

S A P I R

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THE ISSUE ON

ASPIRATION

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BLAKE FLAYTON · REUEL MARC GERECHT

OFIR HAIVRY · YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

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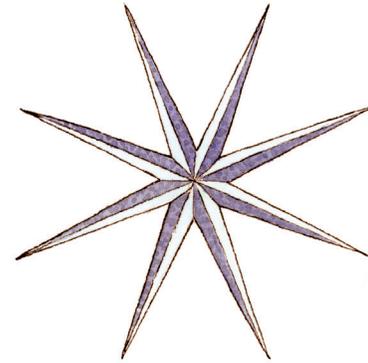
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*And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.*

—Exodus 24:10



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Publisher's Note



WE CHOOSE to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard.” President Kennedy’s declaration, delivered in 1962, seemed incredible at the time. But he set a specific timeline, captured the imagination of the American people, and inspired them to take action. Not quite seven years later, two Americans walked on the moon.

For this issue we asked ourselves, “What is a Jewish moonshot?” We wanted our moonshots to be audacious but also achievable, with a reasonable, but not immediate, timeline; disruptive, but not utopian. We invited a diverse group of authors to send us their—realistic—dreams.

When we founded SAPIR a year ago, we had a simple notion. We wanted to shift the focus of the Jewish communal leaders to the day after the pandemic. Once the immediate crises were in our rearview mirror, what ought Jewish leadership to be thinking about?

At a time when Twitter and texting are forcing people to speak

in shorthand, we wanted to give people an opportunity to discuss ideas in long form. At a time when much of the focus is on calling out problems, we wanted pieces that offered solutions. And at a time when we were becoming more polarized as Jews and Americans, we wanted readers across the political spectrum to experience ideas both comfortable and uncomfortable, to be challenged intellectually and ideologically.

We imagined that four issues would allow us to flesh out key themes that Jewish leaders needed to consider—and that it would take four issues to get your attention. We were wrong on both counts. The march toward normal is taking more than its share of twists and turns—there’s a lot more we need to discuss. And we seem to have gotten your attention right out of the gate. We’ve appreciated your feedback, both laudatory and critical.

We were wrong about something else, too. We assumed that if we put out good literature, we could foster conversations among our readers and their fellow travelers. What we didn’t anticipate was the role we’d be asked to continue to play in unpacking these ideas. You told us how you were using these articles in your teaching, with your trustees, and with your employees and colleagues. You asked for our permission to reprint articles (and in several languages!). You asked for events with the authors and peppered them with questions. You didn’t just want to read; you wanted to engage.

So while our intention was to declare our mission accomplished at the end of 2021, we have decided to keep at this a while longer. We will also be experimenting with other ways to keep the conversations going—new features, events, and gatherings. Let us know what you think of them.

This moonshot issue is an experiment for us, one that we hope will foster a new round of discussions. What are we hoping for as a Jewish community? Let’s snap out of reminiscing and focus on the future. Bill Clinton once said, “When our memories outweigh our dreams, it is then that we become old.” Let’s get back to dreaming. It is what our community deserves. *

Dreams for Living Jews



ABOUT SIX YEARS AGO, I participated in a small American academic conference whose subject was modern Hebrew. Predictably, it was attended almost entirely by Jewish academics who had invested their careers in Hebrew literature, linguistics, and pedagogy, presenting research on everything from contemporary Hebrew fiction to Hebrew usage at American Jewish summer camps. It was a good conference, as these things go. But the reason I remember it six years later isn't because of any of the papers presented. It's because of three attendees who sat in the back of the sessions, taking careful notes. They were representatives of the Wampanoag Nation, Native Americans with origins in today's eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island—the people whose ancestors, centuries earlier, first encountered the Pilgrims who arrived on American shores. Their goal was to revive the Wampanoag language, which had not been spoken in over 200 years. They were at this Hebrew conference because, as one put it, “we want to know how you did it.”

The Wampanoag figured they were ahead of the game. Hebrew was successfully revived after it hadn't been spoken for two millennia, while the Wampanoag language had fallen silent for a mere two centuries. Contemporary scholars of Wampanoag were working with a cache of 17th-century letters and legal documents, along with a Bible translation by the 17th-century English missionary John Eliot, in order to reconstruct the spoken language. In their community, the representatives proudly told us, one young couple had recently had a baby, who everyone hoped would be the first native speaker of Wampanoag in 200 years. These people had nothing but optimism. After all, we Jews had demonstrated that it was possible.

Conference participants made jokes about the sufferings of Itamar Ben-Avi, son of the Hebrew revivalist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Ben-Avi was locked in a closet and otherwise punished by his fanatical father whenever he failed to fulfill his destiny as the first native Hebrew-speaking child in 2,000 years. Those jokes were more uncomfortable than funny. As the Wampanoag waxed eloquent about cultural revival, some of the Hebrew scholars looked at one another with knowing glances that stopped just short of eye rolls. The Hebrew scholars knew, far more intimately than the Wampanoag and far more intimately than most Jews, exactly what this particular grand idea was up against. You could almost see them tabulating in their academic minds the many critical things that the dead Wampanoag language lacked that the supposedly comparably dead premodern Hebrew had: an enduring and evolving written language, a millennia-old education system that relied on children learning that language, an ever-expanding corpus of thousands of years' worth of texts in that language, people deliberately writing intellectually and creatively in that language for varied purposes over many centuries in many countries and contexts, and a worldwide population that had been using that language, albeit for very limited purposes, every single day for all of those intervening centuries. As one of those Hebrew scholars myself, I didn't have a whole lot of hope for the Wampanoag. *Good luck*, I thought.

