cost? How would other states, including other democracies, respond in similar situations—that is, if rockets fired by a terrorist group began raining down by the thousands on their own cities and towns?

What there is no doubt about is that Israel is using far less

Powerlessness can be corrupting, too,
when ordinary people choose self-abasement,
or cowardice, or faithlessness, or dishonesty,
or silence, all for the sake of simply being
left alone and alive.

power than it has. Israel's military would have no trouble inflicting vastly greater damage in Gaza and retaking the Strip in its entirety. Similarly, if Israel wanted to "solve" issues with the Palestinians through ethnic expulsion—much as the United States did to Native Americans, Poland and Czechoslovakia to ethnic Germans, India to Muslims, Pakistan to Hindus, and Turkey to Greeks—it could easily have done so as well. But Israel doesn't, because it tries, not always successfully, to live by the idea that there are moral limits to the use of force, irrespective of strategic considerations. The only territory that Israel can truly be said to have ethnically cleansed is Gaza—of its Jewish population in 2005.

And then there is the philosophical question: Is strength more corrupting than powerlessness? It is obviously true, per Lord Acton, that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

But this truism leads people to the mistaken belief that the reverse is also true—that powerlessness tends to ennoble and absolute powerlessness is positively saintly. In fact, powerlessness can be corrupting, too, when ordinary people choose self-abasement, or cowardice, or faithlessness, or dishonesty, or silence, all for the sake of simply being left alone and alive. The moral life, for people and nations alike, requires the possibility of meaningful choice. That, in

turn, requires power, including sovereign power. Israel exists so that a Chosen People can exercise the full meaning of chosenness by also being a choosing people.

Power does not have to be an obstacle to a moral life. It can be a basis for it.

A basis is not a guarantee. But part of the measure of how much Israel has enriched Jewish life is that it has allowed Jews to explore questions of power and morality from the standpoint of practice, not critique; to understand the dilemmas of politics, foreign relations, warfare, welfare, and similar subjects through experience rather than observation. Above all, it raises the possibility that a Jewish state might pioneer a *Jewish* way of practicing statecraft and peoplehood that is distinct from, and potentially better than, the way statecraft and peoplehood are practiced elsewhere. In an era in which the practice of statecraft throughout the West is often incompetent and the concept of peoplehood is crumbling, a Jewish state may have at least as much to teach as it yet has to learn.



In December 1941, on a beach on the Latvian coast called Skede, German soldiers and their local henchmen murdered 2,749 Jewish women and children, stripping them to their underclothes and shooting them in groups of 10 over three days of methodical slaughter.

Among those victims were three members of my extended family, Haya Westerman and her sisters, Becka and Ethel. Shortly before she was murdered, Haya told an acquaintance, “If you meet any of my children, tell them I was not afraid. Tell them to continue living knowing that I was not afraid.” That acquaintance survived and did, in fact, meet Haya’s daughter, Raya Mazin, to whom she told the story of her mother’s final days.

I came to know Raya many years later, in Israel, where she and her husband had emigrated in the early 1970s. Her husband had

long since passed away, but she had a son, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and she lived an active life right until her death a few years ago, at 96. She, too, died unafraid. But, unlike her mother, she died knowing that, thanks to Jewish power, there is a Jewish future — a future in which what happened on that beach 80 years ago will never happen again. *

June 25, 2021

PART ONE

POWER IN JEWISH
TEXT & HISTORY



The Allure of Powerlessness



WO JEWS IN A WAGON are traveling along a narrow country road when suddenly their horse rears to a stop. A boulder is blocking their path. The Jews begin trading ideas on what they ought to do. As they sit there deliberating, another wagon approaches from the opposite direction and stops across from them. Two peasants jump down, roll up their sleeves, and heave the rock out of the way.

“There’s goyish thinking for you,” says one Jew to the other; “Always with force.”

I found the above item in an early-20th-century Yiddish joke collection; the following one was told to me by the Yiddish poet Avrom (Abraham) Sutzkever:

One summer afternoon, the rabbi takes his students on a stroll outside town. Soon, they all come running back in a panic. The townspeople fear a pogrom and nervously ask the rabbi what

happened. “A *sheygetsl* attacked us,” he replies, “and there we were, the 10 of us all alone.”

Sheygetsl is the diminutive of *sheygetz*, a non-Jewish boy. Sutzkever’s delight in this anecdote lay in the timbre of the reply, “un mir zalbetsent, eyninke aleyh”—and only the 10 of us, all alone—a diminutive minyan. The joke was sweetened for him by the Yiddish inflections that made the scattering Jews sound all the more willfully innocent.

What better way to introduce the thorny question of “Jews and power” than with those who turned the problem into a joke on themselves? These Yiddish humorists had good reason to think themselves more advanced than the surrounding peasantry: *They* were literate, well-educated, and nonviolent, qualities representing a higher stage of civilization. The premise of both jokes is that, unlike those others, Jews of their kind do not resort to force. Yet in each case *they*, not the peasants, are the butt of the humor, precisely *because* they don’t use physical means—not when they’re appropriate to remove the obstacle and not when they’re necessary to confront the threat.

These jokes are wonderfully witty tributes to a society whose learned jokesters were so intellectually agile they could hold contradictory ideas without losing their moral balance or their sanity. They are also insiders’ jokes. In turning the jokes on themselves, the humorists acknowledge that the vaunted habit of Talmudic thinking is useless when physical effort is called for; that nonviolence, however praiseworthy, can become contemptible cowardice when others aggress against you. In their own idiom, these Jews pass judgment—*affectionate* censure—on their unsuitable relation to power.

By the end of the 19th century, the Jews of Europe were threatened from within and without. It had taken almost a century

Jews may have expected toleration in return for good citizenship, but no sooner did they prove their worth than they were blamed for stealing success from others.

before the Western ideas of the European Enlightenment reached Russia and Poland, but then they hit with full force. Jews like our humorists were admirably ready for the Enlightenment, yet unprepared for the kind of thinking that it encouraged. To simplify: In the past, Jews had expected the Lord of Hosts to repay their assailants in kind, in His own good time. But ever since Spinoza drew back the curtain of religious faith, denying the protective power that Jews ascribed to the Almighty, human beings have had to figure things out for themselves and assume responsibility for running the world.

The most exigent of these responsibilities was survival—a prospect eased for the Jews by the joining of Enlightenment to Emancipation. Waves of young men broke free of the confines of the yeshiva to think as they pleased. The results were soon evident in Europe as Jews threw themselves into the professions, the arts, banking and trade, journalism, academia, and into the development of social sciences: sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, linguistics. Fueling that creativity was the Emancipation's promise of toleration and democratic citizenship with equal rights for all. When the gates of the ghetto opened and restrictions were lifted, Jews could believe they were indeed living in the Age of Progress.

But what about the elemental question: Was God the guarantor of Jewish life, or was He not? If modern reasoning said *not*,

then what would protect the Jews, who constituted a nation as well as a religious community? The question was unavoidable, since all of Judaism derives from the biblical covenant at Sinai whereby Jews undertake to uphold God's Law so that they may flourish and be returned to their Land of Israel. Biblical Judaism emphasizes the direct connection between national behavior and divine protection (the idea of individual reward and punishment was a later accretion). If God could not guarantee their survival, what could?

The question was moot for only as long as there was no actual threat. But conditions changed for the worse as the 19th century progressed and the *sheygets* of Sutzkever's joke became a mob of pogromists or a government intent on destroying the Jews. Jews may have expected toleration in return for good citizenship, but no sooner did they prove their worth than they were blamed for stealing success from others.

Some European political thinkers and leaders, looking for ways to explain the disruptive features of liberalization, located the source of the "problem" in the Jews themselves: the already mythologized enemy alien. As visible beneficiaries of greater opportunity, the Jews were held responsible for the harms an open society was thought to have caused. No one had foreseen the rise of antisemitism, the new political ideology and instrument that organized democratic politics against the Jews. How, in stark political terms, could an unprotected minority survive on a continent fomenting aggression against them?

At the start of the First World War, the visionary writer Franz Kafka warned that such a body could *not* survive. His novel *The Trial* charts the situation of a condemned citizen who cannot escape his fate. The book's protagonist, Joseph K., Jewish by implication, is arrested one fine morning. He can neither discover the charge against him nor learn how to prove his innocence. He is told that there are three possibilities—definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement. Living among mistrustful

neighbors and with no God in the Seat of Judgment, the defendant has no hope of attaining ultimate justice or of saving his life.



At the end of the War, Kafka hoped to settle in Palestine. Although he died prematurely, many others ascended to build the Land of Israel. Zionism was the soundest of the several Jewish responses to the perceived loss of divine protection and the manifest threat to Jewish life.

Israel is now a nation among others and a majority of the world's Jews live in the national homeland. Zionism accomplished more than one could have imagined: The force that protects Israel is its army, the Israel Defense Forces. Yet the recovery of Jewish sovereignty could not change the balance of power between Jews and the people among whom they lived. By the time Israel was founded in 1948, Jews were 6 million fewer overall, and the country itself formed a tiny base amid tens of millions of Arabs and Muslims. The Jews were prepared to live with such an arrangement, but the surrounding countries of the Middle East were not prepared to live with the Jews in a position of power, in a state of their own. Western liberals assumed that the Nazi example would serve as a permanent warning against genocide, but Arab leaders with no such liberal inhibitions inferred that they could easily rid themselves of the Jewish state.

I do not need to rehearse for the readers of *SAPIR* the history of the war that the Arab League launched in 1948, or explain why its asymmetry means that peace can come only when the belligerents make their own peace with the fact of Israel's presence in the region. Meanwhile, the country that was supposed to have resolved the threat to Jewish survival was compelled to found its own survival on a guaranteed military defense.

Jews had indeed created the means to protect themselves, but only if they continued to develop and perfect those powers. Some

Jews, both in the Diaspora and in Israel itself, were unprepared to take up the responsibility of Jewish sovereignty under these conditions, and they refused to accept that it meant soldiering and wielding power, year in and year out. They thought themselves back into the time when there was no Jewish state and yet Jews had survived; surely the strategies and moral claims of a stateless people would continue to suffice. Others just left it to God.



Foremost among the opponents of Jewish national power were a number of strictly Orthodox rabbis who had opposed Zionism before the Second World War and who afterward strove, with the grudging acquiescence of the Israeli government, to re-create the same insular conditions among their pockets of survivors. Called *haredi* or ultra-Orthodox, they have preserved the traditional Jewish way of life with its commitment to the observance of *halakhah* (Jewish law), its special emphasis on the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, and its determination to replenish the ranks of scholars who soldier in the army of the Lord.

Jonathan Rosenblum, an American *oleh* (immigrant to Israel) who embraced this way of life and now signs himself Yonoson as a mark of that transformation, founded Jewish Media Resources to improve journalism about *haredi* Judaism. After 45 Jewish men and boys were crushed to death in 2021 in a stampede at a Lag B'Omer celebration at Mt. Meron, he wrote to demonstrate their virtues, anticipating an explosion of *chesed* (deeds of kindness) in the wake of the tragedy.

It seems as if each of the victims has become in death a teacher of *chesed*, as we learn the details of their lives. One after another, we are hearing of how they specialized in what [one of them,] Elazar Yitzchak Koltai, 13, used to call “micro-*mitzvos*,” such as thanking the street cleaners every time he passed by for their work.

Recalling exceptional acts of kindness that some of the victims performed in their lifetime, he also relays from survivors of the crush that more than one, as their life was being squeezed from them, still had the presence of mind to gasp out, “Whoever is on top of me, I am *mochel* (I forgive) you completely.” Rosenblum performs his own deed of lovingkindness by showing the power of ethical teachings so deep that they endure until the very last breath.

Unfortunately, as Rosenblum elsewhere acknowledges, and as some of these communities have begun to realize, these virtues do not address the challenge to the Jewish nation. Just as Moses summons recruits from among the tribes in the Book of Numbers, a sovereign Israel requires first and foremost the self-sacrifice of soldiers. Israelis honor the service of each child and grandchild who spends years in the military, and whose virtue is equal to if not greater than that of the dying forgivers quoted by Rosenblum. Among the learners, too, some of the best minds must go to saving and shielding lives.

Moreover, the highest teaching in a participatory democracy concerns civic behavior—not just thanking the street cleaners, but *being* the street cleaners, keeping the land clean, well-ordered, and safe. The earthly powers that Jews once relegated to local authorities now have to be performed by fellow Jews, and the virtue of respectfulness must include respect for the power and prowess of the nation. Traditional Jews were not meant to be “a people apart” from their own government.

The evolution may be too slow for secular Israelis who deeply resent the special concessions granted to the haredim, but there are now members of haredi communities who serve in the IDF, growing numbers of haredim in the working population, and a school of haredi thought urging increased integration within Israeli society. Ongoing military threats and other national challenges make the exercise of power a moral and practical necessity.

Just as the birth of a child changes an option—whether to have children—into the full responsibility of parenthood, so,

Far more threatening to Jewish survival than those who consign exclusive protective power to the Almighty are those who would outsource Israel’s fate to the international Left.

on May 14, 1948, questions over the viability of Zionism turned into full responsibility for the reclaimed Jewish homeland. The founding of Israel required and will hopefully continue to generate models of *chesed* and righteousness that now include the responsibilities of self-governance.



Far more threatening to Jewish survival than those who consign exclusive protective power to the Almighty are those who would outsource Israel’s fate to the international Left. There were once as many Jewish varieties of Marxism as there currently are communities of haredim, including Soviet anti-Zionists, Jewish Socialist Bundists, and several varieties of Labor Zionists. Otherwise widely divergent, they were against Jewish power that did not subordinate the legitimacy of the nation to a consideration of class.

The Jews who were among the early Marxist revolutionaries in Europe were certain that liberating humankind took obvious priority over protecting merely fellow Jews. The paradigm for this transcendent sensitivity was revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), who insisted that socialism was there to liberate the proletarian masses rather than any particular group. Her 1917 letter from prison to her friend Mathilde Wurm is often quoted, sometimes approvingly:

What do you want with this theme of the “special suffering of the Jews”? I am just as much concerned with the poor victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the Blacks in Africa.... They resound within me so strongly that I have no special place in my heart for the ghetto. I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears.

One might judge Luxemburg’s tender heart more trustworthy if there had been any similar disclaimers of “special” loyalty among the radicals of Italy, France, or Russia whose countrymen were not under “special” attack. The Jews, however, were the most targeted people in Europe, facing modern antisemites as well as old-style Judeophobic churchmen, czarist edicts in Russia, xenophobic nationalists, the spontaneous anger of mobs, and, most particularly, the anti-Jewish ideology of the Left dating from Marx’s identification of the Jews with capitalism. Marxism appealed to Jews by letting them join the attack on their fellow Jews from a principled position of world revolution. It takes nothing from Luxemburg’s physical courage to recognize that caring for “poor victims” was a self-congratulatory excuse for abandoning Jews to their fate.

If this seems harsh, I merely follow the Marxists’ example of reducing human behavior to crude self-interest. In actual debates that Jews staged between a Communist and a Zionist, victory went to the better debater, but in the world of ideas, Communism had a material advantage in promoting the liberation of all the world rather than “merely” the Jews. Having undertaken to perfect themselves according to the laws of Sinai, the Jews had developed a civilization so resilient that they were now, after two millennia in exile, poised to reclaim their rightful home. But how could Jewish self-defense compare with the solidarity of the working classes or the perpetually postponed messianic repair of the world by the historically inevitable Communist revolution?

As between the competing ideologies of Left and Right, the latter, in the form of fascism, could have no appeal for Jews. Its

“will to power” affirmed the rights of the strong to impose their political will, which included curtailing competition from Jews. Nietzsche’s “transvaluation of values” encouraged the exercise of power without Judeo-Christian or liberal scruples. As the alleged source of that despised “slave morality,” Jews were the prime targets of the fascist ideal and the easiest pickings of a bully regime. They could flee, resist, or succumb to the far Right, but never compete for that power, because fascism opposed everything they stood *for*.

By contrast, Communism opened its arms to the Jews as their presumed bulwark against fascist might. Both movements aspired to the same one-party rule, but the Left claimed that right in the name of the disenfranchised. Rejecting both Jewish religion and Jewish nationhood, Communism aimed even higher than the Jews by reordering all of human society at its political foundations. By putting a Jewish face on the capitalist, Marx shamed Jews in particular for their association with the allegedly exploitative class. Fascism forced Jews to protect themselves; Communism destroyed their self-confidence.

Those opening jokes remind us that Jewish political dependency in the Diaspora had instilled habits of mind and inhibitions deep enough to be called a will to powerlessness. Modern Jewish leaders often had reason to fear collective punishment for individual acts of self-protection or revenge, and discouraged Jewish self-defense units from forming. Police routinely punished Jews who fought back against their aggressors. The Zionist drive for Jewish self-emancipation had to struggle against an ingrained resistance to the use of force. Communism, however, was all about assassination and terror in the name of liberating the proletariat. The secret appeal of Communism to the Jews was its offer of hard power in non-Jewish form.

Here again, the great writer exposes what others fear to see. No one understood the Left’s temptations better than Isaac Babel, who served as a war correspondent attached to the Red Army

The secret appeal of Communism to the Jews was its offer of hard power in non-Jewish form.

during the Polish–Soviet War of 1920 and then wrote *Red Cavalry*, a series of stories based on his experience as a Jew embedded in a Cossack regiment. Professionally tasked with disseminating Soviet propaganda, his autobiographical narrator travels through the towns where the Jewish civilian population is being brutalized by both warring armies.

In the story “Gedali,” the narrator takes off from the regiment on a Friday evening to go looking for a taste of his Jewish childhood in the largely Jewish city of Zhitomir that the Reds have just occupied. He finds in the antique shopkeeper Gedali the very Jew he is looking for. To a fellow Jew, Gedali can confide his disappointment. Having welcomed the Communist victory over the Poles, Gedali cannot understand why his saviors stormed his shop with guns to confiscate his gramophone. “I like music, Pani,” Gedali tells the Soviet soldiers, expecting them to respect his values and appreciate his needs. They do not.

You don’t know what you like, Gedali. I’ll shoot at you and then you’ll know, and I cannot do without shooting because I am the Revolution.

To our surprise, the Babel-narrator confirms their verdict. “The Revolution cannot do without shooting, Gedali,” I say to the old man, “because she is the Revolution.”

Babel brilliantly conveys the difference between the rough Soviet speech and the intimate Yiddish exchange. Gedali uses the Yiddish phrase, “Ikh veys nisht mit vos men est es”—I don’t know what you eat it with. He means he doesn’t understand how

the promised Revolution turned out to be so brutal, to which our narrator replies, still in the Yiddish idiom: “You eat it with gunpowder...spiced with the finest blood.”

Babel knew he was writing Communism’s epitaph for Russian Jewry but did not realize that he was also writing his own. The “finest blood” turned out to be his when he was arrested, tortured, and executed in Moscow’s Butyrka prison on January 27, 1940. Unlike Joseph K., he knew exactly how it had happened and, having implicated himself in Soviet brutality, he would not have denied his guilt—for betraying his Jewishness, not the Revolution. Communism got the Jews (and of course Christians, too) to justify murder.

Many thousands were prepared to sacrifice their Jewish morality to the necessary violence if they could do it under the Red flag. The Jewish Left idealized Leon Trotsky for unleashing the Red Terror as well as shaping the Red Army, and then used his “martyrdom” at the hands of Stalin to absolve him and themselves of responsibility for a murderous regime that he had helped to design and would gladly have ruled if he had not been outmaneuvered.

At the same time, the Jewish Left vilified Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky, who conceived the Jewish Brigade of the British Army. The Left romanticized the violence committed by Jews in the name of the world’s first modern totalitarian state, but demonized efforts to create a fighting armed force for the Jewish people themselves. Jews who joined the Left may have done so for the same reason that non-Jews joined the Right: for the chance to use force and aspire to a power they could claim was legitimate, cleansing, and historically ordained.

The full history is more nuanced. When the Soviet Union was on the side of the Allies during the Second World War, Jewish Communists joined in fighting the Nazis. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, one-time Party members in the United States had become community organizers. In Israel, even members of once-Stalinist kibbutzim took up arms in defending

their country. Being part of a Jewish polity under siege gradually clarified the need for military power and the right to defend it.

But once the propaganda war against Israel began making serious inroads in the rest of the world, parts of the Diaspora fell back into the patterns of valorizing statelessness. Jewish sovereignty came under attack, not just from terrorist rockets, but from the *New York Times*, which had been purchased by a German-Jewish owner at the very same time that Theodor Herzl was founding the Zionist movement. As Jerold Auerbach traces in his indispensable study, *Print to Fit: The New York Times, Zionism and Israel 1896–2016*, the anti-Zionism of the Ochs-Sulzberger family has defined its coverage of the Jews ever since, including during the Second World War, and still today the paper remains antagonistic to the idea of a self-governing Jewish people. Yet the majority of New York Jews continue to read and trust a paper that covers Israel from the perspective of those determined to destroy it. Similarly, almost 70 percent of American Jews remain loyal to the Democratic Party, even as it hands the reins to anti-Israel propagandists in its ranks. Jews become the “little 10 of us, all alone,” even in the land of the free and home of the brave.

And just as in the past, the Left’s contemporary attacks on Israel revive Jewish sorrow for the world’s oppressed, provided they are not Jews. In late spring 2021, as over 4,000 Hamas rockets rained down on Israel, more than 100 American rabbinical students shed “tears” over the plight of Gazans, writing an open letter that failed to mention the suffering of Israelis (Jews and Arabs) even once:

How many Palestinians must lose their homes, their schools, their lives, for us to understand that today, in 2021, Israel’s choices come from a place of power and that Israel’s actions constitute an intentional removal of Palestinians?

In the same moment, Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Rashida Tlaib, the only Palestinian-American in Congress,

sponsored resolutions protesting the sale of American weapons to Israel.

Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005 so as not to have to rule over Arabs. Its neighbors interpreted this reluctance to dominate as proof of weakness, and so today does the Left that detests a non-socialist Israel. Rosa Luxemburg would not extend any special sympathy to her fellow Jews, but these Jewish leftists go her one better by extending their own special sympathy to the aspiring destroyers of the Jewish state.

Physical attacks on American Jews have forced even reluctant Reform and Conservative congregations to hire armed guards or mobilize protection through the (Jewish) Secure Community Network or Community Security Service, but members and even leaders of those same congregations often lack the moral confidence to fend off the political attacks against Israel. No other minority in America is “in sympathy” with the war against its members—not African Americans, Latinos, or Asians, not Native Americans or gays. Only the Jewish Left and their liberal fellow travelers capitulate in the old ways. American Jews owe it not only to the guardians of Israel but also to *this* country to fight back against the anti-liberal and profoundly anti-American forces that are trying hard to bring their democracies down.

The question of Jews and power boils down to whether a God-inspired and morally constrained people can hold out until the surrounding nations accept the principle of peaceful coexistence. The creation of Israel was the hopeful answer to that question: *Hatikvah*, literally, the hope of a people. Neither the war against Israel in the Middle East nor opposition to the Jews’ right to a state will likely fade in the years ahead. Let us see if we have the power and moral stamina to keep that hope alive. *

King David and the Messiness of Power

1 | AMBIVALENCE



WAKE UP, startled, and ask myself, was that a siren, or did I imagine it? A siren. I run downstairs quickly; can't use the elevator. An awkward pajama meeting with the neighbors in the building's air-raid shelter. We sit on white plastic chairs, try to comfort the children, listen to the explosions, refresh the news on our phones over and over again, trying to make sense of it. I hear the rocket whistle, hold my breath, and after a few long seconds, listen to the sound of the Iron Dome intercepting it. I thank God—each time—for those who developed the Iron Dome and for the soldiers operating it, who are the same age as my children. I wish the neighbors good night as I go back upstairs and try to get a bit more sleep before morning. I learn the next day that a man was killed in his home not too far from us.

Can you imagine 4,500 missiles shot at New York, Boston, or Philadelphia in the span of a few days? If missiles were to cross your border, how do you think your military would react?

The nights of May 2021 in Tel Aviv, together with the echoes coming from the North American media, make questions of Jewish power particularly relevant—and particularly challenging.

I remember what it looked like to view Israel from North America, where you have a war not of rockets but of information: images of Israeli military might, of destruction in Gaza, of Palestinian children crying. These scenes are a terrible and heartbreaking disaster. Full stop.

And the world seems not to understand, or care, that Hamas attacks from within the homes of civilians—that civilian casualties are not only inevitable but intentional. They are a weapon Hamas deploys against us as they consciously present themselves as the powerless, the underdog. Their cynical use of the suffering of the people of Gaza, of their raw human pain, is highly effective. It even affects us, those whom they are trying to destroy. We, too, weep over the loss of Palestinian civilians.

