

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

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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

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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. *