I had occasion to think of the Wampanoag again while fielding questions about my new book, the rather pessimistically titled *People Love Dead Jews*, which examines how non-Jewish societies often embrace stories of Jewish deaths while taking almost no interest in the actual content of Jewish culture, not to mention actual living Jews. When readers asked me for better ways to think about the Jewish past and present, I pointed out that non-Jewish societies have a great deal to learn from Judaism's persistence as a counterculture that runs through Western history and from the many ways that Jewish culture has dynamically reinvented itself. That's when I remembered those earnest Wampanoag representatives. They had been doing exactly what I was now recommending: learning from the successes of living Jewish culture, instead of from its devastations.

Recently I looked up the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Project online. Far from being the province of a few scholars, as it seemed to be at that conference, Wampanoag language reclamation is now a going concern for a broad community of people. There are adult-education language classes at beginner and advanced levels. There is a language-immersion preschool and a language afterschool program for older children — which, according to news reports, seems to already have a better track record than most American synagogue Hebrew schools for keeping students involved (though, one must admit, that is a rather low bar). One Massachusetts public-school district, on tribal lands that were just reclaimed in 2015, now teaches Wampanoag language to students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

All this, of course, is very far from actually reviving a spoken language. I saw no evidence of that baby born six years ago now posting TikTok videos in Wampanoag, as Itamar Ben-Avi, had he been a century younger, would surely have been forced by his fanatical father to do. But still, these language schools and programs with an active and engaged community of children and adults were quite a bit more than I, a person entirely ignorant of this particular culture, had expected. I've since learned that

I am now the embarrassed recipient of hundreds of messages from Jewish readers from all walks of life, sharing with me their own degrading personal experiences with this type of erasure or humiliation, often prefacing their stories with 'I never told anyone this before.'

the Wampanoag are far from unique in their efforts at language reclamation — or, most poignantly for me as a Hebrew scholar, in taking their inspiration from its most successful practitioners. Similar language schools among the Maori in New Zealand have based their curricular materials on Israeli ulpan language classes. But here I will admit one shameful private thought. As I looked through the photos and news items from the school district that taught Wampanoag, I found myself suddenly jealous. How the heck, I wondered, did they manage to get this language taught in a *public-school district*? Yes, the school was on tribal lands. But was there, maybe, some way we could pull that off for Hebrew too, at public schools in the United States that had many Jewish students? Why not?

And suddenly I felt my pessimistic self awakening to the wide-open world of unexpected possibilities.

Writing *People Love Dead Jews* was not an exercise that encouraged optimism. The book is a collection of essays about how non-Jewish societies often use or exploit Jewish history to encourage positive

The astonishing power of the Jewish past and present is not merely this culture's endurance or even its objective achievements, but precisely its astonishing resilience, its constant reinvention, its demonstration of what might be possible.

feelings about themselves, while simultaneously erasing living Jews and the actual content of real Jewish life. A case in point is a 2018 incident at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, where a young Jewish employee was asked to hide his yarmulke under a baseball cap for the sake of the museum's "neutrality" in celebrating the Jews' humanity—the humanity of the dead Jews, that is, not the living ones doing gross things like practicing Judaism. It was apparently very on-brand for the Anne Frank House to force a Jew into hiding.

For me, this was an intellectual phenomenon that I had repeatedly encountered in my work as a scholar, travel writer, and cultural commentator. But after I published the book, I had the misfortune of discovering that I was more right than I had known. I am now the embarrassed recipient of hundreds of messages from Jewish readers from all walks of life—religious and secular, young and old, from the United States and from around the world—sharing with me their own degrading personal experiences with this type of erasure or humiliation, often prefacing their stories with "I never told anyone this before." I spent 20 years as a scholar of Jewish studies and a novelist on Jewish themes, but my sudden transformation in the past few months into a receptacle for this public outpouring has shocked and disturbed me. Prior to pub-

lishing this book, I passionately agreed with the 20th-century Jewish historian Salo Baron's famous dismissal of the "lachrymose" view of Jewish history. Now that my readers have shared their private experiences with me, I have discarded my contempt for those caught in its thrall. I get it now.

But another result of this outpouring is that I am now, for the first time in my life, being asked for solutions to these problems. *What can we do?* my painfully sincere readers ask. My first thought as a lifelong pessimist is to tell them: *Nothing. Sorry.* And to add, as I mentally told the Wampanoag, *Good luck.* But that's not what the Wampanoag thought. Or what generations of Jews before us thought either.