The Israeli tendency is not to show our struggles, but to present a tough image. Our ambivalence about power is profound: The Jewish people can no longer afford to be weak, but we are uneasy about being strong.

I am the daughter of refugees from Germany and Bulgaria who found safety in Israel during the Second World War. Their homelands had viciously turned on them. I learned from my parents that power is an essential part of a life of freedom. Being helpless again was not an option. As my father would say, “we tried it; it didn't end well.”

I know the occasional helplessness of my mother, waking up screaming from her afternoon naps; of my father, who knew anxiety.

It is important to our life as a Jewish people that there exists a sovereign Jewish state. Even in the years that I lived in Australia and North America, years that broadened my Jewish identity,

I remained a believer in the necessity of our nation-state, whose identity is that of a home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. Our democratic state, working to ensure equality for all its citizens. True, we have not yet fully realized this ideal—there is still a great deal of work to be done, as there is in any country. But for our state to survive, power is necessary.

And yet, we Jews come to this project of nationhood with ingrained ambivalence: We require power, and we fear it. National political power has always assumed a complicated value in the canon of Jewish discourse. Jews outside of Israel, who do not share our existential obligation to be powerful, can afford to idealize powerlessness. There are Israeli Jews who also share this distaste for power, even as they are protected by a strong army. In powerlessness, one can be morally perfect. But we all must wrestle with the necessary compromises that come with exercising power in the real world, with real lives at stake.

This fundamental Jewish unease with power is at the core of a deep collective identity crisis. It afflicts us in both Israel and North America. We must look directly at this crisis and endeavor to understand its roots. The unifying ideas and values that once spoke to us across our communities are at stake.



To begin our discussion, I will call upon King David: David the worm, and David the tree.

In the Book of Samuel, King David is a warrior king. His life's work is to create a sovereign national kingdom and achieve victory over the peoples who threaten it. The matter is seemingly clear-cut. Yet in Jewish memory and Jewish text, as time goes on, David's story evolves, revealing a deep ambivalence about power, might, and strength. David the warrior ensured the Israelites' sovereignty, but the religious warrior could not be the holy leader, the leader in a time of peace.

Jews outside of Israel, who do not share
our existential obligation to be powerful,
can afford to idealize powerlessness.

We read in the first Book of Chronicles (22:6–10):

[David] summoned his son Solomon and charged him with building the House for the Lord God of Israel. David said to Solomon, “My son, I wanted to build a House for the name of the Lord my God. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘You have shed much blood and fought great battles; you shall not build a House for My name for you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight. But you will have a son who will be a man at rest, for I will give him rest from all his enemies on all sides; Solomon will be his name and I shall confer peace and quiet on Israel in his time. He will build a House for My name; he shall be a son to Me and I to him a father, and I will establish his throne of kingship over Israel forever.’”

Rabbi David Ben Yosef, Radak, writes that it was David's own deep feelings, not God's prohibition, that prevented David from building the Temple. His inner voice told him that his hands were stained with the blood of his enemies; he could therefore not build a place of peace.

Maimonides offers a different emphasis:

Even David a prophet...we find guilty of cruelty, and, although he exercised it only against the heathens, and in the destruction of non-believers, being merciful towards Israel, it is explicitly stated in Chronicles that God, considering him unworthy, did

not permit him to build the Temple, as it was not fitting in His eyes, because of the many people David caused to be killed. [Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*, Chapter 7:12–13]

A constant state of war bears a price. It hardened David's heart, and such a heart could not build the dwelling place of God.

As Jewish society and culture developed over long years of exile, so, too, did the image of King David. He became what the Jews needed and wanted him to be. After the terrible period following the destruction of the Temple, the Great Rebellion and the Bar Kochba revolt, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai despaired of Jerusalem and chose to reestablish the center of Jewish existence in Yavne. The Jewish focus shifted from national sovereignty to a kingdom of rabbi-scholars. In the literature of the sages that followed, a new King David emerges: a *talmid hacham*, student of a scholar, a wise man. Where the early depictions of David portray him as a hero, a worldly man, a military commander, warrior, and statesman, the later David is spiritual, introverted, restrained, and detached from the affairs of the mundane world. As the Jewish people move from sovereignty to Diaspora, the ideal of power transforms from one of physical might to one of intellectual and spiritual prowess.

The Talmud tells us: “When David would sit and occupy himself with Torah, he would make himself soft as a worm, and when he would go out to war, he would make himself hard and strong as a tree” (Talmud Bavli, Moed Katan, 16b).

We see before us two idealized types of Jewish manhood: the strong, masculine hero of the Bible and the feminine and gentle scholar of the Talmud. The former is content with his power, the latter is repelled by it. The women and men of today's Am Yisrael, today's Jewish people, are still grappling with this complex equation.

In exile, rabbinic Judaism created and developed an entire universe of Jewish life that did not require a sovereign national force. It even came to reject the power involved in having a national home.

The failure of fanaticism in the last days of Jerusalem left in its wake a rabbinic Jewish culture that preferred to live under the rule of another. The longing for Jewish power or national independence was marginalized, even pathologized.

Even the rabbinic image of a powerful God evolved during this period. The rabbis of the Talmud transformed the biblical supernatural deity, with no limits on power, who intervenes and shapes history—the God who destroyed Sodom, rained down the Ten Plagues, parted the Red Sea—into a more mellow God. This God is no longer always mighty; this God cries when His home, His Temple, is destroyed. The Talmud tracks this evolution:

Moses came and said in his prayer: “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God” (Deuteronomy 10:17). Jeremiah the prophet came and said: Gentiles, i.e., the minions of Nebuchadnezzar, are carousing in His sanctuary; where is His awesomeness? Therefore, he did not say awesome in his prayer: “The great God, the mighty Lord of Hosts, is His name” (Jeremiah 32:18). Daniel came and said: Gentiles are enslaving His children; where is His might? Therefore he did not say mighty in his prayer: “The great and awesome God” (Daniel 9:4). [Talmud Bavli, Yoma, 69b]

The traumas and tragedies of 19th- and 20th-century antisemitism, coupled with new notions of self-determination, transformed this ideal yet again, at least for some. They asked: If Jews could not thrive—or even survive—in the countries where they were scattered, why could they not create their own state? The longing for the power of a neo-biblical King David reemerged in the binary self-depiction of the early Zionists as “new Jews” who rejected the rabbinic ideal of the *Luftmensch*: soft, passive, and manipulative. New Jews would be once again connected to their bodies and to their land, to self-respect and national power. Israelis today

It is the basic right of every person, and of every Jew, to live his or her life in freedom and security. The question is how to execute one's power, not whether one should.

have found more of a balance, living in the dynamic continuum between the two options.

So much of the challenge of understanding and appreciating Israel today has to do with a growing worldview that simply condemns power across the board. It views all human relations through the prism of power, demonizing its acquisition and use, as well as those who wield it, and valorizing victimization, helplessness, and those who appear powerless. This conceptual framework is problematic for a country whose frequent need for military power is on display for all the world to see, scrutinized endlessly by the West. In the eyes of many, Jews have moved from victims to victimizers.

Yet power, in and of itself, is neither good nor bad. Such binary judgment misses the human complexity that is necessary for any existence. It is the basic right of every person, and of every Jew, to live his or her life in freedom and security. The question is how to execute one's power, not whether one should. Power in a democracy like Israel must be limited by the legislature and the judiciary. It should be honest and proportionate, and act to ensure the security of its citizens, and it should not harm anyone who does not threaten its existence. Denying the necessity of the existence of the Jewish national project in one fell swoop—repudiating Israel's right to use power, ignoring the ways a democratic Israel constantly limits its own power—is falling into this

binary trap, to the Jewish people's great peril. Even as the West struggles with the idea of power, and especially Jewish power, Israel must nevertheless exercise it. Our lives, simply, depend on it.

2 | WHAT MUST NOT BE LOST

Zionism created a Jewish miracle in the State of Israel: the flourishing of a culture based in Jewish ideas, stories, texts, and time. Judaism, Jewishness, Jewish culture encompasses everything, from small to large, religious to secular. The Israeli street is the largest public Jewish space in the world. Cultural Zionism, as envisioned by Ahad Ha'am and Chaim Nahman Bialik in the 19th century, became a reality. It is this rich Jewish existence that is, in my view, the greatest success of Zionism. A total Jewish civilization in a nation-state.

Cultural institutions, deliberations in the courtrooms, debates on which drugs will be included in state-supported medicine, political speeches, military decisions, the television broadcasting schedule—all of this is living, breathing Hebrew culture. The Hebrew calendar is alive and kicking: It is an expression of a common identity, the basis for economic activity. Grocery stores, cafés, and supermarkets compete to offer the most original donut (*sufganiyah*) at Hanukkah, the most delicious kosher-for-Passover cookie, the most innovative Purim costume, and the most beautiful decorations for the sukkah. Whole store shelves are given over to memorial candles for Holocaust Memorial Day and Israel's Memorial Day.

Jewish culture in every space, in every sphere, on every street corner, and on every tongue. Nowhere must this majority culture impinge on the rights of minorities' unique cultural expressions. But all of this is contemporary Jewish discourse, an important part of our shared identity, for Israeli and Diaspora Jews alike.

Sharing an identity, sharing a national story, does not mean we

are all alike—our very diversity, the dynamism of our differences pushing and pulling at us in our own homeland, is also an expression of vibrant Hebrew culture. We are a people; we are connected to the Jews who came before us, to those who live now, to those who will come after us. I do not want to live a life in which there is no encounter or friction with an ultra-Orthodox Jew, a national religious Jew, a Diaspora Jew, or a Palestinian Israeli. I do not want to raise homogeneous children who encounter only one way of thinking, one way of believing, and one approach to the great questions of culture. We are not competing “tribes,” as some would say, but a people who have a history together, who have work to do together. Despite our differences, even because of our differences, we must remain together.

If we lose our shared story, we will lose one another.

The loss of Jewish solidarity—the loss of the feeling of every Jew that Israel is her national home and that the identity and culture it brings is of value, while the ties that link Israel to the Diaspora fray—has led to disappointment and despair, to cynicism and a growing sense of distance among Jews worldwide. I take courage from the heroic struggle that empowered a new Israeli government just days before I finished this article in June 2021, meeting across serious political divides, creating real partnerships. It is here, at this exciting iteration of Jewish power, where the relationship with North American Jewry becomes so crucial.

There is peril when North American Jews simplistically condemn Israel as one entity, unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the diversity that exists within our state. There is peril when the very idea of Jewish nationalism becomes anathema. Criticizing the abuse of power is of course necessary; but condemning the use of power altogether, refusing to appreciate the reasons why Israel is compelled to use its force, is immoral and naïve.

Horrified American Jews who feel compelled to dismiss Zionism today are not simply rejecting an ideology, but a complex web of people, a thriving civilization, an evolving state.

Horrified American Jews who feel compelled to dismiss Zionism today are not simply rejecting an ideology, but a complex web of people, a thriving civilization, an evolving state. Zionism is no longer an idea to debate; it is not a slogan on a sign or a hashtag on a social-media post.

Understanding Israel as a real place that struggles with wielding power ethically means embracing the beauty of the dissonant voices within Israel that are engaged in a joint effort at survival and self-determination. This very dissonance is also an expression of a thriving Hebrew culture: “Both these and those are the words of the living God,” we read in the Talmud (Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b). Jewish texts are a record of our disagreements; Israel brings this to life in a national context, a democratic context. Perhaps acknowledging Israel’s internal differences, engaging with the broad array of the ideas and people that inhabit this land and infuse it with vitality, offers the possibility of repair, the opportunity to return to mutual respect, to our shared goals as a Jewish people.

Understanding and embracing these differences is also something we Israelis must do ourselves. The use of force in Gaza, the acts of violence between Jewish and Arab Israeli citizens that we saw in May and June 2021, even the broader West Bank occupation altogether, are symptoms of a society uncertain about its identity, a society whose common space does not accommodate the different voices of all its citizens. And the wider Jewish polity, seeking easy

solutions and not understanding our internal complexity, is suffering from the same.

But the necessity of defending major cities from the 4,360 missiles that fell on them for a terrifying 10 days was accompanied by powerful internal disputes in our desperate search for proportionality and moral solutions. Precisely at these moments, when the uses and abuses of power are never more real, we need more engagement, more generosity of interpretation. These moments of crisis make our need for understanding one another across our many differences—including our ideas about the importance of power—more urgent than ever.

When the rabbis attributed weakness to the once all-powerful God, it changed the role humans had in this world, too. It was taught in a *baraita* (a piece of the oral law) that Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the high priest, said:

Once, on Yom Kippur, I entered the innermost sanctum, the Holy of Holies, to offer incense, and in a vision I saw Akatriel Ya, the Lord of Hosts...seated upon a high and exalted throne.

And He said to me: Yishmael, My son, bless Me.

I said to Him the prayer that God prays: “May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger, and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and may You enter before them beyond the letter of the law.”

The Holy One, Blessed be He, nodded His head and accepted the blessing.

This event teaches us that you should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly. If God asked for and accepted a man’s blessing, all the more so that a man must value the blessing of another man. [Berakhot 7a]

The blessings that humans can give to one another are powerful. God asked in this Talmudic tale for a blessing from Rabbi

Yishmael. I read this as the ultimate sharing of power; humans are partners with God, caretakers of God’s world. In this world, with this human responsibility, we have the authority and the obligation to make ethical use of power, no matter our discomfort. Our lives and the future of our people depend on it. *

The Power of the Mob in an Unforgiving Age



WE LIVE IN AN AGE of “cancel culture,” when online voices increasingly aim to shut down debate and dissent, and ad hominem attacks have replaced legitimate disagreements. In a time when nothing is forgotten, forgiveness seems nearly unattainable. The online mob has the power to destroy the foundations of our liberal society, and to destroy lives.

We need moral models for navigating these challenges, which threaten the core of our free society. I would like to suggest we look to the most recent reflections of Natan Sharansky and the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, two of the most eloquent spokesmen for Judaism and Jewish identity in recent decades, whose writings touch on these topics in ways both explicit and oblique. In origin, experience, and public persona, they could not be more different; yet at the core, their central concerns are united. Throughout their talks and writing, they manifest a deep devotion to the flourishing of the Jewish people and to the moral

future of the free society. And while their worldviews are deeply rooted in their own Jewish experiences, the perspectives they put forward are universal in intent and application. They speak to the future of democracy itself.

On March 1, 1953, Joseph Stalin, at the height of his postwar power and while planning a genocide of Soviet Jewry, was suddenly felled by a stroke. Three days later, he was dead. In Moscow, young Anatoly Sharansky was taken aside by his father, a journalist in a society where truthful reporting was illegal, who told his son to celebrate secretly, while outwardly feigning sorrow. Thus Sharansky recounted later:

I remember the day when I became a loyal Soviet citizen. It was the day when Stalin died, and I was five years old. My father explained it to me, making sure that nobody heard, that it is a great day for us, for Jews, because Stalin died. Probably we are safe now, because he was going to persecute Jews, but I should never tell it to anybody. I should remember that it was a miracle which saved us, but I should do what everybody does. The next day I went to kindergarten, and was crying, together with all the children, about Stalin, and was singing together with all children about the great leader of all the people of the world. And I remembered that it's a great miracle, and that you have to be very happy that he died.

“That,” Sharansky further reflected, “is how I started my life [as a] loyal Soviet citizen, who lives simultaneously in two worlds...that is how my life [as a] Soviet slave started.”

In his memoir, co-written with Gil Troy, Sharansky later borrowed a term from George Orwell for his experience: “doublethink,” or the act of hiding one’s emotions and views in order to survive. A Soviet citizen always lived a masked life, eternally divided between what was in his heart and his public posture, ever aware of “constant probes, some subtle, some direct, to determine [his] loyalty.”

Much of America leads a masked life, one in which we feel forced to hide what we truly believe, who we truly are, for fear of social ostracization, or worse, professional or personal retribution for offending the wrong people.

Although saved from Stalin, Sharansky was nevertheless initiated into living a lie:

The end of Stalin's life, therefore, marked my entry into the Soviets' deceptive order of doublethinkers. This round-the-clock public charade defined the typical life of a loyal Soviet citizen. You knew to be politically correct in everyday life. You said and wrote and did everything you were supposed to do, while knowing it was all a lie. You only acknowledged the truth with your family and a very close circle of trusted friends.

As Sharansky himself notes, his father's celebration of Stalin's death was especially fitting, for it was on the day marked around the Jewish world as the holiday of Purim that the tyrant suffered his stroke. The calendrical coincidence has been seen — rightly — as a hint to God's providence, an echo of the Book of Esther, where an earlier genocidal maniac was also defeated and killed.

But in Sharansky's description of doublethink, we also find a profound irony. The Purim story, described in the Book of Esther, unfolds in a Persia dominated by fear, in which a mercurial king would summarily execute all who defied him. The hero and namesake

of the biblical book is one who feels forced to disguise her own identity, keeping her innermost thoughts entirely concealed until, in a moment of profound courage, she steps forward on behalf of her people. This idea of disguise is behind the penchant for donning costumes and masks as part of the Purim celebration. It is often assumed that this is done in order to remember Esther's original concealment of her identity, but of course, no one would mistake a masked man reading a Megillah or conspicuously celebrating Purim as anything other than a Jew. Rather, the intent is the opposite: In hiding our true selves, we remember the fear that pervaded Persian society, and then, in dramatically declaiming and celebrating the Purim story, we emphasize that despite any attempts to obscure us in the present, we will still proudly proclaim all that we believe.

Sharansky's uniquely Jewish Purim tale is thus also of enormous importance to the entirety of the free world. Today, Americans are not hunted by the KGB, nor do we come close to enduring the terror and tyranny that marked Sharansky's childhood. Yet Sharansky himself suggests that many decades after his Purim experiences, much of America leads a masked life, one in which we feel forced to hide what we truly believe, who we truly are, for fear of social ostracization, or worse, professional or personal retribution for offending the wrong people. The terrible irony is that the digital medium, invented to further facilitate communication and the expression of one's views, actually often encourages the opposite. We are bowing to the power of the online mob. As Sharansky writes:

In the West today, the pressure to conform doesn't come from the totalitarian top — our political leaders are not Stalinist dictators. Instead, it comes from the fanatics around us, in our neighborhoods, at school, at work, often using the prospect of Twitter-shaming to bully people into silence — or a fake, politically-correct compliance. Recent polls suggest that nearly two-thirds of Americans report self-censoring about politics at least occasionally, essentially becoming a nation of doublethinkers

despite the magnificent constitutional protections for free thought and expression enshrined in the Bill of Rights.

This is the sobering warning from a man who, with the Purim “miracle” of 1953, was initiated into the art of doublethink, and who later sat in a Soviet prison, hearing reports of Reagan’s speeches and yearning for American liberty: America is in danger of losing its own identity as a genuinely free society, not from a powerful government but from the perceived power of a vocal minority intolerant of dissent. We are succumbing to the mob’s power instead of demonstrating the moral clarity and courage needed to resist it.



The warning issued by Rabbi Sacks was of a slightly different sort, delivered in one of his last great public speeches. The talk was delivered in October 2019, prior to the penitential prayers known as Selichot, marking the onset of the High Holy Day season. Selichot sermons usually focus on uniquely Jewish themes, but Rabbi Sacks chose to utilize the central motif of the season — forgiveness — in order to indict the direction of the West. The eagerness to condemn others online, the social-media mob, and the Twitter-shaming that for Sharansky marked the dawn of doublethink were, to Rabbi Sacks, the onset of the “Unforgiving Age.”

Examples, of course, abound. Rabbi Sacks cited several: A British scientist made one inappropriate joke, and despite his profuse apologies “was condemned without trial, without consideration of the evidence, without due process, without appeal, without mercy, without regard to his lifetime of service to science, without regard to the simple fact that he was a human being and human beings make mistakes.” Jordan Peterson, the prominent psychologist, posed for a photo with someone attired in an inappropriate T-shirt, and he was immediately let go by Cambridge University’s Divinity School, where Peterson had been hired to serve as a visiting fellow. In this

case, Rabbi Sacks noted the irony whereby a religious institution, purportedly dedicated to the biblical heritage, ignored scriptural teaching in condemning what was likely a simple response to yet another photo request from a fan:

Have they heard of the word “forgiveness” in the Cambridge Divinity School? ...Or, maybe they’ve heard of the word “justice”? Here is a man condemned because of somebody else’s selfie with him, somebody else’s T-shirt, with no trial, no evidence, no judicial process, no reflective moral judgment, no “vedarashta vechakarta ve’sha’alta haytayve” (thou shalt seek and interrogate and inquire thoroughly) as the Torah tells us to do, to examine the evidence well, and see “emet nachon hadavar” (in truth the fact is correct). [Deuteronomy 13:15]

While Rabbi Sacks focuses on attempted cancellation of public figures, his point can be applied, perhaps even more profoundly, to the way that mistakes made by young people have been used against them years later. We have seen expulsions, school acceptances withdrawn, jobs lost, lives ruined because of an irresponsible comment someone made on social media years before, as a teenager. In our current environment, no apologies for fallibility are accepted, and no allowance is made for the maturation process. Strikingly, Maimonides argues that parenting is an important preparatory experience for one who sits on the Sanhedrin, ancient Jewry’s supreme judicial body; for it is through the very experiences of fallibility and learning from error that parents learn to be merciful (Mishne Torah, Laws of Sanhedrin, 2:3).

It is the very refusal to be merciful that marks our age — an ethos that, Rabbi Sacks shows, is profoundly un-Jewish. He shares the biblical tale that could be considered the origin story of the faith known as Judaism: when Jacob’s son Judah first suggested selling his brother Joseph. There are few greater crimes. Yet the Torah recounts in *parsha* Vayigash that Judah later came to openly

admit, and then repent, the horror of his offer. His repentance took concrete, physical form: When the vizier of Egypt (Joseph in disguise) declared his desire to take another of Judah's brothers, Benjamin, as his slave, Judah stepped forward and asked to be taken instead (Genesis 44:33). It was Judah's transformation that suddenly stunned Joseph, convincing him to cease his charade and forgive his family.

This story is often referred to as that of "Joseph and his Brothers," but Joseph is not the person in this plot who undergoes the most interesting character development. We might instead consider this saga as "Judah and his brothers," for it is as much the story of Judah: sinner then penitent, betrayer then savior, coward then hero. Once the very embodiment of brotherly betrayal, he comes to personify family loyalty.

The tale of Judah reminds us of human nature itself, in all its grandeur and flaws. It reminds us of our capacity for sin—and also of the power of repentance. It is a radical reminder of human freedom, of our ability to change, and therefore of the foundation of forgiveness, both God's and our own.

Judah has profound importance in the history of our people. Not only is he central to this biblical tale, but he also ultimately becomes the namesake of its faith. Following the destruction of the northern monarchy and the disappearance of 10 of Israel's tribes, the southern kingdom of Israel, known by its most prominent tribe, Judah (Yehudah in Hebrew), bequeathed its name to all its inhabitants. Thus Mordecai and Esther were descendants of Benjamin, but were nevertheless known as *Yehudim*, Jews. For Rabbi Sacks, this is especially striking and significant in our uncompassionate age. Judah, he writes,

became the ancestor of Israel's Kings....We are called Jews because we are *Yehudim*, because we are named after Yehudah. Why? Because he was forgiven. And why was he forgiven? Because he owned up. He said, "Aval asheimim anachnu" (we were guilty)...(Genesis 44:16). What's more, he changed: From

It is the very refusal to be merciful that marks our age—an ethos that, Rabbi Sacks shows, is profoundly un-Jewish.

the person who sold his brother as a slave, he became the person who was willing to spend the rest of his life as a slave so that his brother Benjamin could go free. He became a *Ba'al Teshuvah*. Joseph, his brother, forgave him. God forgave him, and it is his name we bear.

What are we to make of the striking fact that all Israelites are now known by the name of this fallible child of Jacob? Is it mere historical happenstance that the name "Jew" developed, that the faith that began with Abraham and was revealed to Moses is not named for one of them? Perhaps; and yet it is significant that this is a moniker accepted and embraced by Jews themselves. Perhaps one can add to Sacks's point the suggestion that the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the followers of Moses, embraced the appellation *Yehudi* because *Judaism* is genuinely *Judah-ism*: Before it informs us about God, Judaism is a faith that wishes to inform us about man. It proclaims, idealistically but realistically, that most men will not be Moses, but they can be Judah; it asserts, critically but optimistically, that mankind is not inherently good but is capable of goodness. It is a faith whose namesake is not perfect—and therefore he is an inspiration to us all. Judah was not Abraham, the knight of faith; he was not Moses who spoke face-to-face with God. He was, instead, a man who struggled, faltered, and failed. He repented, improved, and overcame. This, then, is our aspiration—not perfection, but the moral life well lived. This is our ideal: to be like Judah, to be a *Yehudi*—a Jew.

The Jews have a unique calling to make the case for an understanding of human nature that names good and evil, yet recognizes the inherent ability of human beings to repent and grow.

Yet it is precisely this notion of the imperfect, forgivable human being that contemporary culture rejects. What we have been left with is a strange form of moral Puritanism without faith, and therefore without forgiveness. For Rabbi Sacks, it is the West's abandonment of its biblical heritage that is the source of its warped perspective. At the center of the biblical vision is a God who created the world yet is outside of it, and is therefore free. When the Bible insists that man is created in God's image, it means to emphasize that we, too, are free. Our very freedom allows us to sin, and that same freedom allows us to earn forgiveness, to make manifest our capacity for change. All of this has been lost in our current moment. "What happens when an entire culture loses faith in God?" asks Rabbi Sacks.

I'll tell you all that's left. All that's left is an unconscious universe of impersonal forces that doesn't care if we exist or not. In the other direction, all that's left is a world of Facebook and Twitter and viral videos in which anyone can pass judgment on anyone without regard to the facts or truth or reflective moral judgment. And by the time the person accused has had the chance to explain, or the truth has emerged, the crowd has already moved on. They're not interested anymore. And what happens in an unforgiving culture? In an unforgiving culture, the people who survive and thrive are the people without shame.

In the end, the insights of Sacks and Sharansky complement each other. It is those without shame who take pleasure in destroying the lives of others; and the witnesses to this destruction, the other members of society, become all the more afraid to voice their views, lest they too be destroyed. The unforgiving age explored by Sacks produces the digital doublethinkers described by Sharansky.

The culture of cancellation presents American Jewish leaders with a daunting challenge but also, perhaps, with a historical

calling: in the face of online abuses of power, to reflect a scintilla of the courage embodied by Sharansky, and to exhibit the compassion counseled by Sacks. Although neither of these men is American, the message they bring us is critical for the future thriving of America itself. Not long ago, the digital age dawned with so much optimism about its potential. Today, as we understand many of its dangers better than ever, we must let the wisdom of Sacks and Sharansky cut through the cacophony of online condemnation. We must heed their warnings and, inspired by the wisdom of their words, embrace the imperative of preserving the moral future of a free society. *

The Use and Abuse of Jewish Power



WHEN CHAIM NACHMAN BIALIK said, “We will be a normal state when we have the first Hebrew prostitute, the first Hebrew thief, and the first Hebrew policeman,” he was also saying that a Jewish state would require normal powers as well. But Bialik lived in the first age of the Zionist project and died before the Second World War. It was still possible then for poets to dream of more peaceful circumstances for Israel’s birth.

The grim reality is that Israel will never be a normal state, and there is nothing normal about Israel’s Jewish power. That is why the manner in which it is used—and in which its use will be judged—cannot easily be measured against the way in which power is used by other nations.

A sovereign Jewish state was always going to involve powers to which Jews were unaccustomed. Not just the quaint idea of a Hebrew policeman or a Hebrew prison or even a Hebrew air

force—it would also demand darker powers. And these powers would have to be different from those of other governments. Because a vulnerable nation, without much in the way of natural resources or natural allies, and with neighbors bent on not just its defeat but its elimination, would need to acquire powers that were incommensurate to its size and alien to its traditions.

Take Jewish nuclear power. The “textile plant” near Dimona was not built as part of a war effort, as in the U.S. and British nuclear programs; or to achieve world-power status, as in the cases of the Soviet Union and China; or to achieve regional military balance, as in the case of India and Pakistan. For Israel, nuclear power is an insurance policy, a matter of guaranteeing survival.

Israel has never used this power to bully its neighbors, even implicitly, or to deter conventional attacks. This isn’t what Ben-Gurion intended it for. That’s why Israel maintains a policy of “nuclear opacity,” because it isn’t a regular nuclear power.

The same goes for Israel’s other nuclear policy, the Begin doctrine, in the service of which Israel has destroyed Arab nuclear reactors in Iraq and Syria while launching a massive, not-so-covert campaign against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. Ensuring that no other nation in the Middle East acquires a nuclear weapon is not about ensuring Israel’s regional dominance. It is about removing an intolerable threat to Israel’s very existence. Unlike the United States, the Jewish state can’t rely on mutually assured destruction as a deterrent: The desire to destroy the Jews lies beyond the realms of reason and realpolitik.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the now-former prime minister, has been the Israeli leader most comfortable with wielding Jewish power. Perhaps too comfortable. Netanyahu has considered, and argued in private, that less nuclear opacity would make for a more powerful deterrent. Thankfully, more cautious heads prevailed on this argument. To use this type of Jewish power in a less opaque manner could easily lead to its abuse.

Just as there is nothing normal about Jewish power, there is nothing inherently immoral about it, either. On the contrary, in the shadow of the Holocaust, no other form of power could be more moral.

When World War II ended and much of the organized Jewish world rushed to Europe to assist the survivors of the Holocaust, David Ben-Gurion went in the opposite direction—from Mandatory Palestine to New York. On July 1, 1945, at a meeting in the apartment of Rudolf Sonneborn, Israel's founding father persuaded 18 wealthy American Jews to fund the purchase of arms and materiel to equip a Jewish army. "The Sonneborn Institute" ensured that, when the time came to declare Israel's independence, the Jews of Palestine would not meet the same terrible fate as the Jews of Europe.

The speed and extent to which the Jewish state has now accumulated power would astonish and thrill the men who met in Sonneborn's apartment. Israel did so because Ben-Gurion built the institutions of power according to an overarching plan: not just the instruments of hard power, such as an army, an arms industry, and an intelligence service, but also those of soft power, including a scientific establishment, a world-class diplomatic corps, even an international-assistance program for less-developed countries.

All this was imperative because, unlike the hundred-odd countries that were granted their independence after World War II, Israel's existence has always been in question. Survival required power, autonomous and significant power, not the benign consent of foreign nations.

Today, some Jews who say they are expressing anger at Israeli policies seem instead to have descended into feelings of shame about Jews wielding power at all. They seem to have internalized anti-semitic myths fabricated to justify our murder; they live in a state of constant anxiety lest the projection of actual Jewish power give those myths retroactive credence.

Just as there is nothing normal about Jewish power, there is nothing inherently immoral about it, either. On the contrary, in the shadow of the Holocaust, no other form of power could be more moral.

From this we get fashionable concepts such as "Jewish privilege," a term that should be considered absurd if not obscene. Who, exactly, is privileged? Our parents and grandparents (some of them still with us today) who had been marked down for destruction, who were slaves, not just metaphorically, but who actually carried on their arms and chests numbers and letters branded on them by their slave owners? Or the half of Israeli Jews who are either themselves, or descended from, Jews who were persecuted and driven from their homes in Muslim countries, even after the Holocaust? Or the millions of Jews who grew up in postwar Eastern Europe, who were discriminated against and forced to hide their Jewish heritage under Communism? That some Jews, especially in America, have escaped such horrors should not blind us—or them—to the realities of recent Jewish persecution.

For all Jews, who depend (or may eventually come to depend) on the security of a sovereign Israeli state, Jewish power is an unparalleled blessing.

Certainty and confidence in the moral justification of our power does not mean power can't or won't be abused. That is the nature

Jews should be holding our own Jewish power to a far higher standard because it is ours — because it was created for a higher purpose than pure security or self-aggrandizement.

of power. Jews, while unaccustomed to having and using power, are just as susceptible as others to abusing it.

Let's state this as plainly as possible: Israel's treatment of Palestinians is an abuse of Jewish power. Regardless of the historic arguments over the responsibility for the conflict and the Palestinian plight, it is a present and ongoing injustice. Jewish power holds sway over the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean and underpins that injustice. Insisting on the moral foundation of Jewish power cannot erase the reality of its abuse.

The abuse exists in the chronic and systematic inequality of Israel's own Palestinian citizens. Jewish power enforces the brutal policing and military occupation of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and in the West Bank, the continuing blockade of the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, and the denial of Palestinian statehood.

Israeli claims that it was the decisions of the Palestinians' leaders and their cynical exploitation by other Arab regimes that led to the current status quo are true. But the validity of these claims does not change the reality that Jewish soldiers, Jewish police, and Jewish arms are committing these abuses. With power comes responsibility.

True, dozens of countries are currently carrying out much worse abuses of human and civil rights, including many of those accusing Israel. In few cases is "whataboutism" more warranted than in international criticism of Israel. Nevertheless, Jews should be

holding our own Jewish power to a far higher standard because it is ours — because it was created for a higher purpose than pure security or self-aggrandizement. We owe it to ourselves to make a much better effort to avoid abusing Jewish power so we can justify it to ourselves and our children, irrespective of a hypocritical world that stood aside, and still often does, when Jews are victims.

That is why we must try much harder to avoid using our power in a way that victimizes others.

For decades, the case made against the occupation was that it was harmful for Israel's interests: that if Israelis didn't make the necessary concessions to reach a solution of the conflict, they would suffer a "diplomatic tsunami" of boycotts and sanctions; that Israel's economy could never truly prosper until a solution was achieved; and that, until peace was reached with Palestinians, Israel would never reach peace with its other neighbors.

The past 12 years under Netanyahu have demonstrated how false those predictions were. Netanyahu understood that Israel's Jewish power could shield it from the tsunami; that the moralizers of the West were unwilling to exert any real pressure on Israel; that the world has other priorities; and that the progressive Left might be influential in the media and academia, but it didn't hold much sway in terms of actual policy. Meanwhile, Israel's ties flourished with countries, including Arab countries, that admired Jewish power and didn't particularly care whether it was being abused.

Within Israel, the center Left, which used to call itself the "Peace Camp," has yet to come up with an argument for ending the occupation that is a better alternative than the one based on international pressure forcing Israel to do so. In the recent series of four election campaigns, the Palestinian issue was almost totally absent from Israeli political discourse, replaced by the campaign to remove Netanyahu and end his serial abuse of

prime-ministerial power (which is not the same as Jewish power).

This was a worthy cause. Now that it has been won, different arguments have to be articulated.

The new narrative of the Israeli Left will have to acknowledge that waiting for serious external pressure on Israel to solve the conflict will accomplish nothing except paralyze the Left for yet another generation. Instead, the Left will have to make both the pragmatic and moral case against perpetuating a situation in which Israel lives in various levels of constant conflict—or, rather, *conflicts*—with its Palestinian neighbors.

In other words, it has to stop talking about Israel's interests and start talking about its character, its constitution, its ethics, and its highest aspirations.

Right now, Israel is trapped by four simultaneous conflicts with Palestinians: first, with Israel's Palestinian citizens; second, with Palestinians living in East Jerusalem; third, with the Palestinians of the West Bank; finally, with the Palestinians of Gaza.

The last time all four of these separate Palestinian communities rose up together against Israel was at the start of the second intifada, in October 2000. In May 2021 it nearly happened again, as violent clashes with police in East Jerusalem were used by Hamas in Gaza as a pretext to launch thousands of rockets at Israel, while a wave of Arab attacks against Jewish homes and synagogues in Israel's "mixed" cities was met by groups of Jewish vigilantes carrying out attacks of their own. Only the West Bank, where the local Palestinian population is kept in a sullen truce by the self-interested security apparatus of the Palestinian Authority, was relatively calm.

The Israeli Left's argument must be that using Jewish power to bully millions of Palestinians into submission is ultimately self-defeating. Continuing to ricochet between destabilizing rounds of warfare is not a long-term solution. Israel will win each of these rounds, even when all four fronts with the Palestinians blow up at the same time, as will undoubtedly happen one day. It has sufficient Jewish power to survive this conflict and to continue prospering in between bouts.

The new narrative of the Israeli Left
will have to acknowledge that waiting for
serious external pressure on Israel to solve
the conflict will accomplish nothing
except paralyze the Left.

But the price it pays is not just varying periods of damaging paralysis. The Jewish power that ensures Israel's survival was not intended to perpetuate the subjugation of another nation. Abuse of power harms those wielding the power. A society whose young people spend years of their lives in violent suppression of the neighboring society will be debased by it as well. This is true whether they are on the front line of police and military operations, or sitting in the operations-rooms directing drone strikes, or in intelligence-gathering centers monitoring intimate conversations. It is a steady and inevitable moral erosion. That is the price being paid by generations of Israelis.

A belief in the moral justification of Jewish power must come with a commitment to exploring every alternative to using it in such self-destructive fashion. That—and not the self-abasing claims of America's Jewish progressive Left, which seeks to project America's historical experiences and culture wars on the Middle East—must be the argument of the Israeli Left going forward.

No one who has any true historical consciousness can claim that the acquisition of Jewish power was anything but necessary and

The Jewish power that ensures Israel's survival was not intended to perpetuate the subjugation of another nation. Abuse of power harms those wielding the power.

justified. But the darker, if necessary, sides of Jewish power have always presented stark moral dilemmas. Isaiah and Jeremiah and the later prophets of the Tanakh who lived in times of evil, idolatrous kings in the days of the First Temple didn't dispute the need for Jewish power—but they also refused to remain silent over its abuse. Nor did they need the prompting of faraway cousins to lambaste those in power.

And not just them. The rabbis of the Talmud (Yoma 22b) discussed at length the many mistakes and cruelties of the two first kings of the Jews, Saul and David, the father figures of Jewish power. Why did David's kingdom continue, while Saul's did not? Because of David's imperfect ancestry—which lent him a kind of humility. “Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak: One appoints a leader over the community only if he has a box full of creeping animals hanging behind him, so that if he exhibits a haughty attitude toward the community, one can say to him: Turn behind you and be reminded of your humble roots.” A leader needs to be accountable, not impeccable.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak was a member of the last generation of the Mishnaic *tannaim*. He grew up in a Land of Israel that had already been ravaged twice by the Romans—first in the conquest that destroyed the Second Temple, and then again during the Bar Kochba revolt. The great exile had already begun, and soon the scholars of the Talmud themselves would emi-

grate to continue their discussions in the yeshivas of Babylon.

But Shimon's generation was still close enough to the last doomed era of Jewish sovereignty and Jewish power. They were only too aware of the many dangerous ways bad kings could abuse their Jewish power—and also of the total destruction that will befall us if there is no Jewish power. *

PART TWO

POWER ON THE
WORLD STAGE



Military Might and Demographic Destiny



CURIOUS FACT: Both the young David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Zionist Left and, eventually, Israel's founding prime minister, and Yitzhak Shamir, Israel's right-wing sixth prime minister, who had co-headed the Lehi, the pre-state terrorist organization known to the British as

the Stern Gang, idolized Vladimir Ilyich Lenin as a role model and paragon of politics. Not that they admired the one-party police state that he forged or its continuous massacre and incarceration of opponents and innocents. But, in the eyes of Ben-Gurion and Shamir, Lenin had some overriding virtues: He was a successful revolutionary leader who combined strategic vision with tactical pragmatism.

But there was more to it than that. Ben-Gurion's imagination was fired by Lenin's consummate ability to translate realities of weakness—a minuscule, hunted Bolshevik Party—into astonishing power, as exemplified in that famous two-day coup, the “October Revolution,” and the subsequent consolidation of the Bolshevik grip

over the vast Russian Empire in acutely challenging internal and international circumstances.

Ben-Gurion saw the Zionist project in a similar light: a weak, minuscule movement surrounded by a sea of enemies and, beyond it, by an ocean of Gentile indifference. The Zionists were bent on achieving a territorial-demographic revolution while, at the same time, transforming the Jew's nature, place, and image in the world. From the start, Ben-Gurion envisioned himself as the leader who would bring this transformation about. The key to success, as in Lenin's case, was *power*. So, from his arrival in Palestine in 1906, Ben-Gurion set about amassing power for himself, for the Zionist movement, for the Labor wing of that movement (specifically, his Mapai Party), and after 1948, for the state that he founded. He was inimitably successful; this was his genius.

Almost from the moment he stepped ashore in Jaffa, this young, diminutive Polish Jew began to forge power bases, committee by committee, organization by organization, battalion by battalion. By 1930, he had established the party that was to win him the reborn nation's leadership; by 1935, he controlled the Yishuv's main political institution, the Jewish Agency for Palestine, which he effectively turned into a state within a state alongside the British Mandate government; and by 1948, as Israel's prime minister and defense minister—and he was always both, save for a brief hiatus from 1953 to 1955—he commanded the newborn state and its (relatively) effective army, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). After 1948, he arrogated to himself more and more powers, paradoxically becoming an authoritarian premier within a coalition-governed democracy, until a quiet, creeping rebellion within Mapai ousted him in 1963.

The degree to which Ben-Gurion concerned himself with power's minutiae during that half a century and more has continuously astounded historians and biographers who have explored his life in recent decades. For example, his diary for 1947–1949—while the 650,000-person Yishuv/Israel was fighting for its life against tremendous odds (first Palestinian Arab militias, then invading Arab

The key to Israel’s survival and prosperity, as David Ben-Gurion saw it, was not diplomacy and negotiated compromises, but raw power.

states’ armies), and while he was busy setting up the agencies and institutions of state and battling for recognition and acceptance in the international community — contains multiple long, detailed entries about munitions shipments, such as how many 7.62mm and 9mm caliber bullets arrived yesterday, or which military officer was to accompany the team negotiating an armistice agreement.

As it turned out, the dual, sequential victories over the Palestine Arabs (they were not yet called “Palestinians”) and the Arab states in 1948 failed to radically alter the Arab world’s view that Zionism’s momentary success was but a fluke of history and that Arab numbers would ultimately “adjust” reality, prevail, and reverse the humiliation of the Nakba. So the key to Israel’s survival and prosperity, as Ben-Gurion saw it, was not diplomacy and negotiated compromises, but raw power: Israel would browbeat its neighbors until they understood that the “iron wall,” in Ze’ev Jabotinsky’s phrase, that Ben-Gurion had managed to construct was unassailable. They would ultimately have to bend, if not bow, to force majeure.

Israel’s enemies offered continuous provocations that could be exploited. During the 1950s, Arab infiltrators, most of them Palestinian refugees, crossed the borders into Israel in the thousands, bent on returning to their homes, harvesting crops, robbery, and, occasionally, murder. The IDF, honed during the skirmishes with the marauders, periodically retaliated, at first against specific offenders or the villages from which they set out, and then against the police forces and armies of the states that harbored them: Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. In the end, in 1956, when Egypt began to arm with modern Soviet-made heavy

weapons, Ben-Gurion launched the ultimate retaliatory (but also preemptive) strike, the Sinai Campaign of October–November 1956, in which the Egyptian divisions in the peninsula were destroyed. Ben-Gurion had demonstrated that Israel was not to be trifled with. To further assure this, Ben-Gurion secretly engaged with the French to help build Israel’s nuclear-weapons production facility, the Dimona nuclear reactor, believing that this ultimate manifestation of raw power, never really hidden from view, would deter the Arab world and assure Israel’s longevity.

Alas, the Arabs remained unpersuaded. A decade later, Egypt’s president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Arab world’s leader, threw the dice once more, provoking Israel’s stunning assault on his air force and armored divisions. All were wiped out, as were the air forces and ground troops of Syria and Jordan, which had joined the fray believing Nasser’s mendacious boasts that his armies were advancing on Tel Aviv. In those six days in June 1967, Israel convincingly demonstrated that the state and army that Ben-Gurion had fashioned were overwhelmingly powerful.

Israel went on to win a few more wars, in 1973 against Egypt and Syria, and in 1982 against the PLO and the Syrian forces in Lebanon. But the Middle East, along with the rest of the world, had changed, and just as American might had proved unpersuasive in Vietnam (and later in Iraq and Afghanistan), so Israeli conventional and unconventional military power was to prove unconvincing in the new world of non-state agents and asymmetrical conflict. Israelis had long believed that “the Arabs only understand the language of force.” (The Arabs, incidentally, were said to hold exactly the same view about the Israelis.) Ariel (“Arik”) Sharon, Israel’s defense minister and the architect of the 1982 Lebanon War, was purported to have said that if force proved insufficient, then one need only apply still greater force.

But force didn’t really work in Lebanon, certainly not for the long term — as the Party of God, Hezbollah, demonstrated in spades. A fundamentalist Shiite guerrilla and terrorist organization, Hezbollah

lah proved during the following decades that Israel's conventional military prowess was insufficient, ultimately even useless, against a hostile population led by fanatical, self-sacrificing religious believers. Israel kept killing the guerrillas, but the supply was endless. The slums of Beirut and Tyre and Nabatieh provided more recruits than Hezbollah could handle, especially with guaranteed monthly paychecks from Iran. The struggle of attrition that unfolded sapped Israel's staying power, and when protesting Israeli mothers joined the public-relations fray, it was all over. In his final months in office in 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak pulled the last Israeli troops out of Lebanon.

Taking a leaf out of Hezbollah's book, the Palestinians also began testing Israel's staying power through asymmetrical warfare. They proved less successful than their Lebanese models, partly because in Israel proper, the Jewish public viewed the battle as existential: It was about the fate of the state and the Land of Israel, not about the godforsaken hills of southern Lebanon. Significantly, the Palestinian fundamentalists also proved far less courageous and effective than their Lebanese counterparts. The Israeli security services discovered that it was infinitely easier to recruit informers and agents among the Palestinians, including the fundamentalist Sunni Hamas, than among the Lebanese Shiites.

The guerrilla or terrorist mini-war that the Palestinians of the occupied territories waged against Israel intermittently during the past four decades, most dramatically during the intifadas of 1987–1991 and 2000–2004, was ultimately unsuccessful. Yes, Hamas established itself in Gaza and ultimately ejected the Israeli settlers and army from that narrow coastal enclave, and the Palestinian National Authority under Mahmoud Abbas established itself in the West Bank. But at the same time, Israel tightened its hold on East Jerusalem with new, enveloping neighborhoods, and hundreds of thousands of new settlers, with accompanying infrastructure, consolidated the country's grip on the West Bank.

Hezbollah proved that Israel's conventional military prowess was insufficient, ultimately even useless, against a hostile population led by fanatical, self-sacrificing religious believers.

But here's the rub: Israeli military power and its repeated exercise, most recently in the 11-day mini-war against Hamas in Gaza in May 2021, has failed to change the basic realities and variables of the conflict. The Palestinian problem is not going away. In an earlier age, military power could have translated into reality-changing power and trumped demography, especially by mass expulsion. But this has not been an option in the world since 1948, at least not for non-superpowers.



In fact, the opposite has occurred. As time passes, the demographic problem, as it is often referred to in Israel, has only grown more acute (though most Israelis ignore it) simply because there are more and more Palestinians, in Gaza and the West Bank, in East Jerusalem and in Israel itself. (See particularly the burgeoning numbers of Bedouin in the Negev, where there are many men with multiple wives, in violation of an Israeli law that is never applied.)

Since 1967, power has come not from the barrel of a gun, but from women's wombs. Yasser Arafat always said that it would be the Palestinian womb that would defeat Israel, and it is certainly beginning to look as if he was right, in conjunction with two additional demographic trends.

Here lies the great irony in Israel's history: Demography might

In every area that affects Israeli–Palestinian relations, raw military power has been supplanted by raw demographic power.

just prove to be destiny, whatever Israel is able to achieve through military might.

During the British Mandate years of tripartite struggle, 1917–1947, Ben-Gurion and the other leaders of the Yishuv understood the power of demography. A Jewish state would or would not arise, in all or part of Palestine, depending on how many Jews could be funneled to Palestine and how quickly. The Arabs of Palestine, backed by the Arab societies around, fought tooth and nail to force London to curtail Jewish immigration. So from 1934 onward, the Yishuv began to ship Jews to Palestine illegally, alongside the limited British-approved legal immigration. In May 1939, as the Holocaust tragically drew near and upped the stakes, Britain imposed even stricter limits on immigration, and the Zionist struggle focused on bringing in the illegals. Ben-Gurion understood that this was the make-or-break issue.

But in 1948–1950, Ben-Gurion—who admittedly had a great many other problems on his mind—somehow forgot about demography. Three new realities emerged that would together shape Israel’s future. First, while much of Palestine’s Arab population was uprooted, the 1948 Arab–Israeli War ended with 160,000 Arabs remaining inside Israel, becoming Israeli citizens—a full fifth of the new state’s population at the time. That proportion has remained steady, with Arabs today constituting 21–22% of Israel’s inhabitants, *despite the arrival in the country of some 3 million new Jewish immigrants since 1949*—meaning that Israeli–Arab birth rates have been significantly higher than those of Jewish Israelis.

The same applied to the Arabs living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, despite the poverty prevailing in these territories and, especially, in their refugee camps. Today there are more or less an equal number of Jews and Arabs living in the area of Mandate Palestine, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean (in all, 14–15 million souls). And, overall, Arab birth rates remain substantially higher than those of the country’s Jews.