I now have a very different attitude toward the Jewish past and present. One need not dismiss or minimize the "lachrymose" realities of Jewish history to perceive and marvel at its joys and triumphs; on the contrary, the blessing and the curse are entirely intertwined, because the astonishing power of the Jewish past and present is not merely this culture's endurance or even its objective achievements, but precisely its astonishing resilience, its constant reinvention, its demonstration of what might be possible. That reinvention was not foreordained or predictable; it required hard work and harder optimism about the existence of a future. The Judaism that emerged from the centuries following the Second Temple's destruction is not the same as the Judaism practiced in the time of the Temple, but it is deeply indebted to it, and its creative reinvention is a model of what psychologists now call post-traumatic growth. Theodor Herzl's 1902 novel *Altneuland* was speculative fiction, just as corny today as when it was written, and still full of many goofy things that never happened—except for the small detail of a real place named after that novel's translated Hebrew title, which was *Tel Aviv*.

These impossibilities are worth sharing with the world, if only because they demonstrate that more things are possible than we might assume. Sometimes I contemplate what non-Jewish students

in public schools learn about Jews in their history textbooks, and I imagine how that story of Western history might be turned upside down if such students actually learned what was possible. Most textbooks of this nature include only the “lachrymose” versions of Jewish history, mentioning only things such as the Holocaust. So students learn that Jews, essentially, are people who got murdered. But if actual Jewish history were to be included in such textbooks, an entirely new story would emerge that would open up all sorts of challenges to the way things are.

That same textbook that mentions Jews only in the context of persecutions, for example, probably also describes how mass literacy for the poor was not possible until the invention of the printing press and later industrial production. But if Jewish history were included in world history, this would be revealed to be a lie, since, of course, Jewish communities had almost universal male literacy for many centuries before the printing press, even if only in that very dead language called Hebrew. Teaching this historical fact would reveal that societies actually didn’t require advanced technology or industrial production in order to achieve mass literacy, even among the poor; they merely needed to believe that reading was important.

As a history lesson, this might be rather depressing, because it would reveal the lost potential of untold millions of people left unnecessarily illiterate—as depressing as the lost potential of untold millions of women, including Jewish women. Obviously, there are many choices Jewish communities have made over the centuries that are profoundly depressing and limiting too, including choices Jewish communities are making right now. But as lessons about the future, these retroactively depressing facts might be profoundly inspiring. What other impossibilities might be open to us right at this moment, if we were to stop limiting our imaginations? What might happen if we had the courage to approach people different from us and discover how they did it—whether those people were our neighbors, people across the world, or our

Self-abnegation is not a virtue.
We are entitled to want more than crumbs;
the ability to desire more is the most humane
act of respect for ourselves and others.

own ancestors? What might it be possible to hope for? What would we even want to want?

—

Traumatized people are used to feeling grateful for crumbs; such people do not think they are allowed to want things. The classic illustration of this problem in Jewish literature comes to us from the Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz, in his mock-pious story “Bontshe Shvayg.” This infamous tale begins with the death of Bontshe Shvayg (“Bontshe the Silent”), opening with the words “Here on earth, the death of Bontshe Shvayg made no impression.” Bontshe, we are told, was the poorest and most pathetic of people: neglected at birth, trampled in life, homeless and starving and buried in an unmarked grave. But this story is set in the next world, where Bontshe’s arrival is heralded by angels who convene a divine court to judge him. The defense attorney describes Bontshe’s many sufferings and how Bontshe silently endured them all, never once complaining of his plight. The prosecutor agrees, and the reader is led to believe that Bontshe’s humility was admirable. But the story’s trick lies at its end, when the divine court declines to pass judgment: “It is not for us to determine your portion of paradise. Take what you want!” Bontshe, however, has never learned the art of wanting things. He asks only for a roll

with fresh butter each morning, left literally with crumbs as his life's reward, simply because he had no idea he could want more. The socialist author's condemnation of this traumatized passivity is harsh: "You yourself never knew," the court informs Bontshe, "that had you cried out but once, you could have brought down the walls of Jericho. You never knew what powers lay within you." The fact that this story is still sometimes read today as a celebration of Bontshe's "humility" is itself a testament to a deeply ingrained failure of aspiration. Self-abnegation is not a virtue. We are entitled to want more than crumbs; the ability to desire more is the most humane act of respect for ourselves and others.

That act of aspiration and of imagining what might be possible is also at the heart of what distinguished Judaism from other ancient traditions. For many years, I was puzzled by the story in Genesis in which Joseph interprets the Egyptian pharaoh's dreams. Pharaoh dreams of seven fat cows emerging from the Nile, followed by seven thin cows that consume the fat ones; the dream then repeats with sheaves of grain. Baffled by these dreams, Pharaoh calls upon the Hebrew slave Joseph to interpret them. The story always lost me when it arrived at Joseph's interpretation, the rather obvious idea that the cows and sheaves represent seven good harvest years followed by seven bad ones; Joseph then suggests that Pharaoh stockpile food from the good years, so that his kingdom will not starve during the bad years. Pharaoh is stunned by Joseph's brilliance and appoints him to run this rationing system, in gratitude for his genius idea. For a long time, I found this story incredibly stupid. Pharaoh, after all, lives in a country with one water source. Good years are when the Nile greatly overflows; bad years are when the Nile overflows less. Pharaoh knows this pattern and it worries him; he's even having anxiety dreams about it. But why did Pharaoh need this foreign slave to tell him that he should *save food from the good years so that he'd be able to eat later*? Wasn't that obvious? Why didn't Pharaoh think of that?