The second demographic trend that Ben-Gurion failed to understand or address was the burgeoning number of ultra-Orthodox Jews, sustained by hefty government subsidies (mainly for housing and for each additional child). In 1948, less than 1 percent of Israel’s Jews were ultra-Orthodox; today, the figure hovers around 12–13%. The percentage will continue to grow: Ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox “national religious” families (the latter being the core of the West Bank settlers) have on average five to seven children apiece, while secular Israelis have two to three children per family. In addition to state subsidies, Ben-Gurion also agreed to free ultra-Orthodox youths from military service. In effect, through the various subsidies, this perpetuated their lives as Talmud students, instead of channeling them to join the labor market. This has meant that Israel’s secular Jews carry an annually growing parasitic ultra-Orthodox population on their backs, a major long-term threat to the viability of the country’s economy.

The third demographic trend that has affected the character of Israeli society, politics, and culture was the massive influx of Jews from Arab states from 1949 to 1964, especially those from Morocco. Zionism in the 1920s and 1930s had rested on the premise that masses of Eastern and Central European Jews would immigrate to Palestine and sustain and empower the Yishuv. The Holocaust ended this hope, and Zionist leaders reluctantly turned to Sephardi Jewry for the needed manpower. Ben-Gurion was warned that a massive Sephardi influx would alter the nature of the emergent Jewish state (in short, “orientalize” it). At first, the government tried to limit the intake through “selective” *aliyah*. But

in the end, Ben-Gurion and his colleagues caved to the pressures from the Arab world's Jewish communities that they themselves had generated. The gates were flung wide open.

The result was a change in the nature of Israeli society and, ultimately, starting in 1977, the ouster of Mapai/Labor Party, and the assumption of power by right-wing parties, headed by Herut/Likud, whose main base of support was and remains Sephardi Jewry. The Sephardi *olim* had at first voted for the governing left-wing parties that had “redeemed” them from the discrimination and oppression of the Arab societies amid which they had lived. But subsequently, Herut's Menachem Begin and, more recently, Benjamin Netanyahu successfully incited them and their descendants against the Left (the “Ashkenazim”) that, according to their selective collective memory, had treated them poorly when their forefathers landed in the country. This incitement was coupled with Sephardi antagonism toward the Arab world—in effect, toward Arabs—that has sustained their right-wing voting patterns. Thus Ben-Gurion had brought about the political demise of his own Labor Party.

Over the past decades, in every area that affects Israeli–Palestinian relations, raw military power has been supplanted by raw demographic power. Periodic military blows are of no lasting avail in neutralizing the Palestinian threat to the Israeli state and to Israeli democracy, which is gradually being eroded and recast both internally and externally as a two-tier society between the river and the sea. The erosion of democracy lies at the base of the gradually diminishing support for Israel in the West, including in the United States, as the possibility of a two-state compromise recedes.

At the same time, the ultra-Orthodox (and Orthodox) womb is gradually but dramatically eating away at the secular and open nature of Israeli society. The right-wing politics of Israel's Orthodox and, increasingly, ultra-Orthodox communities—which are gradually transforming from anti-nationalist to ultra-nationalist—is coupling with the anti-Arab worldview of the Likud's Sephardi pow-

er-base to render the possibility of accommodation with the Arab world, and especially the Palestinians, ever more remote.

“What is to be done?” asked Lenin in his famous 1902 pamphlet of that name, in effect launching the Bolshevik Party that was to win governance over Russia 15 years later. What can be done in Israel to roll back or at least limit the consequences of the demographic challenges that threaten the state's essentially secular, democratic, Jewish character and very existence?

The first thing would be to tackle the haredi problem. Theoretically, though not politically or practically speaking, this is the simplest to “solve.” There is broad agreement among secular Israelis of both the Right and the Left, who still constitute the majority among Israeli Jews, that the country is drifting if not into full-blown theocracy, then into a state of absolute dependence on the haredi parties in the formation and conduct of government. This agreement needs to be translated into legislation that would force the government-subsidized haredi schools to teach their kids the basic intellectual disciplines—mathematics, science, English, and history—and parallel legislation that would deny the haredim the subsidies that enable them to have large families without their adult men ever seeing the inside of a workplace.

Similarly, the secular Likud and the swathe of center and right- and left-wing parties must agree to pass a law forcing haredi 18- to 20-year-olds to do national service, if not in the military, then in the state's civilian bureaucracies or in local government. Such reforms in education and in national service would pave the way for integration of haredi men in the economy and society. Many Jews of the national-religious persuasion, who have always been resentful of the passes the haredim have enjoyed with regard to national service and economic parasitism, would go along with this.

More complicated, theoretically at least, would be the fuller

integration of Israel's Arab minority, many of whose youngsters rioted in the streets of Israel's mixed Arab-Jewish cities during the recent Israel–Gaza hostilities. Over the past decade, Israeli-Arab birth rates overall have steadily gone down, almost to the level of secular Jewish families (except among the Negev's 200,000-strong Bedouin population). But the schools in the Arab sector — with the exception of Christian Arab schools — are generally below par, with rote learning being the rule rather than the exception. Money needs to be invested in the education of Arabs in teacher-training programs to gradually raise the level of the Arab-minority school system. (Most of the Arab students I taught at Ben-Gurion University couldn't put together a correct Hebrew, let alone English, sentence.)

Money also needs to be invested in training young adult Arabs, among whom unemployment is high, for jobs in the increasingly technological Israeli economy. Policing must increase in the Arab towns, where crime is a threat and large criminal gangs run car-theft rings, protection rackets, drugs, and weapons smuggling. The murder rate in Israeli-Arab towns is hundreds of percentage points higher than in wholly Jewish towns. Overall, the government must direct resources to reducing Israeli Arabs' sense of alienation, and this should start with a repeal of the nationality or nation-state law (*Khok Ha-Le'Om*) enacted by Netanyahu's government in 2018, which managed to anger Israel's traditionally loyal, IDF-serving Druze community and Christian Arabs, as well as the Muslim Arab minority, while contributing nothing to enhancing the country's "Jewishness."

I have no easy "solution" for the general Israeli–Palestinian problem or for the future of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. Both sides have contributed to the evisceration of a possible two-state compromise, initially courtesy of Arab rejectionism, but subsequently through Jewish settlement policy and unilateral annexationism. It is possible that an easing of restrictions on the Gaza Strip's Arabs, reinforced by development projects that would

provide jobs to its hundreds of thousands of unemployed — such as building airports and seaports, and energy and desalination plants — might reduce tensions and hatreds. Easing restrictions on movement inside the West Bank and between the West Bank and Israel might also help, though the danger of terrorism will necessarily curtail such efforts. In the end, a possible confederation of Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, involving some measure of Arab sovereignty in East Jerusalem, might provide an avenue to exit the Israel–Palestine conflict. But this is for the distant future and visionaries.

If acted upon, the foregoing suggestions or proposals, while not canceling out the demographic threats to Israel and its democracy that I have outlined, would go some way toward mitigating their consequences, or at least slowing down their realization, perhaps recovering some of the power to effect real change that Israel has lost in recent decades. *

Israel Enters the Arab World



WHEN BENJAMIN NETANYAHU addressed the Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress on March 3, 2015, he stood alone and, seemingly, isolated. The Israeli prime minister had come to make the case against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the Iran nuclear deal, which the Obama administration was vigorously pursuing.

In fact, it was not the American president who had invited Netanyahu, but the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner. In the press, critics decried the move as interference by a foreign head of state in American politics. Support for Israel risked becoming a partisan issue. And Netanyahu's indictment of the proposed Iran nuclear deal sharply exposed the differences between Jerusalem and Washington on one of the most sensitive foreign-policy issues of the day. With his speech, Netanyahu seemed set to alienate Israel's most powerful ally.

But there was another audience that took note of the events on Capitol Hill that day. Watching from capitals across the region,

many Arab heads of state heard Netanyahu lay out the evidence for Iran's plans for increased control of the Middle East and found themselves nodding in agreement. Reportedly, there was even a message of thanks conveyed to Jerusalem. In shining the spotlight on the Iranian threat, it was said, the Israeli prime minister had been "speaking for all of us as well."

With hindsight, Netanyahu's controversial appearance in Washington in March 2015 looks like the catalyst that accelerated rapprochement between Israel and many Arab states. It set the stage for the Abraham Accords in August 2020, which formalized new normalization agreements between Israel and key Arab states. Iranian aggression — more so than any peace plan or blueprint for economic cooperation — became the glue that was binding Israel and some of its former adversaries together.

Now the questions are: What more can be done to make this remarkable Jewish-Arab rapprochement permanent? And what can we learn from the failed experiments, missed opportunities, or mostly forgotten successes of the past? Let me offer a few observations.



For sure, the focus of Netanyahu's speech that day was the danger of the Iranian nuclear program. He argued that the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, would be unable to contain the program diplomatically, given the reported terms of the document. But he began his speech with a much broader view of what Iran had been up to since the 1979 Islamic Revolution that had brought Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors to power. According to the new Iranian constitution, that regime would establish a Revolutionary Guard "to export the revolution throughout the world."

Iran had unquestionably left its mark on much of the Arab world in the years since the Revolution. A contingent of the Revolutionary Guards had been deployed in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley

Iran has pushed Arabs and Israelis closer together. What, then, can help strengthen these ties and protect peace and security in the wake of the Abraham Accords?

since 1982. As part of the Iran–Iraq War, Iran fired missiles into Kuwaiti territory back in 1987. In 1996, Iran employed a branch of Hezbollah to detonate a truck bomb at Khobar Towers near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing over a dozen U.S. Air Force personnel. It fortified its presence on three islands belonging to the United Arab Emirates, near the strategic Straits of Hormuz.

King Abdullah of Jordan sounded the alarm about Iran in late 2004, warning that Tehran sought to erect “a Shia crescent” across the Middle East. Revolutionary Guards protected an Iranian presence in Port Sudan for Tehran’s naval outreach toward the Horn of Africa. In the wake of what was being called the Arab spring, in 2011, Tehran fully exploited the resulting vacuum and extended its influence to the heart of the Arab world. It began seeking to create a Mediterranean presence at the Syrian port of Latakia, partly in exchange for helping to keep the embattled regime in Damascus alive.

The Israeli prime minister delved into what was happening in the Middle East and explained how, up to that date, four Arab capitals—Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa—had fallen under Iranian domination. “If Iran’s aggression is left unchecked,” he warned, “more will surely follow.” In fact, Iranian media at the time was predicting the imminent fall of Saudi Arabia.

Netanyahu then went through the nuclear concessions that the JCPOA would give away to Tehran. No nuclear facilities would

be dismantled. If the Iran deal was adopted, the centrifuges that could enrich uranium to the weapons-grade level would remain, allowing Iran to assemble an atomic weapon in a relatively short period of time.

While Netanyahu’s energies were focused on scuttling a nuclear deal that seemed to directly threaten his country, it was his broader sketch of Iran’s expansionist plans that caught the attention of Arab leaders.

Communication channels soon opened between Arab states and Israel, even in the absence of formal agreements. Information surfaced that Iran had used its embassy in Algiers as a conduit for providing arms and training for the Polisario Front forces fighting Morocco in the Western Sahara. Rabat responded by breaking diplomatic ties with Tehran. Following in the footsteps of the Gulf states, Morocco negotiated a normalization agreement with Israel. Without having planned it, Israel’s diplomatic campaign against the Iran deal opened its door to the Arab world.

Inadvertently, the Iranian threat reorganized diplomatic ties in a Middle East where previous intentional efforts to do so had failed. Following the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, the United States and the Soviet Union had launched multilateral meetings on a host of diplomatic subjects from arms control to protecting water sources. Israeli and Arab delegations had sat together and held rounds of negotiations in different capitals.

But these talks quickly became moribund. They did not fundamentally alter the political dynamics of the Middle East. Likewise, a theory among the members of the European Union called “functionalism,” which predicted that new economic ties in the Middle East would lead to closer political connections, did not catch on. Increasing imports and exports was not going to be the glue to hold Israel and its neighbors together.

Indeed, talking about trade could have the exact opposite effect. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in May 1995, Fawaz Gerges described how large delegations of Israeli businessmen attending a major economic conference in Morocco in 1994 only aroused fears of Israeli economic dominance. Those were stoked further when Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was misquoted in the Egyptian press as saying, “Egypt led the Arabs for 40 years and brought them to the abyss; you will see the region’s economic situation improve when Israel takes the reins of leadership in the Middle East.” Egyptian political leaders, too, came to believe that peace meant Israeli economic hegemony. Clearly the Middle East was not going to follow the European Union’s blueprint.

For those who believed that progress on the Palestinian issue was the key to a wider Middle East peace, the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 held the greatest potential for altering the region. But these, too, did not lead to any profound changes that had any degree of permanence. True, Israeli trade offices were opened in Qatar, Oman, Morocco, and Tunisia in the mid-1990s, but they were shut down promptly when military escalations erupted between Israel and Hamas in the years that followed.

With the Palestinians divided between Ramallah and Hamas, and with the latter committed to jihadism rather than peace, the chances that the Palestinian cause would trigger a regional peace were slim. Moreover, Hamas was primarily funded by Iran, the nemesis of the Sunni Arab states.

Perhaps the closest precedent to the recent rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states was the situation in Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. At that time, America was demobilizing and keen to “bring the boys home,” while on the other side of the continent, the Red Army remained on a wartime footing with large tank formations in East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

Under strong American leadership, former adversaries such as France and Germany came together under a new security umbrella

Henry Kissinger’s code of conduct distinguished between who was ‘inside the tent,’ and therefore entitled to Western diplomatic and financial support, and who was ‘outside the tent,’ and thus likely to face sanctions as determined by political conditions.

called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). There, it was the mutual Soviet threat that cemented the alliance among former adversaries.

Iran has pushed Arabs and Israelis closer together. What, then, can help strengthen these ties and protect peace and security in the wake of the Abraham Accords?

—

In 1996, I was invited by Hassan bin Talal, then crown prince of Jordan, to a seminar in Amman of policymakers and some academics under the title “Middle East Forum.” Hassan was a true intellectual and statesman seeking to understand peacemaking across the globe. The seminar lasted several days and was held in the Hashimiyya Palace. At one point, someone put his hand on my shoulder. It was the former secretary of state, Henry Kissinger.

Kissinger went straight to the point: What you need, he said, was a “code of conduct” for the Middle East. In 1971, the United States had entered negotiations with the Soviet Union, seeking to achieve a Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement that would become SALT I. The problem America faced in that period was the readiness of

A rulebook on international behavior could become a guardrail at a time when an organization such as Hamas can disrupt the regional order in the Middle East, yet still enjoy diplomatic support from the UN's Human Rights Council.

Moscow to dispatch pro-Soviet surrogates to fight in Africa and Asia, in such places as Angola and Mozambique.

Was Washington prepared to announce a new era of détente when Cuban forces were rampaging against pro-Western regimes? Was it sustainable to hold negotiations with the Soviets on arms control on the one hand and simultaneously fight their allies in the Third World on the other? Formally, Washington drafted “Basic Principles of U.S.–Soviet Relations” to fix norms for how the superpowers were to interact.

Kissinger designed this code of conduct for such situations. It created clarity for those who adhered to its terms. If the Soviets abided by the code of conduct in the various conflict zones where they were engaged, it would allow America to declare an overall détente between the superpowers. But if Moscow violated the code of conduct, it would be relatively straightforward for Kissinger or his successors to denounce it in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee or to the press.

The United States would then have a free hand to take countermeasures. The principles of this code of conduct would “ease tensions” if implemented, Kissinger wrote in his memoirs, and “if flouted, they could provide a rallying point to Soviet aggressiveness.”

The code was not legally binding, but it helped clarify which kinds of international behavior were permissible and which were clearly prohibited.

Clarity was exactly what the Israeli–Palestinian peace process needed. In 1996, Yasser Arafat had been prepared to use terrorism to put pressure on Israel during negotiations. In 1997, Israeli military intelligence disclosed that he had secretly given Hamas a green light to resume terrorist attacks, even while he was trying to curry favor in the West to support his policies.

Then, as now, the region needs its own political etiquette—a Middle Eastern code of conduct. The following principles should apply:

1. State support for terrorism of any kind is prohibited. This includes training, financial backing, and the transfer of arms.
2. States must refrain from threatening the territorial integrity of other states.
3. States must resolve their territorial differences through negotiations.
4. States must respect the religious and historical centers of diverse faiths. Their places of worship must have immunity from attacks of any sort.

Kissinger’s code of conduct distinguished between who was “inside the tent,” and therefore entitled to Western diplomatic and financial support, and who was “outside the tent,” and thus likely to face sanctions as determined by political conditions.

When the Helsinki Final Act was reached in 1975, the signatories set up the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe. In 1994, it was formally renamed the Organization for Security

and Cooperation in Europe. It was based on a code of conduct in security, with proposals such as the prior notification of military exercises and economic innovations as well. It was not just an abstract set of principles. It created an actual organization that included Western powers and the Soviet bloc. In the Middle East, an organization of this sort could serve a special purpose.



Throughout its diplomatic history, Israel has been looking for mechanisms that would allow it to better integrate with its neighbors. As foreign minister, Abba Eban spoke at the 1973 Geneva Peace Conference, explaining this predisposition: “The ultimate guarantee of peace lies in the creation of common regional interests in such degree of intensity, such multiplicity of integration, such entanglement of reciprocal advantage as to put the possibility of war beyond rational contingency.” The Israeli interest in entering the Arab world was basically a hedge against a return to armed conflict even after treaties are signed. If, for France and Germany, a return to war had become unthinkable, then Israel and the Arab states, it was thought, needed to reach a peace with the same conditions.

Speaking to Israel, the West Bank, and Jordan, Eban tirelessly expounded on the applicability of the three-way Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg) economic union, in force since 1948, but the idea did not take off. Another multilateral experiment was considered in the 1994 Treaty of Peace between Israel and Jordan: a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East (CSCME). While both Israel and Jordan undertook in Article 4 of their treaty to form such an organization, this commitment ultimately remained unfulfilled. But the agreement pointed to the fact that both states were prepared to take the idea of a code of conduct and develop it for the Middle East, and that Israel could finally find a way to realize its quest to be an integral part of the region.

A rulebook on international behavior could become a guard-rail at a time when an organization such as Hamas can disrupt the regional order in the Middle East, yet still enjoy diplomatic support from the UN’s Human Rights Council. Terror groups may not consider themselves beholden to a newly created CSCME or its rules, but a code of conduct could tilt sympathies among Western states.

Even now, it is clear that Israel has achieved a level of integration with a large part of the Arab world that would have been unthinkable not long ago. The threat Israel and many Arab states face is the same. Iran’s dreams of “wiping Israel off the map” are well documented. But Tehran also likes to remind its people that the Arab states had once been part of its territory, and that those lands must one day be returned to Iran.

This leaves Israel and the Sunni Arabs on the same side, at least strategically, at least for now. But a common threat, to adapt a phrase, is a terrible thing to waste. The time to move this improbable, promising, and essential alliance forward is now. *

Trial and Triage in Washington



“NO,” WAS THE SHORT ANSWER that I received from several statesmen, all of whom had held the same position. All were responding to my question: “Is it winnable?”

“It” referred to the job of Israel’s ambassador to the United States, a post I was about to assume. The month was May 2009, shortly after the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel’s prime minister and the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Enormous challenges lay ahead, I sensed, and I prepared myself as thoroughly and swiftly as possible. The lessons I would learn—most of them the hard way—would serve me well in Washington.

The first of these lessons was the importance of consulting my predecessors. They described the difficulties traditionally encountered by Israel’s emissary in Washington. In contrast to the legates in other capitals, the ambassador to the United States is almost always a prime-ministerial appointee. While this fact enhances the ambassador’s influence, it can also earn the ire of

the professional diplomats who resent working for a political appointee. The resultant press leaks and harmful rumors can impair the effectiveness of the mission’s chief. The embassy, one ex-ambassador warned, was a hornet’s nest.

I also heard about the impossibility of controlling the entire information flow. The alliance between Israel and the United States is probably the deepest and most multifaceted in the world. Representatives of the two countries interact many times daily on a vast spectrum of subjects—strategic, diplomatic, commercial, social, scientific, and even spiritual. In theory, the ambassador is supposed to supervise all these contacts, or at least be privy to them. In reality, the volume is far too massive. Many officials, especially from the military and intelligence community, distrust the civilian foreign ministry and prefer to operate without its knowledge. And since the Israeli government is less a “team of rivals” than a coalition whose members are often in competition with one another, it is not unusual for a minister to show up at the White House without communicating, much less coordinating, with the embassy.

As another former emissary advised me, “you can devote 100 percent of your time to staying on top of 60 percent of the back-and-forth traffic, or you can devote 30 percent of your time to monitoring and then maybe get something done.”

I had learned two essential lessons—the need to build a trustworthy team, and to know what you can and cannot manage—before even arriving in Washington. Nothing, though, could prepare me for the adversity awaiting me there. The former envoys I interviewed had served during the comparatively halcyon Reagan, Bush, and Clinton years. But the Obama administration would prove to be fundamentally different in its relationship with the Jewish state.

From the outset, the Obama White House worked to downgrade the uniqueness of the U.S.-Israel relationship and to normalize it. One of the ways to achieve this was to weaken the influence of AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations. Accordingly,

the administration fostered the creation of J Street, a lobby that defined itself as pro-Israel, although it rarely supported Israel diplomatically and often worked to delegitimize it. The White House took pains to invite J Street to its first meeting with American Jewish leaders, and it publicly excoriated me—in the first communiqué issued by its Office to Combat Anti-Semitism—for refusing to attend J Street’s annual conference. More jarringly, throughout most of her term, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton boycotted the Israeli Embassy and refused to accept my phone calls. My main point of contact with the administration—fortunately—was Vice President Joe Biden, who always took my calls.

Beyond these largely symbolic measures, the administration departed from long-standing American policies toward Israel. It abandoned the twin principles, honored since the 1980s, of “no daylight” and “no surprises.” The first held that, to the greatest degree possible, tensions between the two countries should be worked out discreetly and out of the public eye.

The second was an American commitment to inform Israel in advance of any statements that might affect its security and to give Israeli leaders the opportunity to comment on them. But President Obama maintained that “no daylight” had hardened Israel’s positions (in fact, just the opposite was true), and he vigorously publicized our differences. Beginning with his June 2009 speech in Cairo, and continuing through several major addresses that impacted Israel profoundly, the president never once gave Israel forewarning.

More damaging, though, were the clashes over Israeli settlement building in Judea and Samaria—the West Bank—and East Jerusalem. The new administration quickly adopted a platform of “not a brick on a brick,” with which no Israeli government, even one from the Left, could comply if it wanted to survive politically. This led to an almost unbroken spate of crises and successive American condemnations of Israel.

Yet even this friction ultimately paled beside that generated by the administration’s efforts to achieve a rapprochement with

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton boycotted the Israeli Embassy and refused to accept my phone calls. My main point of contact with the administration—fortunately—was Vice President Joe Biden, who always took my calls.

Iran and secure an agreement on its nuclear program. In his very first week in office, President Obama reached out to the Iranian regime and took numerous steps—many inimical to Israel and conducted without its knowledge—to reorient America away from its traditional Middle Eastern allies and toward Tehran. The 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, which the White House touted as a historic achievement, was widely regarded in Israel as a strategic, if not existential, threat.

Israel also contributed to the friction by announcing large-scale construction projects—once, insultingly, during Vice President Biden’s visit to the country—and by appearing to side with the president’s Republican detractors. Israel launched military and intelligence operations against Iran and its proxies that often aroused the Obama administration’s ire.

And then there was the personal animus between Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The president treated the head of America’s most important democratic ally, as *Washington Post* columnist Jackson Diehl described it, “like a third-world dictator.” The prime minister lectured Obama in the Oval Office and assailed his Iran policy before Congress. No two leaders—the one averse to the use of military force and deeply committed to the United Nations and other international bodies, and the other determined to uphold his country’s security at

Entering the White House, I was more than once greeted jokingly with, ‘What, you’re not on CNN?’

almost any cost, while regarding the UN as a curse—could have been more temperamentally and philosophically mismatched.

What, then, was an ambassador to do?

As the son of a veteran of the Normandy landings, I had long been an advocate of triage: When under fire, address the problems that can most benefit from intervention, ignore what cannot be helped or what will otherwise take care of itself, and press on. In diplomatic terms, this meant rectifying only the most serious staff issues while aggressively addressing crises. Unfortunately, my predecessors’ warnings proved accurate: Virtually every word I spoke to foreign-ministry officials, even in the most classified settings, appeared in the morning papers. So my first task was to identify those individuals I could trust. The team did not have to be large. Mine was composed of my deputy chief of mission, my spokesman, my chief of staff, and a congressional liaison.

A greater difficulty arose from the fact that, though I was personally appointed by the prime minister, I was never especially close to Netanyahu and had never been a member of the Likud. This did not elevate my profile in Washington.

Raising it required the diplomatic equivalent of an end run. The Obama administration was especially sensitive to the media. This presented an opportunity to harness my experience as a newspaper columnist and television commentator. Penning some 60 op-eds and performing hundreds of TV and radio interviews, spending many hours on background briefings, and appearing on popular talk shows significantly enhanced my stature. Entering the White

House, I was more than once greeted jokingly with, “What, you’re not on CNN?”

A similar tactic was to greatly expand my social calendar, attending innumerable balls and galas and hosting prominent guests at the residence. These events were hard work and essential for establishing personal relationships. But beyond the usual meet and greets, I sponsored a series of intercultural dinners and performances, including Israel’s first-ever official Iftar—the nightly break-fast of Muslims during Ramadan—which made headlines in the United States and which has remained an annual event on the embassy’s calendar.

While some Israeli ambassadors may see themselves as the prime minister’s envoy to the president, I chose to act as Israel’s emissary to America. Whenever possible, I traveled to cities and towns far from the usual diplomatic route. Sundays often found me in churches, not all of them warm to Israel, and weekdays on campuses that were openly hostile. I attended popular gatherings, such as the 150th reenactment of the Gettysburg battle, and innumerable sports events. Irrespective of the venue, the goal was always the same: to introduce Israel to the wider American public.

Israel’s ambassador to Washington is also Israel’s representative to the American Jewish community—or, more accurately, communities. The once-vaunted bipartisan support for Israel in the United States had begun to break down, with profound ramifications for American Jews, the overwhelming majority of whom vote Democratic. Most of them supported the Iran nuclear deal, deeply disappointing Israeli leaders. Israel, for its part, withheld recognition from the liberal Jewish movements and denied them equal status at the Holy Places.

Bridging these divisions could easily have been a full-time job. While trying to explain American Jewish perspectives to policymakers at home, I reached out to Reform and Conservative rabbis and organized a series of “tisches”—roundtable discussions—between them and their Orthodox counterparts. I devoted more than two

years to mediating an agreement that guaranteed egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall. The objective, throughout, remained unchanged: to preserve the unity of Jewish people and the status of Israel as our nation-state.

By the end of my first year in office, I had internalized the lessons that would guide me over the next four, most of all when it came to reaching out beyond my political comfort zone. No amount of lessons, unfortunately, could ease the strains with the Obama administration.

The response was what might be called a “whole of government” approach—taking advantage of the fact that there is more to the U.S. government than the executive branch. It meant identifying those areas of American decision-making most sympathetic, or at least open to, Israel’s positions. Consequently, I more than doubled the time I spent on Capitol Hill, forging personal relationships with members from both parties as well as their senior advisers. I similarly reached out to the military, spending days at the academies and officer-training schools. Wherever I went, I adhered to the self-imposed rule of never working behind the administration’s back. Even when lobbying against President Obama’s policies, I always apprised his advisers of my activities and so retained their confidence.

But the crises kept recurring and even escalating. I often imagined myself bound to two chariots racing in opposite directions. The best I could do was to maintain, at least unilaterally, the “no daylight” principle by downplaying the depth and scope of our disagreements while spotlighting the areas of consensus. If the administration was making concessions to Iran that Israelis saw as dangerous, I praised America’s commitment to our security and to Israel’s right to self-defense. If Israel was constructing apartment complexes in East Jerusalem and being condemned for it, I explained that even the best of friends can disagree. The effort helped dispel the image of a weakening alliance and deny our enemies the temptation to exploit it.

Simultaneously, in my conversations with Israeli leaders, I explained what the situation looked like to Americans and how they might react to our decisions. This was perhaps my hardest role, as it often meant going against the advice of most of the prime minister’s senior staff, some of whom faulted me for being too conciliatory to the administration. My strategy was to be as creative and proactive as possible, to regard every crisis as an opportunity, to present Israel’s case directly to the American public, and to elevate the embassy’s status in Washington’s social calendar. And yet, no matter how imaginative and robust, an ambassador is only one person whose ability to affect the course of events is ultimately limited.

In the United States, as in Israel, historical processes continue to alter society and reorient politics in ways that may further strain our bilateral ties and fray our alliance. The U.S. is not only withdrawing from the Middle East but also retreating from many aspects of world affairs in general. America is unlikely to project the large-scale military power upon which its allies, Israel among them, have long depended. An ambassador can interpret these developments and recommend the policies necessary to adapt to them. He or she can work to mitigate the negative impact of some of these developments and even delay them. But, in the end, an ambassador merely represents, rather than leads, a country and can pursue only those diplomatic, social, and media measures that best advance its interests.

Those tasks can be weighty enough, and the lessons I learned in Washington proved essential to fulfilling them. Listen to your predecessors, build a trustworthy team, play to your strengths, think and act out of the box, earn the trust of key players, reach out of your political comfort zones, direct your energies solely at those situations that you can affect, and understand the limits of your power—all are necessary if an ambassador is to succeed at the job and demonstrate that it is, in fact, winnable. *

Between Hostile and Crazy: Jews and the Two Parties



HOW CAN Jewish Americans who care about the welfare of the United States, Israel, and the Jewish people navigate a world in which one major party is trending toward “woke” hostility to Israel and the other is barreling into authoritarianism? How can Jews use their influence wisely?

First, a few thoughts about power. A quick way to earn the ire of Jewish organizations in the United States—and globally, for that matter—is to suggest that Jews are powerful. Other interest groups vigorously assert and demand power. “Black power” and “Woman power” graced posters and T-shirts in the Sixties and Seventies. But you won’t see “Jew power” on a baseball cap. For Jews, power is, as the progressives might say, “problematic.”

This is not mere modesty. Unlike racism or sexism, which are grounded in contempt for imagined inferiority, antisemitism is bound up with fantasies about Jewish power. Antisemites weave phantasmagoric tales about the hidden and controlling hand

behind banking, the media, the Congress, even the weather. Jews have been blamed for depressions, revolutions, plagues, and wars. Little wonder that Jews are wary of being called powerful.

Right-wing antisemites in our time imagine that Jewish overlords are plotting to replace the white, Christian population of the United States with immigrants: The Charlottesville marchers chanted, “Jews will not replace us,” and the gunman who mowed down 11 people in a Pittsburgh synagogue was obsessed with HIAS (formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and its work to resettle refugees. Then there is QAnon: an otherwise inexplicable conspiracy that imagines a Satanic cabal of child-eating cannibals, best understood as a revival of the medieval antisemitic myth of Jews kidnapping and sacrificing Christian children to make matzo. Soros, Rothschild, and Hollywood moguls feature prominently as villains. Some polls have found that 29 percent of Republicans believe that the QAnon conspiracy is “completely or mostly accurate,” along with 7 percent of Democrats. Even in a time of iPhones and miraculous vaccines, ancient, feculent fairy tales have not lost their power to warp people’s minds.

Left-wing antisemites obsess about Jewish power in other arenas. Jewish money, they say, is the tainted source of American support for Israel. As Representative Ilhan Omar put it: “It’s all about the Benjamins, baby.” Nor are leftists above reviving old antisemitic canards in their calumnies against Israel. As three prominent U.K. Jewish thinkers wrote in a 2017 letter to *The Times* of London: “Anti-Zionism frequently borrows the libels of classical Jew-hating....Accusations of international Jewish conspiracy and control of the media have resurfaced to support false equations of Zionism with colonialism and imperialism, and the promotion of vicious, fictitious parallels with genocide and Nazism.”

The attribution of power to Jews is a classic ingredient of antisemitism, but it strikes many Jews as wildly absurd. A sense of powerlessness is deeply embedded in the Jewish psyche. Jewish history is mostly perceived to be a tale of defeat, dispossession, dispersal, and persecution. For millennia, Jews were denied rights,

hounded, and pursued. They were forced to live by their wits and to look over their shoulder. Some wealth was always kept in portable form, the better to be smuggled out in flight. The Passover Haggadah intones, “In each and every generation they rise up against us to destroy us. And the Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hands.” On the eve of Israel’s birth, David Ben-Gurion telegraphed his intention to defy this heritage of weakness when he described Zionism as a “revolution...against destiny, against the unique destiny of a unique people.”

So, while American Jews may be thankful for the benevolence of the American experience, and joyful at the revival of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, they instinctively reject the attribution of power.

In fact, American Jews do enjoy power, though in neither the quantity nor quality imagined by their detractors. Much of that power derives from the behaviors of any good citizens in a democracy: grassroots organizing, strong voting participation in key states, and financial contributions.

Contrary to the pernicious stereotype about Jews wielding secret influence, the chief power Jewish Americans have brought to bear is the most open kind there is—the power of persuasion. Jews have excelled at telling the story of Jewish persecution and Jewish resilience.

This is especially true with respect to Israel. But while AIPAC’s educational foundation sponsors trips to Israel for members of Congress, faith leaders, and others that are eye-opening experiences for Americans who know little about the region or the conflict, the notion that a Jewish lobby controls American foreign policy is risible. American support for Israel is rooted in many factors, of which the fervent commitment of the American Jewish community is only one. It was President Richard Nixon’s perception of Israel as a bulwark against the Soviets that accounted for his decision to rush military aid to Israel during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, not Jewish votes (Jews had voted overwhelmingly for McGovern, his

The chief power Jewish Americans have brought to bear is the most open kind there is—the power of persuasion.

competitor, the year before). Nor, as the release of his White House tapes later revealed, did he harbor much affection for the Jews.

Subsequent presidents and Congresses supported Israel because it was a valuable ally in a critical region, first in the Cold War and later in the war on terror. Most Americans agree, tending to see Israel as a struggling democracy in a tough region: An *Economist/YouGov* poll from early 2021 found that 40 percent of Americans consider Israel to be an “ally” and another 27 percent believe it to be “friendly.” (Only 14 percent characterized it as either “unfriendly” or an “enemy.”)

Yet partisan polarization regarding Israel has been worsening, accelerated by the Trump presidency. Pew found that between 2016 and 2018, the percentage of Democrats who sympathized more with Israel than with the Palestinians declined from 43 to 27, while the percent increased for Republicans, from 75 to 79 percent.

This bifurcation represents a threat. It is clearly not in Israel’s interests to be linked with one political party in the United States. Israel needs reliable friends on both sides of the aisle and has traditionally enjoyed such. Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arguably strained the loyalties of some Democrats by choosing to confront President Obama directly, even delivering his 2015 address to Congress about Iran over Obama’s objections. While Netanyahu was probably correct about the defects of the Iran deal, the decision to alienate Democrats was questionable, as was his bear hug of Trump. The cratering of Democratic sympathy evident in the Pew poll may be attributable at least in part to that.

There are corresponding risks with being linked too closely with

For the first time in history, Jews must ask themselves not just how they can survive and thrive in this country, but how they can help to heal the breach, and preserve the nation.

progressives, especially with respect to the price the Left extracts from Jews in exchange for toleration. As Bari Weiss argues in *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*:

In order to be welcomed as a Jew in a growing number of progressive groups, you have to disavow a list of things that grows longer every day. Whereas once it was enough to criticize Israeli government policy, specifically its treatment of Palestinians, now Israel's very existence must be denounced.

Progressives have made strides in the Democratic Party but have not achieved lift-off as the reigning ideology—a 2020 Pew survey found that only 15 percent of Democrats call themselves “very liberal.” Thus, when Bernie Sanders introduced a resolution during Israel's conflict in May 2021 with Hamas calling for a cessation of military aid to Israel, he appeared to speak for only a minority of Democrats, at least for now. No other Senators signed on to his resolution, and only three House members endorsed similar legislation in that chamber.

But all of this leaves Jews with a perilous path to tread. The embrace of the Trumpist Right, evident among groups such as the Republican Jewish Coalition, has the potential to alienate moderate Democrats and even the 15–20 percent of Republicans who were repelled by Trump. Yes, the Trump administration's policies were

helpful to Israel—although the Abraham Accords may owe more to President Obama's Iran tilt, which frightened Arab states into Israel's arms, than to Trump. But the Trump presidency and the movement he heads unleashed long-dormant furies on the Right. A movement that demonizes minorities, elevates conspiracy theories, disdains truth, and threatens the rule of law is a profound threat to Jews even if, in the short run, it seems to have delivered some benefits for Israel.

Today's Republican Party is vigorously, even passionately pro-Israel. Israel has become a wedge issue for Republican politicians who link Democrats to terrorism and fundraise by highlighting the anti-Israel and antisemitic tweets of Ilhan Omar and others. The Republican Party has also welcomed into its ranks the likes of Representatives Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert. Boebert is a gun-slinging QAnon advocate who called the events of January 6 the equivalent of 1776. Greene is all that, and she also dabbles in theories about Rothschild space lasers causing California forest fires.

More disturbing than the kooks is the transformation of the Republican Party writ large into a Trump cult that is impervious to facts and evidence and trending in an apocalyptic direction. Far from being repelled by the attempted coup on January 6, a majority of Republicans have rallied to Trump's fictitious interpretation. Some 53 percent of Republicans believe that the 2020 election was stolen.

Trump's assault on truth worked as a corroding acid on American civic life during his presidency. Faith in institutions had already been in steep decline, but Trump propelled his party into a cul-de-sac in which otherwise normal Americans were spouting conspiracies about a “deep state” stealing a presidential election. Without faith in elections, violence becomes not only thinkable but plausible. A recent American Enterprise Institute survey found that 56 percent of Republicans agree with the statement that “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to *use force* to save it.”

A Republican Party that embraces conspiracies, tolerates racism, stigmatizes immigrants, and celebrates political violence will

probably not remain friendly to Jews or Israel. But even if it does, Jews must ask themselves whether supporting such a party advances the national interest or their values. As Rabbi Hillel famously asked: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

When confronting a Democratic Party with an anti-Israel progressive wing whose members credit an unhistorical and frankly libelous interpretation of Israel’s history, Jewish Americans are called to educate, agitate, and persuade as they have always done in American life. But when confronting a Republican Party that is dangerous to the health of the republic itself, the bargain cannot be “but Israel.” Hillel’s question echoes: “What am I?”

Bitter polarization threatens not just American Jews, but America itself. It represents the most urgent challenge confronting the Jewish community and individual Jews. For the first time in history, Jews must ask themselves not just how they can survive and thrive in this country, but how they can help to heal the breach and preserve the nation.

This work can proceed on many tracks simultaneously. Political reforms such as nonpartisan primaries and limits on gerrymandering are promising. Pushing back against the firehose of falsehood on the internet is a massive task that we are just in the early stages of managing. Like the printing press, radio, and other information technologies, the internet has empowered the worst in human nature along with the best, and it takes time for society to wake to the danger and devise counterstrategies. Jews have an acute historical understanding of the dangers of conspiracy thinking and belong on the front lines of those raising alarms and devising deprogramming ideas.

The nation is riven by rancorous fights over American identity to a degree unseen since the Civil War, and here American Jews may have a uniquely valuable contribution to make. Some of the energy that Jewish organizations have devoted to telling Israel’s story should be redirected to telling America’s. Jewish organizations and

individuals ought to weigh in on curriculum debates such as that over the 1619 Project versus 1776 Unites, or on critical race theory, pro and con. Americans on both sides of these arguments think the soul of the nation is at stake, and they believe that those on the other side are enemies.

Jewish Americans can offer a middle ground: acutely sensitive to the agony of racism and discrimination, and able to bring that historical perspective to bear on contemporary discussions, yet also grateful for the haven that America has provided for centuries and aware of the preciousness of liberty. Jews can help craft American history courses that walk the careful line between air-brushing American history and damning the entire national project. The country desperately needs fair-minded interpreters who can find the words that will permit both sides of this acrid controversy to exhale, while enriching our national story.

Another path to healing the breach might be to endow a new prize—an American version of the Nobel Peace Prize, to be awarded annually for a person or entity that is successfully fighting polarization. It could be endowed by Jewish philanthropists alone or in concert with others. A fitting name would be the Micah Prize, in honor of George Washington’s favorite prophet. Washington quoted his words some 50 times over the course of his life, most famously when paying his respects to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island: “May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

Americans are afraid in 2021 —of the pace of change, of foreign foes, but most of all of one another. The moment cries out for the comfort envisioned by the biblical prophet, endorsed by the father of our country, that offers a vision for a pluralist society where Jews, and everyone, can thrive. *

MARK DUBOWITZ

How to Use Antisemitism Against Antisemites



JEWISH POWER in America? When SAPIR approached me to contribute an essay to this issue, my first instinct was to decline. I was born in South Africa and raised and educated in Canada. I became a U.S. citizen only in 2015, 12 years after moving to the country. My “lived experience” as an American Jew is somewhat limited.

Then again, as the chief executive of a Washington think tank, I have had a prime perch from which to watch the exercise of Jewish power—or rather, *alleged* Jewish power—in this country. The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) spends considerable time observing the Islamic Republic of Iran. My 20 years of studying Iranian mullahs and Iranian rhetoric have given me an intimate acquaintance with Jewish power as it is perceived through the warped lens of antisemitism.

In 2019, I came to see my own image grotesquely distorted through that lens when the Iranian government, in an official sanc-

tions order, singled out FDD as “the designing and executing arm of the U.S. administration” and authorized Iran’s “judicial or security institutions” to “counter, prosecute, or punish” FDD—and me. A regime with the largest missile and terrorist arsenal in the Middle East had declared its intent to harm an American Jew who runs a 50-person think tank. In 2020, the regime also sanctioned my FDD colleague Richard Goldberg, a lieutenant commander in the Navy Reserve who had, for many years, worked in Congress and the White House on Iran policy.

To be fair to the mullahs, I have spent considerable time working with four administrations and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle on sanctions against the Islamic Republic. I have also been outspoken in my opposition to the nuclear deal of 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). But my arsenal of weapons is limited. It comprises little more than my overly active Twitter account, periodic congressional testimonies, a steady stream of op-eds and media appearances, a habit of reading the fine print of International Atomic Energy Agency reports, and a willingness to nag policymakers to keep their focus on the Iranian threat.

The Iranian government isn’t the only one to endow me with outsize power. The mainstream American media have fed the same mindset.

In a 2018 profile, one prominent Washington reporter, referencing the influence of Jewish money, wrote that “Mark Dubowitz’s campaign to draw attention to what he saw as the flaws in the Iran nuclear deal has taken its place amongst the most consequential ever undertaken by a Washington think tank leader.” It’s a great quote that has helped me raise money from Jewish and non-Jewish donors alike. The article itself, however, was woefully inaccurate and wound up being appended by a massive four-point correction. Journalistic integrity has a way of going out the window when the target is a member of the you-know-who lobby.

But that will not have stopped the regime in Iran from seeing the article as further evidence that it’s the Dubowitzes and

Who can blame Khamenei and his minions for believing in cosmic Jewish powers when so many respectable Washington insiders seem to believe in them as well?

Goldbergs of America who are the puppet masters in Washington. When it comes to confirming crackpot theories of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy, it helps to have the imprimatur of the same media they are said to control.



To study Iranian rhetoric on the subject of Jews and Zion is to be reminded of the old joke about two Jews sitting on a park bench poring over the news. One, reading the *Jerusalem Post*, is in despair, lamenting Jewish vulnerability from a new barrage of attacks on Israel and a spike of anti-Jewish violence in European and American cities. The other Jew, reading the Iranian press, is delighted by tales of Jewish power, as he reads that the Zionists control Washington, Wall Street, Hollywood, the global financial markets, and the global media.

Halevai that it should be so — if only we *were* that powerful.

Unfortunately this is not, actually, a joke. Here is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in real life: “Today,” he tweeted in 2020, “the epitome of rebellion, arrogance and tyranny is the U.S. government, which is controlled by the wealthy Zionist individuals and corporate owners.” In a 2017 speech, he declared, “The U.S. is the agent of global Zionism. There is a malicious and dangerous network in the world which is called ‘global Zionism.’” In 2015, he tweeted, “The day when West-

ern ppl realize that their problems result from #Zionism’s hegemony over govts they will make an inescapable #hell for them.”

Here is Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, heralded in left-wing circles as a “reformer” (and apparently the spearhead for the campaign against FDD): The pro-Israel lobby AIPAC, he tweeted in 2020, “dictates US — & Western — policy in the Mid East...#AIPAC has poisoned US politics for years, overtly giving instructions to Congress. Time to end #APARTHEID Israel’s tyranny over Western halls of power.”

And here is the 1988 charter of Hamas, an Iranian proxy, explaining the terrorist group’s reasoning (or should I say, “reasoning”) for despising the Jews: “With their money, they took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations, and others. With their money they stirred revolutions in various parts of the world with the purpose of achieving their interests and reaping the fruit therein. They were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there. With their money they formed secret societies, such as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, the Lions and others in different parts of the world for the purpose of sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests.”

It would be bad enough if these fairy tales about Jewish omnipotence were limited to Islamist antisemites; even worse is the way they find currency within U.S. policy, media, and academic circles.

The idea that “The Israel Lobby” runs Washington was made semi-respectable over a decade ago by Steven Walt and John Mearsheimer, two professors at the summit of U.S. academia. To this day, it is Jewish policymakers such as Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, and Richard Perle who are widely blamed for drawing the U.S. into the Iraq War, despite their being (respectively) second-, third-, and fourth-tier officials in the Bush administration, while all the principals — George Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, et al. — were Christians. The Obama

administration did much the same when its chief spin-doctor Ben Rhodes decried Jewish-American opposition to Obama's nuclear deal. One leading American broadsheet lent a helping hand when it listed the Jewish religion of those Democratic lawmakers who opposed the deal — with graphics to match.

Who can blame Khamenei and his minions for believing in cosmic Jewish powers when so many respectable Washington insiders, in government and the media, seem to believe in them as well?

So what is the Jewish community to do with all this perceived power? The gap between reality and perception is wide. Yet it opens up a space for skillful negotiation by thoughtful Jewish leaders who understand that, as in certain martial arts, the key to winning is to turn an opponent's momentum against him.

By population, the Jews are a tiny people: almost 15 million worldwide, about 0.2 percent of the global population and about 2 percent of America's. There are approximately 6.9 million Israeli Jews, compared with an Iranian population of over 80 million, more than 420 million Arabs, and almost 2 billion Muslims. By sheer numbers, Jews are clearly outmatched. The intersecting echo chambers I have described mutually reinforce one another in a way that elevates the perceived power of a people who usually haven't had much power at all.

Yet the malignant perception of overwhelming Jewish power comes with a hidden but potent benefit: the chance to leverage the tropes used against Jews to Jewish advantage. If Khamenei, Hamas, and Hezbollah prefer to believe that Jews pull all the big levers of American might, it only feeds a mindset of paranoia and illogic that is usually self-defeating. It might even give them more reason to fear us than to fight us. If Tehran (or the Washington press corps) wants to feed the perception that my modestly sized think tank dictates U.S. policy in the Middle East, who am I to complain?

The challenge is to find a way to speak about Jewish power that neither gives aid to conspiracists nor feeds into a sense of Jewish hopelessness by decrying the decline of political influence.

What goes for U.S. policy in the Middle East goes for other areas of Jewish concern: Especially in a democracy, the perception of power *is* power, at least in the hands of those who know how to use it judiciously.

From biblical times onward, Jews have often proved adept at this, not for nefarious reasons but because we appreciate how necessary that perception can be to our own survival. To take one example: In 1991, after Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam lost his Soviet patron, he approached Israel as a conduit to Washington — doubtlessly on the idea that Israeli influence in Washington would surely be enough to rescue him. The belief was antisemitic, but it still helped set the basis for negotiations leading to the rescue of Ethiopian Jews in Operation Solomon.

Something similar might be said about the way Jewish politics play out in the U.S. By any standard metric, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is far from the biggest lobby in Washington — certainly not when compared with, say, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Rifle Association, or the pharmaceutical lobby. What *actual* power AIPAC has derives mainly from three strengths: the talent of its staff; the passion of its members; and, above all, the instinctual support that a majority of Americans (only a small fraction of whom are Jewish) feel for a

country they rightly see as an embattled bastion of democracy facing and fighting the same enemies that threaten the United States.

Yet AIPAC's critics, at home and abroad, like to paint it as a Washington juggernaut that politicians cross at their own peril. In a city where perception counts for almost everything, such a view can work in AIPAC's favor. As in the 1959 Peter Sellers classic, *The Mouse That Roared*, it's better to be a midget thought of as a giant than the other way around.



There is a final piece to the question of Jewish power in America, which is pedagogical.