After I wrote a novel recasting the Joseph story in the modern era, I posed this question to my readers, and one of them supplied an answer. My kind reader explained that, like an immensely wealthier Bontshe Shvayg, perhaps Pharaoh had simply never learned to think of the world as something that was his to change. Perhaps Pharaoh's milieu, like many ancient cultures, assumed passive submission to the whims of capricious gods. Joseph, on the other hand, came from a covenantal tradition that required divine-human partnership. Joseph's father and great-grandfather had negotiated with God for what they wanted or needed, sharing their own desires and hopes and joining a dialogue that, while far from equal, required their participation. Such a tradition is not merely amenable to people acting for dramatic social and technological change; it requires it. Later, in the Book of Exodus, with the Israelites enslaved, Moses breaks with his society's expectations by killing a murderous taskmaster to save a slave's life, an act of resistance to a seemingly impregnable social order, an act that is not the result of God's call to him, but the prerequisite for it. We are not merely allowed to demand better than the world we are given; we have to. The Hebrew prophets who followed Moses are known for their warnings of doom and their promises of restoration, but they are equally known for their visions of previously unimagined and still-unrealized possibilities: widespread peace, ultimate justice, broad human liberation, shared enlightenment. Such things are possible, even promised. We are allowed to want them.

So why not dream as big as we can, as our ancestors both ancient and recent didn't fear to do? Why not solve the unsolvable problems, change the social order, undo the bad years, do the things that were supposed to be impossible? Someday, sincere and thoughtful strangers may come and sit in the back of our conference rooms, wanting to know how we did it. We might as well be ready for them. *

PART ONE

MOONSHOTS FOR
JEWISH LEADERSHIP



Universal Jewish Literacy



JOHN F. KENNEDY'S original "moonshot" idea—to land a man on the moon before the end of the 1960s and return him safely to Earth—was spurred not so much by the need to solve a technical challenge as by a desire to stick it to the Russians at the height of the Cold War.

Acknowledging the fact that competition is a great motivator helps us understand the difficulties of bringing other types of "moonshots" to life. While Kennedy's aspiration could be broken down into a series of technical challenges, it did not *also* require masses of people to change deeply rooted behaviors and beliefs, much less entire societies rethinking their identities in novel ways.

This is why philanthropic moonshots are so difficult: They aim to transform people and communities, all within a context of trends and forces that philanthropy can't control. There are seldom actual external adversaries who can serve as a spur to competition. But there are competing values and needs within a group that pull it in multiple directions. And when big ideas are proposed in "soft" areas

of community work, such as "Jewish identity"—a difficult concept to which Jews relate in different ways—the challenges only multiply.

And yet we must try. Moonshot thinking challenges us to identify huge problems that appear impossible or intractable. It asks us to seek new approaches by developing new technologies and repurposing existing ones. And it pushes us to design concerted efforts and collaborations among many actors.

The moonshot I want to propose has all these difficulties and characteristics: achieving, among North American Jews, universal basic Jewish literacy in 20 years. Let's call it "Birthright Judaism" for now, even though it no doubt needs a different name.



Why do we need such a thing? The American Jewish community is the strongest, wealthiest, safest, and most influential community in the history of the Diaspora. And probably the most Jewishly ignorant.

While it's not true that in the past every Jew was a scholar, there was indeed a basic level of Jewish knowledge shared by all and transmitted through educational institutions, common practices, lived culture, and a communal environment. Jewish knowledge conferred social capital, public appreciation, and self-respect.

The reasons for our current Jewish ignorance are many, but let me mention just one: In responding to the challenges of assimilation, American Jewish leaders created the concept of Jewish identity, a vague notion that has created more problems than it has solved.

Jewish identity allowed Jews to define Judaism as a religion while abandoning most religious practices, to celebrate Jewish culture while ignoring Jewish languages, and to assert our place in a diverse society while avoiding the difficult question of what, exactly, makes us different from the mainstream. It has no boundaries and places no actual demands, except perhaps a nebulous sense of loyalty to an amorphous idea of peoplehood. The iden-

tity ideology also offers a hefty dose of victimhood, resulting in an overemphasis on the Holocaust and an infantile version of Israel advocacy.

On the altar of “identity,” we sacrificed much that made us truly Jewish. Identity has been, as Jon Levisohn of Brandeis University has argued, “a meaningless substitute for a focused, disciplined articulation of the goals of Jewish education” in both adults and children. What do we want Jews to know and be able to do? Read texts in certain ways? Speak certain languages? Enjoy Jewish culture? Produce Jewish culture? In what ways do we want them to be engaged with their local Jewish and non-Jewish communities? Who do we want them to be, as interpreters of Jewish history and tradition? What is our picture of engaged citizenship? What are our aspirations for the inner, spiritual lives of Jews?

These and other questions have all been left to the wayside as Jewish funders spend hundreds of millions of dollars in “identity” and “engagement,” carefully avoiding defining what Jews are actually supposed to engage *with*. Designed as gateways, the most lavishly funded programs in Jewish life instead become final destinations.

In the long run, this simply won’t do. We can no longer rely on silver-bullet trips to Auschwitz or Tel Aviv to emotionally shock people into feeling Jewish. For a culture to thrive, people need to truly know what that culture encompasses. To feel part of a historical continuum, people need to learn that history. To find comfort in rituals (regularly and at life’s key moments), people need to understand the ritual. To be guided by wisdom in ancient sources, people need to be able to navigate their structure and content beyond a handful of cherry-picked quotes. This requires sustained engagement with meaningful Jewish content.

A proper program of Jewish cultural literacy needs to cover the different areas that make up the fascinating kaleidoscope of religion, nationality, culture, and history that is Judaism. Scholars have argued extensively about what the pillars of Jewish content are,

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and many have debated what would make an educated Jew. But by and large, the fundamentals can be grouped into six buckets:

1. Rituals and practices
2. Texts and sources
3. History
4. Languages, art, and culture
5. Thought and philosophy
6. Zionism and Israel

In every historical period, especially those that witnessed seismic changes, Jews redefined and enriched Judaism to provide answers to the challenges of the times. The COVID-19 pandemic and its collateral effects have accelerated already transformational trends in Jewish life and will no doubt lead to a greater quest for meaning and purpose in a disrupted, uncertain world. Jews need to be empowered to take ownership of their own Judaism and to participate in a conversation that will shape the Jewish world for decades or even centuries to come. To do so, they need to have a basic level of knowledge in all these dimensions of the Jewish experience so they may have meaningful Jewish conversations and participate in the historical challenge of redefining Judaism for the 21st century.

Just as Jews have a ‘birthright’ to the Land of Israel, they also have a birthright to their culture and their multifaceted heritage.

I realize that the idea of “basic literacy” or “curriculum” is under fire these days: “Who are you to define the most important content?” goes the frequent retort. But education has never been democratic. We educate because we have something we consider valuable that we want to transmit to others. We don’t need to be apologetic about proposing a “core curriculum” of Jewish literacy. We can debate what goes into it—but let’s at least have something to debate.

What of the critique that the Jewish canon is male and white (however problematic the term “canon” might be for a diverse and global Jewish community)? There’s something to it, of course, but learning about what patriarchal rabbis said in the 12th century is not an impediment to including feminist writers of the 20th and 21st. You can’t criticize or improve on what you don’t know. Take Zionism: It was a critique of traditional Judaism, but it could exist only because the early Zionist thinkers were highly literate in the tradition they were rejecting. We now have unprecedented access to Jewish texts and sources of all kinds; they can be taken together as the building blocks of a diverse, living culture.



So how would it work? I propose that most adult Jews experience at least a hundred hours of Jewish studies, covering the basic building blocks of Jewish cultural literacy. This needs to be normative and transformative—a “Birthright Judaism” in its scale and some of its features. Just as Jews have a “birthright” to the Land of

Israel, they also have a birthright to their culture and their multifaceted heritage.

There will be a variety of different formats. Immersive trips and retreats. Months- or year-long courses, virtual and physical. As with Birthright Israel, a central body will strongly subsidize those courses to eliminate financial impediments to participation. There will be different providers for those courses, representing Judaism in all of its variety and diversity, and a central mechanism for quality control to ensure that the curriculum covers the requisite material at a high professional level.

There are great precedents for these courses on which we can build. Boston’s Project Meah (meaning 100, for the number of hours of study), the Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning, and Chabad’s Jewish Learning Institute are excellent examples. Significantly, these programs haven’t been shy about defining what they believe constitutes basic Jewish literacy. On their own, however, they haven’t achieved the scale we will need; our new program will allow them and many other programs to reach many more people.

The biggest impediment to the success of this project will not be funding or organizational wherewithal, but motivation: Will people enroll in a program in Jewish education that demands a substantial and sustained commitment? And how do we avoid preaching to the choir—adding more to the options for those who already engage in serious study?

The genius of major programs such as Birthright, PJ Library, and Moishe House is that they draw on normative behaviors. Young people travel *anyway*; Birthright makes the travel a free trip to Israel. Parents read to their children *already*; PJ Library just offers a different book to read. Young people live together and host parties for their friends *already*; Moishe House adds a Jewish dimension to these activities.

Finding normative behaviors to harness will be our core challenge. Americans aren’t already regularly gathering to study, and at first glance, our program has few obvious perks, such as free trips

or subsidized rent. But it's not insurmountable. We will need to be creative. For example, Limmud UK "used" the Christmas break, when many Jewish Britons were either bored at home or taking a vacation, to propose an alternative break—a weeklong, fun, and meaningful experience of Jewish learning in community. We can use the time when kids are at summer camps to conduct retreats for parents. We can create "destination" retreats, invite particular social networks, and even bring celebrity teachers or participants. Graduates could be offered communal perks, such as discounts on school tuition, synagogue or JCC memberships, or camp fees. Completing the course should be a communal rite of passage, and graduates should be afforded respect and leadership roles in communal settings.