For Jewish communal leaders, the challenge is to find a way to speak about Jewish power that neither gives aid to conspiracists nor feeds into a sense of Jewish hopelessness by decrying the decline of political influence. Those leaders must also contend with different manifestations of Jewish unease with power, particularly in the form of progressive Jews whose answer to the dilemmas of Jewish power is to become anti-Zionists while echoing anti-semitic allegations of Israel as a malignant, illegitimate, and even genocidal state.

Better for those leaders to *explain* Jewish history—a story that has often been about what happens to a powerless people in the face of the harshest geopolitical realities, from bigotry and legal discrimination to expulsion and genocide. Yet it's also a story of how that people have used power, whether real or reputed, to flourish against considerable odds. A people without power are, too often, a people without a future. Jewish leadership has a responsibility to ensure that this lesson is broadly understood.

Jewish communal leaders also should explain that Israel and its American Jewish supporters do not wield what power they have (or are perceived to have) indiscriminately. As Michael Oren, a historian and former Israeli ambassador to the United States, has

observed: “The IDF is generally regarded as one of the strongest and most sophisticated armies in the world, yet it does not use even a fraction of its potential strength against the people who, if they held such power, would hesitate not a moment to direct it at Israel's destruction.... Israelis fight, asking themselves at every stage whether in fact they are doing the right thing, the moral thing, the Jewish thing.”

Zionism, like Judaism, is not only about the relationship of the Jewish people to power. It is also about justice and peace—the return of a people to their ancestral homeland and a tireless commitment to building a society based on classical Jewish and liberal values. Judicious use of power, real or perceived, toward the realization of that goal is not only a historical necessity; it is a virtue. *

PART THREE

POWER IN CULTURE
& PHILANTHROPY



Philanthropy Is Not Enough



PHILANTHROPY, φιλανθρωπία, is Greek, meaning man-loving.

Tzedakah, תְּדָקָה, is Hebrew. Its root, קִּיּוּן-דָּל, means justice.

Justice. Not charity.

Jewish destiny should be shaped by *tzedakah*, not by philanthropy; the difference here is not etymology but rather ontology.

The תְּדָקָה מִיְנֵהּ (consequential distinction) dances on two levels between the two concepts. Most fundamentally, the distinction of consequence is a question of identity. What does it mean to be a Jew investing in social change? For me, it is not about repurposing *tikkun ha'olam*, to mean being charitable. Investing in social change from a Jewish perspective means operating from a framework of commandedness. *Tzedakah* givers can be influenced by the tax code and by contemporary challenges in the civic square, but they are ultimately directed and regulated by an eternal framework, and not a human, voluntary, ephemeral one.

The second distinction is practical: *Tzedakah* is a more just, inclusive, and better-regulated system of social investing than philanthropy.

In my view, Jews should make *tzedakah*, not give charity. *Tzedakah*—not philanthropy—leads to a better world.

PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropy can make a huge, positive social impact. Carnegie created revolutions in health care and public education in America. Rosenwald stood in place of the state, insisting on education for black Americans in the South.

Philanthropy creates good.

But philanthropy is ultimately charity: a human moral instinct, an intuition or a feeling that surges and recedes within the individual who brings time, money, and power to the table. Philanthropy honors power: the creative, disruptive, innovative power that built America and American culture. But unregulated, this power spreads inequity as a disease in the world.

Accountability in philanthropy is largely self-determined. Donors' moral judgment drives philanthropy; no marketplace constrains philanthropic power by reward or punishment. Nor is there a market view of the impact or efficiency of the hundreds of billions of dollars of philanthropic money that courses through America and Israel, no agreed-upon standards or measures of philanthropic impact, no quarterly calls from CEOs to stakeholders accounting for performance, no stock price indicating how philanthropists are succeeding or failing.

At its worst, intentionally or unwittingly, philanthropy undermines the very system it invests in, holding social entrepreneurs and their organizations hostage to burdensome application processes within annual funding horizons, forcing them to spend half their time soliciting grants rather than changing reality, all the while leaving them vulnerable to fickle, year-to-year decision-making.

Contrast the governance (required by the Sarbanes-Oxley Act) of a \$100 million public-company CEO with the requirements — Form

990s—demanded of a \$100 million foundation head, whose “business” is subsidized by taxpayers through charitable deductions. The imbalance in oversight is absurd. Both CEOs operate with a public trust, but only one is held accountable.

Power—decisions moral or social or whimsical, about which issues deserve resources and on what terms—sits with the philanthropist, with essentially no communal voice or oversight.

TZEDAKAH

Tzedakah is divinely commanded, an inclusive obligation that applies to every Jew, rich or poor. Giving for basic human needs in a Jewish community is an enforceable obligation that can be compelled by the Beit Din, the rabbinical court.

But *tzedakah* is not just a tax. Jews are exhorted to give of themselves, to be creative, to be passionate, to be innovative—as the best of philanthropists are—but in a specific context:

צדק צדק תרדו למען תחיה וברשת את הארץ אשר יהי אלקיך נתן לך

Justice, justice, shall you pursue—so that you may thrive and live in the Land that Hashem your G-d has given you (Deuteronomy 16:20).

G-d commands us to *pursue* justice—an unrelenting and yet circumscribed imperative that is a fundamental principle of the Jewish worldview. Pursuit is an asymptotic aspiration that implicitly recognizes that justice is divine. *Tzedakah* is rooted in this awareness of human limits and is commanded within this framework of radical humility.

The power of allocation in *tzedakah*, the question of which causes get time and attention, sits in explicit and creative tension between the individual Jewish investor and the wisdom of Jewish communal leadership.

The Jewish wisdom tradition is deeply engaged with this tension between individual will and collective responsibility.

By design, *tzedakah* is collected by no fewer than two communal representatives—*gabbaim*—appointed by, and answerable to, the community (Bavli Bava Batra 8b). By design, a community can coerce giving, but communal power *can never be held by only one person*. By design, the individual, no matter how rich or powerful, is subordinate to the community.

The Jewish wisdom tradition is deeply engaged with this tension between individual will and collective responsibility.

Judaism does not abjure individual power—the Talmud names many Jews who invested *tzedakah* with power for the common good (see Bavli Gittin 56a as an example)—but Judaism is explicitly cautious about the individual exercise of power. (Among the sins we confess on Yom Kippur is “misuse of power.”) Power can create innovation and new solutions—but in a *tzedakah* system, the exercise of power is deeply regulated, in a religious sense, lest its exercise disenfranchise or distort.



In American Jewish communities today, it seems clear that philanthropy, not *tzedakah*, rules. I assert with humility that there are two problems with this.

First, there is a lack of Jewish understanding of *tzedakah* as a Jewish framework. This is a question of identity. We have a wisdom tradition that has much to say to Jewish changemakers—social entrepreneurs and *tzedakah* investors alike—but that wisdom is

Tzedakah demands accountability, not just
to the tax code, but to eternal standards.

It is fully inclusive and it is rooted in humility.

blurred, un-accessed, undervalued. Esau said of his birthright: Of what value is this to me (Genesis 25:32)? His question haunts us today: How can *tzedakah* bring its power to bear for the Jews if we have no conception of what our tradition teaches?

Generosity of spirit notwithstanding, philanthropy has devolved power to a very limited number of power players, free from meaningful regulation or communal accountability. These philanthropists exert too much unregulated power over the social and civic framework of Jewish life in Israel and America.

We find ourselves with a Jewish communal operating system characterized by the Golden Rule—those with the gold make the rules. The ideology of individual philanthropy trumps the Torah of *tzedakah* and community in practice.

If this choice of ideology were working, perhaps we'd shrug our shoulders and sacrifice process for impact. But does anyone really believe that the current reality of Jewish life is working?

In a generation more free, with more resources and access to education and opportunity than ever, our children know Shakespeare but not Rashi. When they think of 1492, they think about Columbus, not the expulsion of Jews from Spain. In the shadow of “start-up nation,” do we see that more Israelis are food-insecure than 10 years ago? Yet we continue to count on the self-directed largesse from the lions of philanthropy. Hundreds of millions spent on Jewish education, Jewish identity, campus activities, Israel experiences—and yet social gaps yawn, Jewish illiteracy proliferates.

When do we ask whether philanthropy alone is the right system for addressing the holes in the heart of our community?

Perhaps *tzedakah* needs a second look from the Jewish givers of this generation.

First, it is *our* system, *our* identity, and we need to engage with questions of our identity as a fundamental piece of our giving. Those Jews who invest in and make social change need to hear and feel Jewish wisdom as a part of their work. For reading lists to feature *The Gospel of Wealth* or *From Generosity to Justice*, but not to include Rabbi Elazar on *gemilut hasadim* (acts of loving kindness) (Bavli Sukkah 49b)—as but one of countless examples—is a real and concrete tragedy.

Second, downstream, there is practical value to be created by Jews practicing *tzedakah*. If the powerful Jewish givers who do so much good in America and in the world infused their philanthropy with more *tzedakah* philosophy, they would by their leadership re-regulate the too-unregulated power of the individual. *Tzedakah* adds to philanthropy a much-needed sense of responsibility for the common good, a corrective to the fetishization of one person's genius or whim.

In our riven world—where a pandemic has exposed our many vulnerabilities, where the disintegration of America's institutions has allowed Jew-hatred to flourish, where the political implosion in Israel continues to expose the limits of our progress toward the vision of *Megillat HaAtzma'ut*, Israel's Declaration of Independence—what risk do we take by re-centering the role of *tzedakah* in our communal living as a question of identity, and practice?

Imagine Jewish giving, one again understood as a Jewish communal commitment: All must give. Fantasy? No: commandedness. Not charity, but a real, inclusive commitment to the common Jewish good.

Imagine the creative energy of the individual innovator, contextualized within consequential communal oversight.

Imagine what direct service to the poorest Jews—Shoah survivors

who today are going hungry in Tel Aviv and New York—would look like if we were guided by Maimonides’s rules of *tzedakah*.

First, if we learned together what Maimonides lays out in *Hilchot Matanot Aniyim*, we would be stronger as a people. And if we practiced together from this framework?

Wow.

See the very language Maimonides uses to title this volume: These are not the *Laws of Gifts TO the Poor*; they are the *Laws of Gifts OF the Poor*. This distinction of language is breathtaking. Building Jewish destiny is not redistributing my wealth to you; it means sharing together the job of building a Jewish future.

For the first eight chapters, Maimonides teaches us the obligations imposed by the Torah on farmers at harvest time. The farmer is commanded to leave a corner of his field unharvested, part of his trees uncollected, a fallen sheaf unretrieved.

This is *not* an image of the farmer as philanthropist—he does not *give to* the poor, he *leaves for* the poor, so the poor can exercise agency and collect for themselves. This is not the farmer’s philanthropy, but the Torah’s *tzedakah*.

As Maimonides makes clear, without the hungry, the farmer cannot fulfill mitzvot such as Pe’ah or Leket. Jewish wisdom turns the human power construct of donor/recipient on its ear. The farmer needs the poor, as the poor need the farmer. This is a different worldview—a Jewish worldview.

Jewish farmers don’t give charity. Neither should Jews. Jewish farmers fulfill mitzvot in pursuit of justice. Jews are free to practice philanthropy, but we are obligated to make *tzedakah*.

In the final two chapters of *Matanot Aniyim*, Maimonides consolidates the Torah of *tzedakah*. From the agricultural Torah context, he teaches *tzedakah*, relevant in the 12th century and in the 21st. He lays out his famous eight levels of *tzedakah*.

The penultimate level of *tzedakah* in his schema is this:

הנותן צדקה לעניים ולא ידע למי נתן ולא ידע העניי ממי לקח

(one who gives *tzedakah* to the poor, and the giver does not know to whom he gives nor does the recipient know from whom he takes. [Laws of Gifts of the Poor 10:8])

This double-blind aspiration—for both giver and recipient—is an elegant and moving expression of *tzedakah*’s worldview. For Maimonides, double blind means that both actors—the giver and the recipient, the farmer and the gleaner—exist in one shared framework, working together to pursue justice.

And at the highest form of aspiration, *tzedakah* bids the giver to help a fellow Jew become independent, not in need of anyone’s help. Make the recipient a peer, liberate his or her agency, and together you will build a better world.

Tzedakah aspires to clear the obstacles, to accelerate the possibilities of agency. Not a hand out, but a hand up—because all of us are required to be part of the march toward justice, together.

Tzedakah—commanded and communal, not left to individual philanthropic instinct.

Tzedakah is our Jewish worldview, and it beats philanthropy. *Tzedakah* demands accountability, not just to the tax code, but to eternal standards. It is fully inclusive and it is rooted in humility. Whether rich and powerful by wealth, or innovative and creative by genius, all Jews are in covenant to a vision that is beyond contemporary mores. Jewish destiny will be better served by Jews making *tzedakah*, pursuing justice together, rather than by Jews giving charity. *

A conversation with

ELISA SPUNGEN BILDNER &
ROBERT BILDNER

The Power of Ethical Philanthropy



LISA SPUNGEN BILDNER and Rob Bildner have been influential, entrepreneurial, and actively engaged philanthropists in the North American Jewish community for more than two decades. They made a visionary contribution to the Jewish communal world in 1998 when they founded and provided the seed funding for the Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC), a public foundation supporting and promoting nonprofit Jewish camps in North America. Between them, the Bildners have been active board members of many major organizations in Jewish life. Most notably, Elisa has chaired the boards of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Jewish Funders Network, and Honeycomb (formerly Jewish Teen Funders Network); Rob was a founding board member of Repair the World; and they are both longtime board members of the Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale. They are also both attorneys, business entrepreneurs, and award-winning authors.

Managing Editor Felicia Herman sat down with Elisa and Rob to discuss their views on individual power and collective collaboration in philanthropy.

FH: Let's talk frankly about the role of power in philanthropy. One of the core critiques of philanthropy today—Jewish or otherwise—is that philanthropists wield too much power: They use their money to shape communal agendas and organizations in their own image, to coerce certain behaviors and beliefs among a populace whose values they don't share. What do you think of that idea?

ESB: I understand that there's vitriol against funders, especially mega-donors, but it's like so much of the criticism of wealth today: There's a patina of malevolence on it all. Obviously, philanthropists exert influence, but let's not inflate it too much. Givers just do what most people who care, who are involved, who have passion, do.

We don't consider ourselves mega-donors; we're not in that stratosphere. But the mega-donors are just like the rest of us—some have been phenomenal, and others have engaged in practices that might not be mine. Many of the Jewish organizations I've been involved with couldn't have survived without mega-donors, so I'm grateful to them for their generosity.

But there's also a larger principle at work here: I get concerned and distressed when *any* group of people is written off in one fell swoop. I'm trained as a lawyer, and I specialized in First Amendment law. I believe very strongly in the necessity of all individuals to speak out, no matter their perspectives, political or otherwise. We each come to life with different views, different ways we express ourselves, and that diversity is valuable.

FH: You both do a lot of different things with your time. How does philanthropy fit in? And can you dive a little deeper into this idea of

the diversity of givers, which seems a more distributed, multivocal idea of “power” in philanthropy than is usually assumed?

ESB: I look at it this way: In business and in philanthropy, we’re investors. We’re willing to take certain risks with our money to produce what we believe is a common good, something that people want and need. For example, we’ve been very involved with nonprofit Jewish summer camps, and I’ve been involved with Jewish media. With both, we’ve had big goals. We’ve tried to advance fields and to appeal to others to join us. Just like in business, if others agree with our vision and buy into it, then they join us financially. It’s a marketplace of ideas.

RB: We’re not forcing anything on anyone; this is all voluntary, and everyone involved has his own agency—they opt in or they don’t. We’ve been salespeople for big ideas. When we started the Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC), for example, there were many people out there who loved camp, but they were operating in silos, weren’t learning from one another, weren’t able to realize efficiencies across the field. No one was researching the impact of camp, which turned out to be pretty substantial. So in the beginning, we had to sell the idea that this was a big idea: There was much more going on here than just summertime fun in the woods.

FH: The way you’re speaking about investing in organizations also reminds me of Maimonides’s ladder of charity. The top of his eight “rungs” is entering into a partnership: giving someone a loan or a gift to enable him to become self-sufficient. When a donor has a strategic vision for their giving, this relationship is a two-way street that I think many people don’t understand: The recipients need the money, and the donors need the recipients to bring their philanthropic vision to life. Does that resonate with you?

RB: Actually, that’s precisely how we approached the development of FJC. It requires a lot of humility. We were bringing financial

Just like in business, if others agree with our vision and buy into it, then they join us financially. It’s a marketplace of ideas.

resources and our business expertise, but we weren’t operators of camps. So we were very respectful and very committed to learning from experts in the field. Philanthropy isn’t just about putting money into something; it’s also about respecting the people in the trenches who are doing the work. This goes back to the issue of power: We’re not doing any of this in a directive way. We’re partnering with the recipients in ways that work for all of us—it’s investment, collaboration, and partnership.

ESB: It’s anathema to me to routinely discuss philanthropy as a power play. Some funders might act that way, but for the most part, philanthropy done well is not that. It’s always been important for us to be in a community that’s learning about philanthropy in addition to doing it—that’s why we became involved with Jewish Funders Network. Part of the learning is specifically about how *not* to be top-down, how not to push our ideas on others. That’s a surefire way to fail, both in business and philanthropy. Every successful philanthropic endeavor I’ve been involved in has been collaborative, involving networking with others, listening, a real exchange of ideas. If it’s a kind of power, then it’s the power to inspire, to listen, to bring people in.

RB: I’d add this: With FJC, we had financial capacity, but to be really effective, we had to earn our power. It didn’t just come along with the money. We had to earn people’s trust, we had to prove that things were working. Instead of the word “power,” I’d

I think every board should strive to be as inclusive as possible across political leanings. Actually — it helps us *avoid* being political.

use the word “influence.” I don’t begrudge influence; I admire it. Power derives from having earned someone’s respect.

FH: All of the enterprises you’re discussing require a lot of money and a lot of people. The advantage of the kind of power-sharing you’re describing is clear: You can have greater impact if you band together with others. But it’s also complicated to have people with different views coming together. Can you talk about how you work through all of that?

ESB: An example: We decided from the beginning to create FJC as a public foundation. It wasn’t just us and our money—we needed to create something that other people could invest in. We knew we needed to recruit an outstanding board with multiple perspectives: from different denominations, ages, areas of the country, kinds of expertise. We needed to collaborate to develop a vision and a strategy that would work for a big, diverse field.

But yes—it’s not always easy. In some cases we have definitely seen what I’d call a lack of “etiquette” among some funders. Maybe they string people along, or aren’t transparent about how their decisions are made, or are playing games with people’s time and energy. But many funders who have similar values and passions can successfully play in the sandbox together, not be competitive, even if they don’t agree on everything.

FH: Do you think collaboration has become more difficult in

philanthropy in recent years because of political or other forms of differences? Have you seen political litmus tests for being involved with particular organizations, political agendas hidden in organizational work?

ESB: I really get upset about this idea of litmus tests, or when political views are superimposed on or considered in the actions of Jewish organizations, because it’s just wrong. Politics just don’t come into most of this work—it’s just not relevant.

RB: Of course, all of the funders we deal with have very distinct political ideologies. But what we’ve focused on in Jewish philanthropy is collaborating and partnering with folks with whom we have common ground on the issues we’re discussing. The rest of what someone believes doesn’t really matter to me—I can work with many types of people if we share something we care about. Take camp, for example: Whether the people we partner with are left, right, or center, we share a basic philosophy that Jewish camp is really important for our community. As FJC’s CEO, Jeremy Fingerman, always says: The camping field goes from the Haredim to Habonim—from the ultra-Orthodox to the labor Zionists. There’s no place, in my opinion, for bringing politics into this type of community building, which is the work that so many organizations are doing.

But yes, it has gotten harder—now there’s more of a partisan divide, and people have more extreme positions on different issues.

ESB: There’s an idea out there that I can’t understand, which is that we wouldn’t accept funding from someone, or wouldn’t include them on a board or in the governance of an organization, because of his politics. I’m not talking about criminals or about people with extremist or dangerous views. Outside those kinds of examples, though, we actually *need* multiple points of view, multiple political perspectives, to help sharpen our thinking. I think

every board should strive to be as inclusive as possible across political leanings. Actually—it helps us *avoid* being political, because we can't slip into groupthink or assume everyone around us agrees.

FH: I've seen this same dynamic on the boards I've been on, and in the giving circles that I've been a part of and helped to build. People from very different perspectives are around a table investing in the same recipients for totally different reasons. It's not just that we're discussing our views, but we actually need to accomplish things together—I think that's an incredibly important muscle to strengthen.

ESB: I'm so glad you raised giving circles. I know you're a giving-circle person, and I think they're really important to mention in the context of power and philanthropy because they indicate a positive direction in philanthropy: to be more inclusive. I can't tell you how many times people in the political or philanthropic arenas have told us that they don't feel they can make a difference because they don't have enough money. We've never felt that: Philanthropy just isn't a top-down power play, it's not a story of the powerful overwhelming other people with their ideas and their passions. Giving circles to me are a key example: People are sitting down to give collectively, to learn how to make decisions collectively.

This is happening with young people, too—I'm taking over as chair of the advisory board of Honeycomb, which engages teenagers in collaboratively giving and getting involved in Jewish life. And there's crowdfunding, Kickstarter, etc.—so many ways that didn't used to exist to get involved in philanthropy now. These enterprises all democratize giving. It's not always a pyramid with rich people on top; it's much more inclusive than that, much more diverse, much flatter.

FH: You're both alumni of the Wexner Heritage Program, which empowers emerging lay leaders with a grounding in Jewish text,

Giving is not always a pyramid with rich people on top; it's much more inclusive than that, much more diverse, much flatter.

history, and culture. Tell us about the Jewish wisdom and principles that underlie and inspire your giving.

ESB: We believe that Jews are responsible for one another, and in fact that's the foundation of our Jewish giving. Much of our giving is in the Jewish community, though we're also involved in secular and political causes. But we're concerned about the Jewish future. I saw an estimate that only 11 percent of giving by Jews goes to Jewish causes. That's troubling, because I don't know how we're going to sustain our community when community members don't feel compelled to give more generously.

RB: I agree with this concern, and I also believe that it's a Jewish principle to be active in the broader community. My parents, of blessed memory, were very active in civic institutions, from the performing-arts center to the food bank to the university systems, both because they felt obligated and because they wanted Jews to be known as donors to the community at large. The point is: We have to do *both*.

Another principle that's important to me is what you mentioned before, about Maimonides's ladder. We want to give to people, to institutions, that can utilize the gift in a very meaningful way, to enable them to be successful. We want to be their partners. That's a key Jewish principle to me.

Our focus has always been on young people. It's a tough sell, because younger people seem more interested in universalism than

in engaging with particularly Jewish organizations. I was one of the founding directors of Repair the World, which encourages young people to get involved in community service within a Jewish context. All of our work, really, has been about creating institutions to invite young Jews to engage with their heritage, their communities.

ESB: We also need to talk about the Federations. They're seemingly in decline, because there seems to be a shift away from what it means to be part of a collective. I think that's a mistake. Don't misunderstand me—this is in no way saying we should not be responsible for our neighbors, the world. But we also have a special responsibility for other Jews, and no one else is going to step in to assume that. One of the easiest ways to do that, it seems to me, is through the collective action of a Federation, because its work encompasses all facets of the Jewish community, including taking care of the most vulnerable among us, which is sometimes difficult to find individual philanthropic champions for. Federations support all Jews—I think we need to help Federations survive, especially in a time of individualism.

FH: We can't end this without talking for a moment about the COVID-19 pandemic. What we saw in the Jewish communal world was the value of organizational networks and collaborations that could wrap their arms around entire sectors or communities. And when the story of the pandemic is written, camp will be a huge part of the story. It looked as though it might collapse altogether, and not only did it not do that, but more kids will probably be able to go to camp this summer (2021) than ever.

RB: Yes, camp is going to be bigger than ever this year, we hope. It's extraordinary. Apart from our family, I think FJC is our greatest accomplishment.

ESB: The pandemic was an incredible example of so many funders coming together to ensure that the Jewish communal sector and

others would survive this terrible time. I want to offer a kind of paean to philanthropists, to the people who say, "There's a need, let's attack it. I'll take the risk that I could fail, that nobody will listen. I'm going to do it anyway." It's extraordinary. We see it in the camp world all the time, but of course it's everywhere. That's why I really bristle when negative ideas about power are associated with giving. Stop generalizing! And let's be grateful for the exemplary work so many people are doing.

RB: Agreed. This past year has offered a great model for how we can bridge divides, including political, partisan divides. By being respectful, trusting one another, working together, and giving generously to the things we care about and to the communities we're responsible for, especially in a time of real crisis. It's a real privilege to be a part of it. *

The Misuse of Expertise



CHOLARS POSSESS a unique kind of power: They are the “experts” on whom we rely to educate our children and our communities and to elevate our understanding of past and present. Communal organizations turn to scholars to provide information, perspective, and analysis, and to evaluate programs,

conduct original research, and make policy recommendations.

The power of the expert has long derived from the assumption that they bring objective, informed, and incisive analysis to the topics at hand. What those outside of academia may not understand, however, is that the standard of academic “objectivity” has long been eroding. Thanks to the postmodernist rejection of Enlightenment ideals of truth, objectivity, progress, morality, reason, and more, many scholars have come to instead embrace subjectivity, the influence of identity (or “positionality”) in understanding the world, and critical theories that argue that the motivating forces behind civilization are struggles for power along the lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, and so forth.

Once scholars began to see the past and present through the lens of power—a binary between the oppressors who have power and the oppressed who do not—it was a short step to arguing that scholarship and teaching should not simply open students’ minds to injustice and oppression, but should be used as tools to combat it. Hence the rise of the “scholar-activist.” At a time when the vast preponderance of liberal arts faculty in American universities share left-leaning political perspectives, however—77.6 percent of professors at Harvard identified as liberal or very liberal, for example—the risk of viewpoint homogeneity and single-minded political indoctrination is clear.

Jewish studies have not been immune from such trends. In the last several years, the “Jewish Studies Activist Network” has weighed in on many contemporary political conflicts in the United States and Israel. Calls to action proliferate across the field, whether in open letters or statements by professional associations. For example, in its June 2020 statement on the death of George Floyd, the Association for Jewish Studies called on its members to “channel our personal outrage in the application of our professional research, scholarship, practice, and teaching to participate in overturning the deeply entrenched institutional sources of race-based inequality that are barriers to a more just and equitable world.” More recently, over 200 Jewish and Israel studies scholars signed a May 2021 statement labeling Zionism as “a diverse set of linked ethno-nationalist ideologies...shaped by settler colonial paradigms” that have “assumed a hierarchy of civilizations” and “contributed to unjust, enduring, and unsustainable systems of Jewish supremacy, ethno-national segregation, discrimination, and violence against Palestinians.”

SAPIR asked Professor Jonathan D. Sarna to opine on the power of the scholarly “expert” in a time of subjectivity and activism. Sarna has observed these trends over his lifetime, first while growing up in a household of Jewish-studies pioneers, and then through his own award-winning career of many decades. Among his many roles in the field, he has held multiple leadership positions in Jewish studies, Israel studies, and Jewish Professional Leadership at Brandeis University, is a past

president of the Association for Jewish Studies, and is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

SAPIR: Tell us about the beginning of Jewish studies in the academy—the original ideal of objectivity and the goal of staying removed from Jewish communal interests and contemporary politics.

JS: The academic study of Jews and Judaism began in Germany in the 1820s. Revealingly, its founders employed the term *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, “the science of Judaism.” In their essential sourcebook *The Jew in the Modern World*, Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz underscore that *Wissenschaft* “unambiguously meant ‘science’ in the fullest sense of the term: a devotion to factual accuracy, normative neutrality and the quest for empirically grounded truth.” The founders of the field, in short, aimed high. They aspired to scholarship that would be rigorous and value-free, “without any preconceived opinion,” and aiming “neither to put its object in a favorable, nor in an unfavorable light.”

While these scholars wrote history informed by their times, and some, but not all, were politically engaged, they believed—and this is key—that their scholarship and their politics should be kept rigidly separate.

The idea that Jewish studies, like science, should be objective and value-free continued when the field migrated to America. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–1906), the first great product of American Jewish scholarship, reflected its ideals. So did the American Academy of Jewish Research, founded in 1920 in part “to formulate standards of Jewish scholarship.” The early practitioners of Jewish studies in American universities, giants such as Harry Wolfson of Harvard and Columbia’s Salo W. Baron, modeled *Wissenschaft des Judentums*’ central ideals.

In celebrating “objectivity,” the founders of Jewish studies

Objectivity is akin to perfection:
While we know that we cannot achieve it,
we must strive for it nevertheless.

echoed the lofty goals of scholars in many other disciplines. As Peter Novick recounts in *That Noble Dream*, his historiography of objectivity in American history, historian Charles Beard praised the scientific method as “the only method that can be employed in obtaining accurate knowledge of historical facts, personalities, situations, and movements.” The scientific method, Beard insisted, was “the chief safeguard against the tyranny of authority, bureaucracy, and brute power.”

Beard understood that pure objectivity was actually unattainable. Influenced by philosophy and the sociology of knowledge, he appreciated that “every historian’s work—that is, his selection of facts, his emphasis, his omissions, his organization, and his methods of presentation—bears a relation to his own personality and the age and circumstances in which he lives.” While acknowledging that no one can be totally objective, he nevertheless understood, as did the scholars who founded and maintained my field, that one is not free to desist from that goal. Objectivity is akin to perfection: While we know that we cannot achieve it, we must strive for it nevertheless.

SAPIR: What power did striving for an ideal of objectivity confer upon Jewish studies professors as “experts”? Were there weaknesses to this approach?

JS: In the early 1990s, a significant Jewish communal leader contacted me in response to a hate-filled book by the Nation

What seems new to me today is the insistence on the part of activists that political identities should shape not only the *agendas* but also the *conclusions* of scholars, that truth should be subservient to politics.

of Islam, *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*, that blamed Jews for the slave trade. “Could you write a response showing that Jews had nothing whatsoever to do with the slave trade and in fact were staunch abolitionists?” he asked. “Well,” I stammered. “It’s actually very complicated. There were Jewish slaveholders and slave traders in the U.S., and there were also Jewish opponents of slavery. Jews were divided.” “You scholars!” the leader exploded. “On those rare occasions when I call upon you, you invariably disappoint me! Why can’t you just produce what the Jewish community needs?”

The conversation highlighted for me the difference between an expert scholar committed to learning, objectivity, and truth and a communal activist committed to strengthening and protecting the Jewish community. My job, as I understood it from the perspective of the academy, was to offer rigor, complexity, and balance. What the community sought, at least at that moment, was a powerful response to an antisemitic libel. The Jewish leader who contacted me understood that complexity, nuance, and scholarly dispassion would prove no match against the lies, oversimplifications, and passion of the Nation of Islam. Indeed, when objectivity and scholarship go head to head against passionate advocacy, advocacy usually wins in the courtroom of public opinion.

Looking back over a career spanning more than 40 years, however, I have no regrets at disappointing that leader who sought to lure me from scholarship into advocacy. The Jewish community, it seems to me, requires experts who command a body of knowledge—in my case, American Jewish history—and who can be relied on to present the truth as best they understand it. Postmodernists may scoff at the very notion of truth, but in our Trumpian world, it seems to me that commitment to truth has never been more important. The job of scholars is thus, first and foremost, to gather and teach well-documented truths. As new evidence becomes available, scholars must be open to modifying those truths on the basis of newly discovered knowledge.

In the heat of ideological battle—over slavery, religion, Israel, gender issues, and the like—advocates may lose patience with scholars. They may even attempt to stifle, defund, and excommunicate them, to declare their scholarship wrong and wicked. Committed scholars nevertheless believe that, in pursuing truth, they answer to a different calling than communal leaders and ideological advocates do. Truth, scholars believe, will inevitably triumph in the end.

SAPIR: How has the ideal of objectivity changed? Scholars now seem to embrace their own political and ideological biases and believe that these positions are critical to shaping communal policy in particular directions. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this shift?

JS: Political identities have long shaped scholarly agendas. Marxists, for example, stimulated important scholarship concerning workers and economics; they shifted history away from just the study of elites. Zionists stimulated new interest in the history of the Land of Israel and of the Jews who returned to it. Feminists inspired a whole library of books concerning women, past and present, and of gender as an analytical category.

What seems new to me today is the insistence on the part

of activists that political identities should shape not only the *agendas* but also the *conclusions* of scholars, that truth should be subservient to politics, and that uncomfortable truths should be suppressed or “canceled.”

A good example of this arose from the new political focus on “Jews of color.” Jewish history books have indeed paid far too little attention to this subject. Much has been written, in my field, about people such as the American Jewish philanthropist Judah Touro and the Jewish sculptor Moses Ezekiel, but next to nothing about their black offspring, the product of illicit relationships with (usually non-Jewish) women of color. More scholarship on Jewish diversity worldwide is by all accounts urgently necessary.

In place of such scholarship, however, in 2019, a partnership between The Jews of Color Field Building Initiative and researchers from Stanford and the University of San Francisco produced a widely publicized report claiming that “Jews of Color represent at *least* 12-15% of American Jews, or about 1,000,000 of the United States’ 7,200,000 Jews.” Their press release predicted that “some decades from now, Jews of Color will become the majority of U.S. Jews,” and they urged the Jewish community to shift resources to take account of this development.

Two highly esteemed Jewish demographers, Professors Ira Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky, challenged these claims on scientific grounds, citing the 2013 Pew Study on American Jews and arguing that “the percentage of Jews of Color is almost certainly closer to 6% nationally than to ‘at least 12%–15%’; and this percentage has not increased significantly since 1990, although it is likely to do so in the future.” To their — and observers’ — surprise and horror, their well-argued, dispassionate scholarly critique met with a torrent of politically motivated abuse, first in dozens of anguished and angry comments (now removed) on their post in *eJewishPhilanthropy*, and then more substantially when Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, wrote an op-ed accusing the scholars of racism, saying it was “appalling

Communal organizations (like their corporate counterparts) often hire experts to tell them what they want to hear.

that the authors chose to publish their article at all.” Thousands of people signed a petition lambasting the two men for opposing a “vibrant, equitable, multiracial Jewish community.”

A year after this controversy, the 2020 Pew study confirmed that Sheskin and Dashefsky had been right all along: “92% of U.S. Jews describe themselves as white and non-Hispanic,” the Pew study reports, “while 8% say they belong to another racial or ethnic group.”

To activists, the admirable political goals of combating racism and embracing Jews of color may justify distorting the empirical truth in favor of sentiment, just as the Jewish leader looking to rebut the Nation of Islam on the question of Jews and slavery had admirable reasons for wanting me to do so. But even high-minded motivations cannot justify sacrificing truth for the sake of political expedience or utility. Absent a shared commitment to “truth even unto its innermost parts,” as my university’s motto puts it, the scholarly enterprise as a whole is imperiled, and the free market of ideas closes down.

SAPIR: Can you reflect upon the power of the “expert” in Jewish communal life, including when scholars are called upon to conduct Jewish communal research and evaluation?

JS: Jewish communal organizations must be wary of exaggerating the power of the expert. Nobody is all-knowing and nobody can be fully objective — period. Moreover, communal organizations (like

If you seek a written report from an expert, demand footnotes and a bibliography.

their corporate counterparts) often hire experts to tell them what they want to hear. An inquiry phrased as “can you help me persuade my board that ...” may yield a learned brief, but it is unlikely to be an objective scholarly analysis. Worst of all, in my experience, are leaders (or funders) who invite experts to speak and then publicly challenge them. “Why did you invite me if you think you know everything already?” I have more than once found myself wanting to ask. If you think the expert you invite knows less than you do, save your money and don’t bother calling.

The best approaches I have received are those framed as open-ended inquiries. In early 2009, at the height of the Great Recession and the Madoff scandal, when endowments plummeted and large donors declared bankruptcy, the Jewish Funders Network invited me to “share knowledge of Jewish (or specifically American-Jewish) life in times of economic uncertainty. What were the challenges that arose?” they asked. What were the innovations that came in these times? What was the role of good leadership in these struggles and in creating solutions?” By framing the questions as they did, JFN made clear that it had no specific agenda but sought a relevant presentation that would draw upon my expertise to help leaders craft policies for times of crisis.

As a rule, objective queries posed in broad terms—“we as an organization are struggling with this problem. Can you help frame it in a larger historical context that illuminates different sides of the issue?”—are more likely to elicit helpful responses than those that look to academic experts to solve problems of a nonacademic sort, or to support preordained conclusions.

One final suggestion: If you seek a written report from an expert, demand footnotes and a bibliography. Scholars are taught to cite sources in defense of their claims and to build on prior research. Asking them to employ an academic style in their reports will encourage the dispassion that the best scholarship demands, and it will make explicit the universe of thought in which researchers are situating themselves or against which they are defining their views.

SAPIR: You’ve been part of Jewish studies for your entire life. How does it feel, at this point in your career, to see how the field has changed?

JS: I am the son of the renowned Jewish Bible scholar Nahum M. Sarna, who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Brandeis University, and many other institutions for 60 years. The world of Jewish studies was small, clubby (and almost totally male) for decades, and my parents frequently hosted fellow scholars for dinner; they also believed in including their children in these meals and conversations. So, in addition to my father’s colleagues, many of whom I also saw weekly on Saturday morning at synagogue, I had the honor to meet many of the foremost Jewish luminaries of the 20th century: Salo W. Baron, Jacob Rader Marcus (later my teacher and mentor), Gershom Scholem, and Harry Wolfson. I also met some of the early women in the field, including Lucy Dawidowicz and Naomi W. Cohen. My understanding of Jewish scholarship was shaped by these pioneers.

The most important value I learned from them was to consider scholarship itself a sacred calling. It required long hours of intensive study and demanded adherence to the highest and most exacting of standards. Woe to the scholar who overlooked a source, failed to cite an important article, or embarrassed himself by displaying ignorance.

Politics above all was anathema to these pioneers, for its values were seen to be antithetical to those of the scholar. Scholars

pursued truth; politicians pursued power. Scholars might discuss politics and even express political judgments; several did over my parents' Shabbat table. But in their research, they abjured politics lest it taint and distort the timeless scholarship that they yearned to produce.

To reinforce scholarly standards, the scholars I grew up with called out those who, they believed, strayed from the canons of scholarly purity. A scholar who accidentally revealed his biases in print was treated much like one who accidentally revealed an undergarment. It was a source of unending embarrassment. A scholar who displayed ignorance was mocked. A scholar caught plagiarizing or forging was barred from the fraternity of scholars forever; those were unpardonable offenses.

Scholars who strayed from the canons of moral or religious purity, by contrast, remained respected scholars with a “but” henceforward attached to their names. One might be “a great scholar but a *meshumad* [apostate],” “a great scholar but intermarried,” “a great scholar but a lecher,” “a great scholar but a miserable human being,” even “a great scholar but an antisemite”! This language denoted the separation of rarefied scholarship from other realms of life. One could be expelled from scholarly Eden for scholarly offenses alone.

The sciences and the arts followed the same rules as scholars did in the world in which I was raised. We celebrated scientific breakthroughs even if made by terrible human beings. And we judged art on the basis of artistic standards alone, no matter how depraved the artist.

Bad behavior still mattered, of course, and nobody in my world doubted that scholars, scientists, artists, indeed anybody who broke the law or committed gross moral offenses should be punished. But the punishment extended only to the person, not to their work. To do otherwise—to refuse to read, cite, publish, or admire a miscreant's creative work—was to be guilty of what philosophers call a “category error.”

Today, category errors abound throughout the academy. Jewish studies are no exception. I watch with a mixture of incredulity and horror as colleagues and friends cast aside the scholarly values on which we were raised and replace them with ideologically tainted political ones. A growing list of books and people may no longer be published, cited, or even mentioned, never mind met with, even for scholarly purposes. Academic departments and learned societies debate political resolutions. Words such as “objectivity,” “truth,” and “merit” provoke ridicule and pushback.

What, I wonder, would the giants of the past think of these changes? And what will scholars of the future think of us? *

The Eclipse of Jewish Cultural Power



CULTURE, TRUE CULTURE, breathes life into societies —launching ideas, sparking conversations, changing minds, expanding horizons, stilling hearts.

That breath feels increasingly shallow in the United States these days. We are living through a cultural crisis. The aes-

thetic impulse and the life of the mind are being subordinated to a rigid progressive orthodoxy that specializes in taking offense. We have allowed, even enabled, the politics of identity and its cousins, “inclusion” and “equity,” to dictate and narrow what our culture is and should be.

The new moral imperative to remain always *woke* is leaving its imprint on every corner of American culture. American history is being rewritten. American liberties and traditions are openly mocked. The Founding Fathers are viewed as irredeemably delinquent. White schoolchildren are taught to live in a state of contrition, no matter their ethnic identity, individual beliefs, or family history. Non-white children are taught that they live in a nation in which

everything has a racial component and there are racist fingerprints everywhere. Media companies, publishing houses, Hollywood studios, art museums, corporate suites — all have been taken hostage by an intolerant, bitter, and humorless insurgency that is illiberal in its aims and hypocritical, even Orwellian, in its claims to inclusiveness.

In this climate of suspicion and accusation, the risks are great. All contributions to the culture are meticulously scrutinized for ideological impurities. Old tweets are resurrected to demonstrate moral unworthiness. Innocently citing an offensive word can swiftly end a distinguished career. Speech in any form can lead to professional or reputational ruin if it merely *sounds* offensive or expresses a heterodox point of view. The price of membership, of acceptance, has become costly. A script must be followed, involving endless one-upmanship in alleging evil and confessing guilt. Self-editing is essential. Allegations of “microaggressions,” or worse, outright racism, are casually invoked. Twitter and other social media act as a crowd-sourced version of a police state, always ready to denounce a heretical thought and extract a self-abasing apology.

Cultural entities that should know better — publishers, producers, and professors who all owe their livelihood to the First Amendment — suddenly find themselves in the censorship business. Book deals are withdrawn by imprints such as Simon & Schuster and Hachette because junior editors feel empowered to start a petition, charge racism, or claim to be “endangered” by a point of view they reject. In any other journalistic era, they would be fired. Today, bizarrely, it’s the employers who fear the wrath of employees only a few years out of college. The *New York Times* apologizes for printing an op-ed from a United States senator — and then sacks and demotes those responsible for doing their jobs. Broadcast journalism replaces objective news-gathering with partisan morality tales. Museums dispense with aesthetics for the sake of social justice. Guest speakers at colleges are shouted down by students who have no appreciation for the meaning of free speech. Faculty members are bullied on campus and chased off campus. Artists are black-

balled for something as innocuous as condemning arson. Even the United States Navy is reading Ibram X. Kendi, the high priest of “antiracist” illiberalism. The culture wars are now scrambling the minds of those who fight our actual wars.

Outside the ivory tower, ideas have real-life consequences. We’re all trapped in the groupthink of critical race theory, intersectionality, and trendy academic/activist flights of fancy that have metastasized into nonsensical, even catastrophic social policies, such as defunding the police or allowing cities to be taken hostage by rioters. Anger and demonization become a behavioral ethic that feeds on its own rage.

America should always be mindful of its appalling history of slavery, segregation, and racism. But institutionalized, “systemic” prejudices were dismantled long ago, even if their legacies remain. Racism still also exists. But the concrete, real progress made in racial equality over the past several decades should not be devalued. The numbers don’t lie; there are causes for real optimism. Why else do countless immigrants and refugees from around the world undertake every risk to live on our side of the border? Surely, they have heard the canard about America’s deep-seated racism. Apparently, they are not buying it. Neither should we.

What kind of a culture can possibly survive so much blame, so much intimidation, so much self-censorship, so much brainwashing? And — to get to the topic at hand — what does it mean for the Jews?



Wherever Jews went in nearly 2,000 years of wandering, they always made their adopted homes more interesting culturally, spiritually, and intellectually. How winningly they took to the countries that would have them. How much they enriched them, in countless ways.

It is especially true of the Jews of America. They arrived as immigrants. But they are indigenous to American culture, which, at least before this impoverished moment, wouldn’t have existed in

its fullest forms without the creative imagination and intellectual energy of Jews.

Beginning in the early 20th century, no area of American cultural life has remained untouched, if not wholly transformed, by Jews. Song, cinema, theater, literature, comedy, journalism, and style; philosophy, social activism, scholarship, commentary, and criticism: As America grew ever more open to embracing difference, as barriers to entry fell, as new cultural forms emerged (wherever ideas were being debated, played with, produced), one could find Jews resurrecting the ghosts of Talmudists past.

Some of this cultural production began by mining the richness of Jewish ideas and traditions, languages, and idioms. It then moved outward, finding new audiences for a Jewish sensibility: creative, wry, ribald, honest about human frailties and the inner resources required to persevere. Sensibilities honed over centuries of standing outside mainstream cultures, looking in, suddenly became the mainstream culture, looking out.

Yiddish theater did much to beget both Broadway and Hollywood. The American songbook was all but written by Irving Berlin, the Gershwin brothers, Stephen Sondheim, Carole King, Bob Dylan, and Paul Simon. A Jew from Tennessee named Adolph Ochs purchased, at the heavily discounted price of \$75,000, a failing newspaper called “the New York Times” and turned it into the most important journalistic institution in the world. The most prestigious award in American letters is named for a Hungarian Jew, Joseph Pulitzer, who also founded the country’s most important school of journalism, at Columbia University. Postwar Jewish writers such as Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, and Saul Bellow reinvented the American novel. Walter Lippmann, Irving Kristol, Irving Howe, Barbara and Jason Epstein, William Shawn, and Norman Podhoretz created magazines and journals that set the terms of American discourse for decades. Jewish comedians dispensed with knock-knock jokes and pratfalls, and pioneered observational and political humor. A

Jewish culture was *liberal* culture in the broadest sense of the word: It believed in itself just enough not to believe in anything completely.

San Francisco wholesaler named Levi Strauss is responsible for the trousers that define casual American dress, while a man named Ralph Lifshitz—a product of the Manhattan Talmudical Academy and Baruch College—changed his name to Ralph Lauren and invented the preppy New England look. The Hollywood Western was created by former street urchins such as MGM’s Louis B. Mayer, the four Warner brothers, and four of the other six major original Jewish studio chiefs, who grew up sleeping on fire escapes in the summer and who had probably never been on a horse. Comic-book writers took the Jewish experiences of vulnerability, braininess, irreverence, and fantasies about rescuing Jews, and transformed them into America’s superheroes. The overwhelming popularity of this culture demonstrated that Jewish ideas didn’t have to be put into Jewish characters to be universally understood—and universally popular.

This was a generous culture, an inviting one, one that was open to everyone and everything. No idea was alien to it; nothing was beyond discussion; nobody was unwelcome. James Baldwin’s early published stories appeared in the pages of *Commentary*, an organ of the American Jewish Committee. Jewish music and film producers showcased talent of all kinds, wherever they could find it. Allen Ginsburg’s great poem “Howl” brought gay love into mainstream consciousness. Jewish culture was *liberal* culture in the broadest sense of the word: It believed in itself just enough not to believe in anything completely.

It also believed in America, at least what was best in it: its unparalleled freedom, its fairness, its celebration of individual merit, its usual willingness to change when called out on its (many) flaws, its

allowances to let people be people—and to let Jews be Jews. This was a culture in which Jews sat proudly at the table with every other ethnic and racial group, but never demanded to sit at its head.

Now all this is being lost, deliberately. One might say an entire culture is in the process of being canceled. The ground rules of liberalism have disappeared, and with them, the qualities that made Jews so vital to American culture are vanishing as well.

It isn’t that Jews no longer occupy important positions in American culture, to say nothing of other fields. What’s disappearing from the cultural scene is the Jewish sensibility: its essential broad-mindedness, impish irreverence, openness to difference, and its skill in the art of disagreement.

Today, culture-makers fear being charged with plundering the stories of others, instead of being inspired to tell them. The new woke ground rules are “Stay in your lane. Do not fictionalize the experiences of people who are not you. Do not write (or speak) dialogue in their voices. Stop imagining the lives of others.” One wonders how a culture that demonizes empathy and imagination can survive as any kind of culture at all. It demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of how ideas are brought to life and art is made: Imagination must be free to observe widely, inhabit other worlds, and reassemble their fractured pieces.

We no longer speak of giving everyone an equal chance. Now the call is for “equity”—equal outcomes. We also no longer speak of excellence, at least not as the overriding consideration in cultural endeavors. Instead, the dominant factor is inclusion—not of ideas or perspectives or experiences, only of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. An artist’s presumed merit these days rarely has much to do with the reach of her imagination or the power of her prose; it’s whether she is “representing” her identity. But art whose chief business is to “represent” rather than create (or, heaven forbid, *defy*)

is inherently derivative, and derivative art is inherently mediocre. Is there any wonder why woke culture is so excruciatingly tedious?

Where does this leave Jews?

Recognizably Jewish stories are now out of vogue, as are so many stories that appear to be about “white” people. The Holocaust is derisively dismissed, in some circles, as “white-on-white crime”; harm that comes to those who appear to benefit from privilege is either no crime at all or one that is deserved. And harm directed specifically at Jews—as we have seen lately in New York and Los Angeles and, of course, throughout Europe—provokes little public outcry at all. Antisemitism still makes up by far the largest percentage of ethnically or religiously based hate crimes, but it’s a statistic that barely registers with an attentive audience outside the parochial world of Jewish organizations.