Birthright Judaism will require the partnership of funders at all levels of giving and a variety of Jewish communal organizations that can serve as "delivery mechanisms" for the courses. We'll need a backbone organization to manage the enterprise and serve as quality assurance and a clearinghouse of information and resources. The benefits will ripple out across communities: Learners and alumni can gather at annual conferences; new courses of study can be added for those who crave more; and we can convene teachers across all of the programs for training and idea-sharing, creating a vibrant cohort of educators.

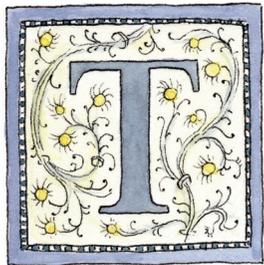


If this moonshot comes even close to fruition, we will have, for the first time in recent American Jewish history, a generation in which most Jews once again have a basic knowledge of their history, culture, and religion. This program won't make all Jews scholars, but it will provide a common foundation for people to have informed Jewish conversations. It will expose Jews to the richness of their culture, providing a valuable historical perspective to face the challenges of our time. It will empower them to use Jewish wisdom, sources, and ritual

to find meaning. It will make them more likely to want to transmit that heritage to the next generation.

The challenges to bringing this idea to life are many, but why shouldn't we try? We have the wherewithal and the resources to ensure that all Jews have access to a meaningful relation with their heritage. Do we want history to say that the 5,000 Jews of 17th-century Vilna—poor and persecuted—produced and consumed more Judaism than 7 million American Jews, the wealthiest and safest community of all time? *

Muslim-Jewish Reconciliation



THE Christian-Jewish dialogue that began in earnest in response to the Holocaust is arguably history's most successful experiment in interfaith relations. Though many tend now to take it for granted, there was nothing self-evident about its success.

Two faith traditions that had been pathologically estranged from each other for nearly two millennia courageously explored their suppressed commonalities. The result was a radical reformulation of Christian theology, especially in the Catholic Church, affirming the ongoing validity of the covenant between God and the Jewish people and undoing the foundational "supersessionist" belief that the church had spiritually displaced the Jews from their own story. That theological transformation is hardly shared by all Christian denominations; nor has the dialogue been spared significant setbacks, especially over Israel. Still, the Christian-Jewish dialogue challenged a seminal source of antisemitism and helped Jews achieve fuller social acceptance in the West.

The great interfaith challenge of the 21st century is to renew the severed relationship between Judaism and Islam. Despite their second-class status (and sometimes even more degraded), some Jews also engaged in profound encounters with Islamic civilization. They included philosophers and poets in medieval Spain, mystics in medieval Egypt, musicians in modern Iraq. While the relationship between Muslims and Jews was rarely as idyllic as pro-Palestinian apologists claim, neither was it as relentlessly grim as anti-Muslim polemicists insist.

The Muslim world is undergoing a deeply schizophrenic moment in its relationship to the Jewish people and to Israel. While anti-Jewish hatred, often based on the most outrageous conspiracy theories and genocidal in intent, is spreading among many Muslims, others are experiencing a combination of fatigue with the Arab-Israeli conflict, along with curiosity and even admiration for Israel as the most successful society in the Middle East. Just recently, more than 300 Iraqi public figures, defying Iranian death threats, held an unprecedented meeting calling for normalization with Israel. Israelis involved in social-media outreach to the Arab world report widespread regret among young Arabs for the destruction of their countries' ancient Jewish communities, a disaster they link to the decline of the Arab world.

At this time of radical uncertainty in the Muslim-Jewish relationship, strengthening Muslim goodwill is a core Jewish interest. As Israel becomes home to the majority of world Jewry, the locus of Jewish history has shifted back to the Muslim world. The growing Muslim communities in the West are an additional incentive for positioning Muslim-Jewish relations close to the top of the Jewish communal agenda. The French experience is a sober warning of what can happen when Muslim-Jewish relations reach the breaking point, which has called into question the long-term viability of a venerable Jewish community.

In 2013, together with Imam Abdullah Antepli of Duke University, I helped found the Shalom Hartman Institute's Muslim Leadership

Initiative (MLI), which has brought more than 150 emerging Muslim North American leaders to Hartman's Jerusalem campus to study Judaism, Israel, and Zionism. Our goal is not to challenge participants' support for the Palestinians, but to deepen their understanding of the central role Israel plays in Jewish identity and values. Graduates often refer to MLI as life changing. That extraordinary educational experience—unfortunately all too rare—has taught me to appreciate the potential of a contemporary Muslim–Jewish encounter.

The challenges we face in teaching about Jewish identity to Muslims are formidable. The Christian-Jewish dialogue was based on Christian penance toward the Jews, but Muslims in dialogue with Jews tend to regard themselves as the aggrieved side, expecting Jews to atone for the Palestinian tragedy.

But even before we are able to unpack the complexity of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, we have to overcome misconceptions among our students about Judaism. The absence of a shared sacred text between Muslims and Jews contributes to widespread Muslim ignorance of the significance for Judaism of peoplehood and of the Land of Israel. Instead, Muslims tend to regard Judaism as only a religion. They attribute Israel's existence to supposed Western guilt over the Holocaust, rather than seeing it as an organic result of the Jewish historical attachment to Zion.

On the first day of our first MLI cohort, in Summer 2013, a lecturer was explaining the roots of the Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel, beginning with Abraham and Sarah. A prominent young journalist raised his hand and asked, “So are you saying that your attachment to this land isn't because of the Holocaust but because of a 4,000-year tradition?”

Imam Abdullah, sitting beside me, leaned over and whispered, “Dayenu.” If we achieved nothing more than helping our students understand the profound Jewish connection to this land, the program would be a success.

The story of Israel that we teach in MLI, then, is not primarily the Zionism of refuge, but the Zionism of longing. And we tell

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the story of Jews from Muslim countries, including their uprooting and re-rooting in the State of Israel, where their descendants now form the majority of the Jewish population.

MLI is a test case for what can be achieved in Muslim–Jewish relations. To effectively nurture that relationship, though, would require a permanent institution with global reach.

I am proposing the creation of an intellectual and spiritual center, an institute where Muslim and Jewish scholars, artists, and religious leaders would collaborate on renewing and deepening the historic encounter between our faiths. This would range from scholars uncovering the Sufi mystical path embraced by Maimonides's sons, to theologians exploring new ways of interpreting each religion's complex attitudes to the other, to musicians examining the interface between Hebrew and Arabic music. (Israeli musicians such as Dudu Tassa, Omer Adam, and Sarit Hadad are widely popular in the Muslim world.)

The institute would also focus on the practical challenges facing the dialogue, such as how to deal with the return to Zion and the occupation. It would seek to expand the reach of the encounter, for example, identifying potential new partners across the Muslim world and attracting Orthodox Jews who are (religiously if not always politically) natural partners for traditional Muslims.

The Jewish interest in encouraging relations with the Muslim world is self-evident:

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The institute would maintain branches in Western countries with strong Jewish and Muslim communities, and in those parts of the Muslim world receptive to its mission (for example, the countries of the Abraham Accords). The natural home for the institute would be Jerusalem, the most intense meeting point of Muslims and Jews in our time. Precisely because Jerusalem is so fraught for both sides, it is where the Muslim–Jewish encounter can happen in its most authentic way. In Jerusalem, it is impossible to maintain what Imam Abdullah wryly calls “hummus dialogue,” the polite interaction that seeks to avoid hard questions. The MLI experience confirms that the more honest the encounter, the greater potential for breakthrough.

The Jewish interest in encouraging relations with the Muslim world is self-evident: There are 2 billion Muslims, while the Jews are not even 15 million; both for Israel and the Diaspora, lessening Muslim enmity could be a matter of life and death. But Muslims, too, have much to gain from this relationship. Embattled Muslim communities in the West need allies; when a relationship of trust is established, the Jewish community is a loyal ally.

And far from impeding a solution to the Palestinian problem, Muslim–Jewish “normalization” can help create the conditions

for a solution. Only a regional-based peace process can break the current impasse; the more that Muslims and Jews are engaging with one another, the more opportunity for political relations to evolve. And Muslim acceptance of Jews can help Israelis face the Palestinian problem more forthrightly, by easing the sense of siege and existential threat—based on the trauma of the Oslo precedent—of deceptive peace processes. That is the transformation I personally experienced: My MLI encounter helped commit me, despite my Israeli skepticism, to efforts to heal the Palestinian–Israeli wound.

The institute will not only address the Muslim–Jewish divide; it can also help bring together Jewish “tribalists” and “universalists” in a shared vision. It will speak to those whose primary concern is the safety of Israel and the Jewish people, and also to those whose primary concern is increasing understanding across divides. Muslim–Jewish dialogue is good for Jews, good for Muslims, good for humanity.

Finally, deepening the relationship between Judaism and Islam is not only a pragmatic necessity but also an opportunity for spiritual growth. The encounter stimulates what the late interfaith theologian Krister Stendhal called “holy envy,” the ability of one faith to learn from the beauty and insights of another.

In my encounters with Islam, I have experienced the power of the Muslim prayer line, the immersion of the body in a choreography of surrender to God. My own capacity for prayer has deepened as a result. For their part, MLI participants passionately embrace the traditional Jewish method of *hevruta*, or paired study, in which questions are valued no less than answers. Their exposure to the freewheeling nature of the Jewish study hall empowers them to explore their own tradition more deeply.

Maximizing the potential of the Muslim–Jewish encounter will require a sustained and multifaceted approach. The opportunity exists; a wise people knows how to respond. *

Jewish Study for Non-Jewish Clergy



ONE DAY in the spring of 2012, the Catholic archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, paid a visit to the main *beit midrash*, or study hall, of Yeshiva University. There he saw hundreds of young men engrossed in their learning, fervently discussing and noisily debat-

ing the Talmudic texts they were studying.