Ironically, in an era of identity politics, Jewish identity means almost nothing, except insofar as Jews are condemned to accepting their status of “conditional whiteness,” to use the new woke jargon. Nor have Jews been enthusiastically “included” in a Dyke March that expelled marchers flying a Pride flag emblazoned with a Star of David, or in a Women’s March led by admirers of Louis Farrakhan, or in a Black Lives Matter movement that finds its main foreign-policy concern to be opposition to the Jewish state, or on college campuses that are hypersensitive to every alleged micro-aggression and racist dog whistle except the ones that target Jews.

Some Jews, wandering the halls of film and TV studios, publishing houses and media companies, perhaps concerned for their livelihoods, think the best way of dealing with this new culture is to downplay their Jewishness and make a show of their social justice bona fides. They will write checks to social justice organizations and gladly march in a Black Lives Matter rally—but they wouldn’t cross a street to join much smaller marches against the new onslaught of antisemitism, and especially not to join a pro-Israel rally. One Jewish actor, Seth Rogen, has gone out of his way to bash Israel and mock a Jewish woman being abused online for her Zionist views. That is his

The politics of identity are not a suitable replacement for American culture. Art and ideas don’t easily arise from grievance and reprimand.

right, though perhaps he should try tweeting similar put-downs at a member of some other ethnic group experiencing online hate. Then he can count the nanoseconds until his career implodes.

What these fellow-traveling Jews don’t seem to understand is that no amount of public support or shows of solidarity with others, however heartfelt, will spare them from the woke furies when they make the smallest misstep. Just think of actress Mayim Bialik, forced to offer a cringing apology for publicly making the Orthodox Jewish case for dressing modestly.

Jewish Americans, especially those in the arts, should be defending the culture that earlier generations of Jews had contributed so much to—and that included them. They will find no home and even fewer friends in this dystopian culture now being built. The stronger the demands for “sensitivity reads,” the less space there will be for original thinking and creativity. The louder the call for “equity,” the more it will exclude the genuinely talented of all backgrounds. The more aggressive the effort to demonize people who have expressed a “bad take,” the more timorous and pallid the overall culture will become. Woke culture is to Jewish culture what kryptonite is to Superman—a character, it bears remembering, created by two Jews named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.

For Jews to attempt to make peace with woke culture is a fool’s errand. Something else is needed: a return to a prouder Jewish sensibility.

Given the outsized influence Jews have had on American culture, we must take a stand to defend the liberal traditions that have guided us and so many others, based on timeless values. Jews have many decades of creative and intellectual sweat equity in the cultural life of this country. It should not be surrendered or squandered.

It is time for Jews to stop apologizing: for being “white,” whether we consider ourselves that or not; for loving Israel and standing up for its rights to self-defense; for being “privileged,” as if Jews were ever given things they didn’t themselves earn. The apology reflex is undignified, dishonest, cowardly, and an insult to the historic and unstinting support Jews have shown for civil and human rights.

It is also time to full-throatedly reject vintage antisemitic labels and libels, no matter whence they come. Condemning Louis Farrakhan and “the Squad” for antisemitic statements and dog whistles must become a litmus test for demonstrating solidarity with Jews. Israel is not an apartheid state. No ethnic cleansing is taking place in Gaza or the West Bank. No Jew with the Holocaust imprinted in his or her memory would ever be involved in mass killing. Palestinian children are not being deliberately targeted by Israelis; they are being sacrificed, willfully, by the death cult that governs them. Israel is not training American law enforcement to choke black male suspects. And, finally, Jews have not stolen land—on the contrary, Israel has voluntarily surrendered more land than any other state to achieve real peace.

These lies must be rebutted. They are already too widely disseminated, too easily excused. To fail to stand up for the truth in a time of more fashionable lies is a betrayal—not just of fellow Jews, but of the moral universe.

The politics of identity are not a suitable replacement for American culture. Art and ideas don’t easily arise from grievance and reprimand. The life-affirming and sublime are necessary, too. Having a fixed identity undermines the promise of American reinvention. The amalgam of hustle and grit that gave the United States its

distinctive cultural richness is what made this country great, not evidence of systemic injustice. Holding some people back rather than lifting everyone up is un-American. It is the antithesis of a liberal culture. Equity by engineered fiat is as stifling as it sounds.

Until such time as true liberalism returns to American cultural life, Jews must find other outlets for our intellectual and cultural commitments. There are places where authentic Jewish culture is thriving, but they lie outside the mainstream. It’s time to refocus our energies, redouble our investments, in particularly Jewish culture: *Jewish Journal*, *Algemeiner*, *Mosaic*, *Tablet*, *Commentary*, *The Jewish Week*, *JNS*, the *Forward*, *Jewish Insider*; Jewish book publishers such as Schocken, Jewish Lights, Fig Tree Books, and Mandel Vilar Press; the Jewish Book Council, the National Yiddish Theater Folksbiene, Jewish museums and archives. Jewish funders and Federations should increase their support for these enterprises, and together we can rebuild a vibrant culture elsewhere.

Someday, ideally soon, the power that progressive politics is exerting over our culture will disappear. Jews will have to help recapture and replenish what has been lost, provided there are still Jews worthy of the task, those able to reclaim the liberal spirit and aesthetic impulse. It will be a mammoth undertaking—the culture war in reverse. The time to start fighting it is now. *

Summing Up



OWER IS EVERYWHERE,” wrote Michel Foucault. In today’s America, what’s “everywhere” is a grim, Foucauldian, post-modern obsession with power — who has it, who doesn’t, and what each category is supposed to mean, morally speaking. We live in a culture in which the “powerful” are said to be malignant and the “powerless” virtuous, with little thought to possibilities in between.

Dualistic thinking poses a special problem for Jews. As Rabbi David Wolpe noted in the first issue of *SAPIR*, Jews generally “do not fit neatly into ... binaries.” The essays in this volume also do not fit neatly into predictable categories. What they do is explore the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of Jewish power that are at the heart of so many contemporary debates. Jews have power and do not; the Jewish state is exceptionally powerful and uniquely vulnerable; Jews welcome power, fear it, have misgivings about using it.

The articles in this issue of *SAPIR* do not always agree on the nature of Jewish power or how it might go astray or be squan-

dered. But they are united in their insistence that we should not be afraid of the existence of Jewish power, either in Israel or the United States, and that we must defend its necessity, however imperfectly it might at times be wielded.



BRET STEPHENS rejects the contemporary value system attached to power and powerlessness: “Power does not have to be an obstacle to a moral life,” he writes. “It can be a basis for it.” Jewish ambivalence about the uses of power may have much to recommend Judaism as a value system, but Jewish powerlessness has nothing to recommend it as a strategy for political and personal survival. Especially in an era when the safety of Jews in the liberal-democratic West no longer seems assured, Jews need to appreciate the profound benefits, pragmatic and ethical, of hard power found in political sovereignty. The reality of a Jewish state, he writes, “raises the possibility that a Jewish state might pioneer a Jewish way of practicing statecraft and peoplehood that is distinct from, and potentially better than, the way statecraft and peoplehood are practiced elsewhere.”

RUTH R. WISSE describes the allure of powerlessness among two of the contemporary groups that must soberly acknowledge the necessity of Jewish national power. On the right are ultra-Orthodox Jews, whose belief that only God can protect the Jewish people has led them to abjure the requirements of civic behavior in a participatory democracy, including military service and economic self-sufficiency. On the left, old-school Jewish Marxists and their progressive fellow travelers valorize Jewish statelessness and fetishize the Palestinian cause at the expense of their fellow Jews. “No other minority in America is ‘in sympathy’ with the war against its members,” she writes. Only Jews “lack the moral confidence” to defend their own people.

Jews have a unique role to play in helping to heal America's current breaches: an opportunity to stand apart from and above polarization, and to tell America's story anew.

RUTH CALDERON's thoughts on the existential importance and obligations of Jewish power take on special meaning for having been written from Israel during the recent conflict with Hamas. Despite the impact of the Jewish tradition's long ambivalence about power, the Jewish people, she argues, must embrace power as an existential necessity. While Israelis understand this—they are, after all, the targets of very real missiles, knives, and suicide bombs—Jews in the Diaspora must overcome their discomfort with power, reject “immoral and naïve” blanket condemnations of Israeli power, and stand in solidarity with their diverse, complicated people. Zionism is no longer an idea; it has become a country. Condemning Zionism means condemning millions of people—representing many backgrounds and political and religious views—to oblivion.

RABBI MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK brings two vital Jewish voices, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *z”l* and Natan Sharansky, to his discussion of the new power wielded by online mobs to destroy people's lives. From Sacks, he derives the primacy of Judaism's focus on forgiveness and mercy, so powerful that the Jewish people, *Yehudim*, are named for a biblical character of tremendous fallibility and then courageous repentance: Judah, Joseph's brother. Judah sells his brother into slavery but comes to understand his great sin and offers to trade his life for another brother's as repentance. Such acts require honesty, however, and from Sharansky we learn what a

profoundly dishonest society can look like: Obeisance to the totalitarian state led to widespread doublethink in the Soviet Union. Soloveichik weaves the lessons of these two thinkers together to argue that America is increasingly plagued by an unwillingness to forgive, which leads people to mask their true selves. “The perceived power of a vocal minority intolerant of dissent” poses grave dangers to a free society. Jews must channel Sacks's compassion and Sharansky's courage and stand up to such abuses of power, both for their own and America's sake.

Nowhere is the complexity of Jewish power made more manifest than in the state of Israel, as several articles in this volume illustrate.

Historian **BENNY MORRIS** argues that while Israel has focused attention on gaining and sustaining military power, it has failed to address the threats posed by the demographic power of growing Arab, ultra-Orthodox, and right-leaning Mizrahi populations, which he believes undermine the secular and open nature of Israeli society. To mitigate the consequences of these demographic threats, he argues for government reforms in education, national service, and welfare that would better integrate haredim into Israeli society; for a vast improvement in Arab schools and economic development; a repeal of the nation-state law; and, perhaps, easing of restrictions on Gazan and West Bank Palestinians, investments in development, and even a confederation of Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, involving some measure of Arab sovereignty in East Jerusalem.

ANSHEL PFEFFER observes that there is nothing immoral about Israel's “need to acquire powers that were incommensurate to its size and alien to its traditions.” Yet this cannot blind us to what Pfeffer describes as the abuse of Israel's power in its treatment of

the Palestinians, which erodes Israeli society and violates the “far higher standard” that Jews should use for judging their own uses of power. The Israeli Left, he asserts, must “stop talking about Israel’s interests and start talking about its character, its constitution, its ethics, and its highest aspirations”—because while Israel can survive “destabilizing rounds of warfare,” the price it pays for its treatment of Palestinians is “a steady and inevitable moral erosion.” Israel must explore “every alternative to using [power] in such self-destructive fashion,” even while unquestioningly accepting the need for power.

Ambassador **DORE GOLD** examines the opportunities for a fundamental realignment of power in the Middle East presented by the new rapprochement between Israel and her neighbors. The existential threats posed by Iran are leading to new and unprecedentedly public alliances, and to shore up these burgeoning relationships, the Middle East needs a “code of conduct,” an idea suggested to Gold by Henry Kissinger. With the Biden administration committed to renewing the Iran nuclear deal, Gold argues that the time to capitalize on the “improbable, promising, and essential” new Middle Eastern alliances is now.

Ambassador **MICHAEL OREN** reflects on his experience wielding power as Israeli Ambassador to the United States. These are lessons that can serve any leader well: “Listen to your predecessors, build a trustworthy team, play to your strengths, think and act out of the box, earn the trust of key players, reach out of your...comfort zones, direct your energies solely at those situations that you can affect, and understand the limits of your power.”

Shifting our lens to the United States, **MONA CHAREN** notes that American Jews are caught between two political parties that pres-

ent real challenges to Jewry and to Israel, with extremes on either end promoting fantasies about Jewish power. Charen believes that this political homelessness and “an acute historical understanding of the dangers of conspiracy thinking” mean that Jews have a unique role to play in helping to heal America’s current breaches: an opportunity to stand apart from and above polarization and to tell America’s story anew, championing the classic vision of America as “a pluralist society where Jews, and everyone, can thrive.”

In a discussion of the role that age-old antisemitic canards play in the thinking and behaviors of Iran (and its proxies Hamas and Hezbollah), **MARK DUBOWITZ**, CEO of Foundation for Defense of Democracies, offers a counterintuitive take based on personal experience of how antisemitic fictions about Jewish power can be used to Jewish advantage. “As in certain martial arts,” he notes, “the key to winning is to turn an opponent’s momentum against him.” Jewish communal leaders can leverage paranoid and illogical visions of outsized Jewish power to deter attacks on Jews, while also using them as a catalyst for explaining the very need for Jewish power.

The final essays in our volume address other elements of power: philanthropic, intellectual, and cultural.

JEFF SWARTZ, the former CEO of Timberland and a major philanthropic supporter of Israel and Jewish communal life, contrasts the ways that power works in the secular American philanthropy system against a mindset infused with the Jewish values of *tzedakah*. The former, in his view, invests too much power with the giver, who can be entirely independent and without accountability. The latter, by contrast, flattens power dynamics, empowers recipients, prioritizes principles of humility and communal responsibility,

and rests on “eternal standards” of accountability. “Building Jewish destiny,” he writes, “is not redistributing my wealth to you; it means sharing together the job of building a Jewish future.”

ELISA SPUNGEN BILDNER and **ROBERT BILDNER**, experienced and entrepreneurial Jewish givers, puncture the myth of the malevolent, power-wielding philanthropist. The lever the philanthropist wields is not power, they argue, but *influence*, which is built through relationships characterized by trust and mutual respect. Drawing on their years of philanthropic work, they describe the ways their mindset of “investment, collaboration, and partnership” can enable grant recipients to flourish, while creating strong boards and funder partnerships that are diverse and inclusive of multiple perspectives.

Professor **JONATHAN D. SARNA** calls our attention to an underappreciated area of power in communal life: the power the scholarly expert wields in producing knowledge about Jews. This power is compromised, he argues, by the contemporary turn to explicit scholar-advocacy. Scholars who replace liberal values of empiricism and political neutrality with politics and ideology threaten the trust placed in them by their students and the communities that often hire them to speak, teach, and conduct research. Given the degree to which Jewish communal organizations rely on academics to produce the knowledge that then leads to communal policymaking, it is critical to understand the new hybridization of scholarship and activism.

THANE ROSENBAUM closes the volume with an urgent polemic about the danger that “woke” beliefs pose not just to liberal American culture in general but, more specifically, to the Jewish place in that culture. The Jewish contribution to what we think of as “American culture”—from denim jeans by Levi Strauss to songs such as “White Christmas” by Irving Berlin—is undeniable and immense. Yet it is under threat by a new ethic of outrage and cen-

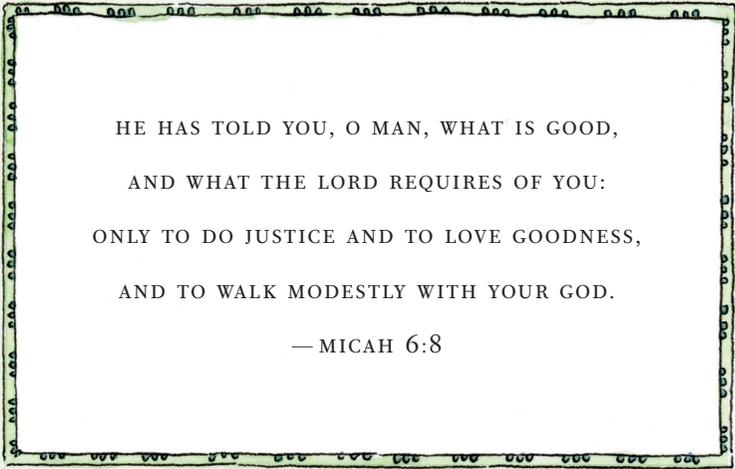
Reckoning maturely with the realities of Jewish power means acknowledging its necessity, in Israel and for Jews around the world.

soriousness and a commitment to equity over excellence or merit that undermines the creativity, individualism, and commitment to excellence that make great cultures thrive. Rosenbaum urges Jewish culture-makers to reject this framework and devote their considerable talents and resources to Jewish arts, culture, and humanities, “refocusing our energies on existing Jewish institutions and joining together with other true liberals to create new ones.”

For many Jewish communal leaders, the most dispiriting of the many public declarations about the hostilities between Israel and Hamas raging as the authors of this issue completed their essays was the letter signed by more than 100 American Jewish rabbinical students expressing sympathy for the Palestinians while ignoring entirely the suffering of those living in Israel (Jewish or otherwise). Among the many things the students expressed anguish and shock over was that “our Israel has the military and controls the borders... that... Israel’s choices come from a place of power.”

Reckoning maturely with the realities of Jewish power means acknowledging its necessity, in Israel and for Jews around the world. Since 1948, the existence of a sovereign Jewish state has backstopped Jewish life in a highly changeable Diaspora as much as it has protected the lives of Israelis. Jews are responsible for one another, even if we are also responsible for others.

Leading the Jewish people requires loving the Jewish people in all of its diversity — *ahavat Israel* — and accepting, as our tradition does, our frailties along with our strengths. It means striving to live up to Judaism's highest aspirations, while tempering idealism with reality. *



HE HAS TOLD YOU, O MAN, WHAT IS GOOD,
AND WHAT THE LORD REQUIRES OF YOU:
ONLY TO DO JUSTICE AND TO LOVE GOODNESS,
AND TO WALK MODESTLY WITH YOUR GOD.

— MICAH 6:8

CONTRIBUTORS

ELISA SPUNGEN BILDNER is an attorney, former CEO, journalist, author, and a Jewish and secular communal leader.

ROBERT BILDNER is an attorney, entrepreneur, investor, and author, active in Jewish and secular nonprofit communities and public life.

RUTH CALDERON is an Israeli academic writer and politician. She is the founder Israel's first secular, pluralistic, and egalitarian Beit Midrash for women and men; and the founder of ALMA, which seeks to acquaint secular Israelis with Hebrew culture. She served as a Member of Knesset for Yesh Atid from 2013 to 2015.

MONA CHAREN is a syndicated columnist, the policy editor of *The Bulwark*, and the host of the Beg to Differ podcast.

MARK DUBOWITZ is the chief executive of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington, D.C. In 2019, Iran sanctioned Dubowitz and the FDD.

Ambassador DORE GOLD, Ph.D., is the president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He served as the director-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Israel and as Israel's ambassador to the United Nations from 1997 to 1999.

FELICIA HERMAN is the managing editor of SAPIR. She has been involved professionally in Jewish philanthropy and communal organizations for two decades.

BENNY MORRIS, an Israeli historian, is the author of *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*.

MICHAEL OREN is a historian and author who served as Israel's ambassador to the United States from 2009 to 2013, as a Member of Knesset and as a deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Office from 2015 to 2019. He is author of *Ally: My Journey Across the Israeli-American Divide*.

ANSHEL PFEFFER is a senior correspondent and columnist for *Haaretz*, Israel correspondent for *The Economist*, and the author of *Bibi: The Turbulent Times of Benjamin Netanyahu*.

THANE ROSENBAUM is a Distinguished University Professor at Touro College, a columnist for the *Jewish Journal*, the director of the Forum on Life, Culture & Society at Touro College, and the author of numerous books of fiction and nonfiction.

JONATHAN D. SARNA is a university professor and the Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, where he directs the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies.

RABBI MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHNIK is rabbi of Shearith Israel, the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States. He is the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, and he writes regularly on issues of faith and religious freedom.

BRET STEPHENS is the editor-in-chief of SAPIR.

JEFF SWARTZ, his wife Debbie, and three generations made Aliyah during COVID. When not baking challah with his grandchildren, he chairs MAOZ and invests for Israel and the Jewish people.

RUTH R. WISSE is a senior fellow at the Tikvah Fund and a columnist at *Mosaic*. Her next book, *Free as a Jew: A Personal Memoir of National Self-Liberation*, will be published in September.

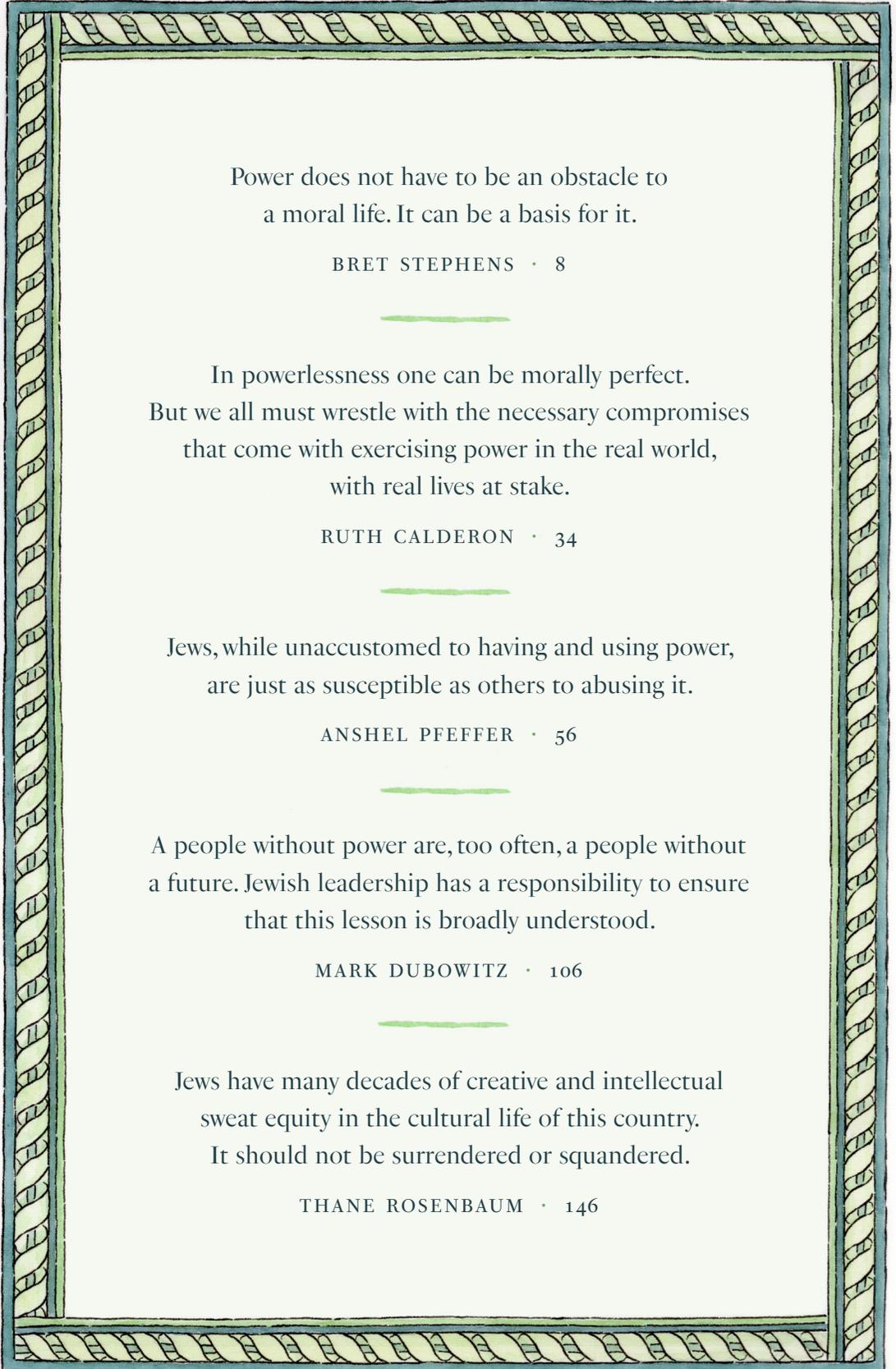


MAIMONIDES FUND

Maimonides Fund is a private grantmaking organization inspired by our namesake's commitment to Jewish faith, Jewish peoplehood, citizenship, and science.

וְיִרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתַחַת
רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבִנְת הַסְּפִיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר:

— שמות כד:י



Power does not have to be an obstacle to
a moral life. It can be a basis for it.

BRET STEPHENS · 8

In powerlessness one can be morally perfect.
But we all must wrestle with the necessary compromises
that come with exercising power in the real world,
with real lives at stake.

RUTH CALDERON · 34

Jews, while unaccustomed to having and using power,
are just as susceptible as others to abusing it.

ANSHEL PFEFFER · 56

A people without power are, too often, a people without
a future. Jewish leadership has a responsibility to ensure
that this lesson is broadly understood.

MARK DUBOWITZ · 106

Jews have many decades of creative and intellectual
sweat equity in the cultural life of this country.
It should not be surrendered or squandered.

THANE ROSENBAUM · 146