Reflecting on his visit in a stirring essay for *First Things*, Chaput wrote, “What struck me first was the passion the students had for the Torah. They didn’t merely study it; they consumed it. Or maybe it would be better to say that God’s Word consumed them.” The atmosphere in the *beit midrash*, he wrote, crackled with energy. The zeal the students brought to their Torah study reminded him of the current that sizzles when a couple falls in love — “a kind of electricity runs not just between them, but also in the air around them.”

Such ardor for learning helped illuminate for Chaput one of the astonishing wonders of history: the endurance of the Jewish

people against all odds. “Despite centuries of persecution, exile, dispersion, and even apostasy, the Jewish people continue to exist because their covenant with God is alive and permanent. God’s Word is the organizing principle of their identity. It’s the foundation and glue of their relationship with one another, with their past, and with their future.”

Then came a remarkable coda: “What I saw at Yeshiva should also apply to every Christian believer, but especially to those of us who are priests and bishops.”

If a relatively brief visit to a yeshiva could evoke in the archbishop such strong admiration for the serious study of Torah and Talmud, how much more enthusiastically might he have reacted had he been able to take part in such study himself? What if he could have encountered traditional Jewish learning at some point in his career, not merely as an onlooker but as a participant? Imagine that it were possible for non-Jewish clergy — Catholic, Muslim, Baha’i, Mormon, Baptist, Hindu — to have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the world of Torah study from the inside, even if for only a limited time.

What could such a program engender among the nation’s non-Jewish religious leaders? Consider the potential benefits:

- a deeper understanding of Jews and Judaism, and of the unique bond between the “people of the book” and the books they venerate;
- a firmer grasp of the deep Jewish roots of Christianity, Islam, and ethical monotheism;
- a more informed perception of the dual status of Jewishness as both a religion and a nationality;
- the enrichment of Gentile pastoral practice and spiritual oversight with insights drawn from the Jewish tradition;

- strengthened recognition of the centrality of the Land of Israel to Jewishness—a bond that anti-Zionist activists in some mainline Protestant denominations denigrate or disregard;
- effective tools for combating the spread of antisemitism or ignorance about Jews within non-Jewish communities;
- above all, perhaps, an enhanced awareness of “the gifts of the Jews”—the transformative ideas about morality, human dignity, and social justice through which Judaism shaped human civilization for the better.

Some seminaries and organizations offer courses and small programs to enable non-Jewish lay leaders to learn about Judaism. But there has never been a program to engage exclusively with clergy from across the spectrum of religious traditions in focused Jewish study.

I propose that we build such a program: the Jethro Project, a national initiative designed to provide promising non-Jewish clergy members with the opportunity to devote a significant period of time to traditional Jewish religious study. Jethro Fellows would fortify their own religious commitments and expand their spiritual horizons through meaningful exposure to Jewish texts, culture, and thought, guided by qualified Jewish instructors who are respectful of non-Jewish faiths.

The project and fellowships would be named for the most prominent non-Jewish cleric mentioned in the Torah. Jethro was a Midianite priest who admired Moses and exulted in God’s redemption of the Israelites. In midrashic literature, he is portrayed as a religious explorer and seeker of truth. Yet when Moses invites Jethro to join the Jewish people, he declines, choosing to return to his own society. He is arguably the greatest example in the Jewish tradition of a non-Jew who revered Jewish learning. It is surely no accident that the weekly Torah portion that recounts the giving of the Law at Sinai is known as *Parashat Yitro*—the portion of Jethro.

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Like its namesake, the Jethro Project would have no conversionary intent. Nor would it be designed for interfaith dialogue. Its purpose is different: to develop a measure of Jewish literacy among non-Jewish clergy, thereby introducing more of the world’s religious elite to the riches of Jewish wisdom while expanding the Jewish people’s circle of knowledgeable allies and admirers.

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Jewish literacy begins with studying Hebrew.

One cannot experience authentic Jewish learning without possessing at least the rudiments of the language in which the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish prayerbook, and countless Jewish texts are written. Many clergy members will already have studied another language (Latin, Greek, Arabic, Sanskrit) and will readily grasp the importance of Hebrew to Jewish proficiency.

Of course, beginner’s-level Hebrew is not enough to read and understand the Torah and other works in the original. But even a very simple grasp of the biblical tongue would enable Jethro Fellows to (for instance) comprehend the Torah’s explanation of many names, which typically turn on a common root, readily apparent in Hebrew but lost in translation. Similarly, they will gain a window into the frequent ambiguities in the biblical text—anomalous spellings, doubled words, “wrong” tenses—from which the Jewish sages derived countless insights.

Aided by their newly acquired language skills, Jethro Fellows

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will study some of the core texts of Judaism, starting with Tanach, the Hebrew Bible. Depending on the length of the program, they might sample multiple texts drawn from an array of scriptural sources, or undertake a deep dive into just one or two books. They would learn that Jewish study of Tanach involves an ongoing interrogation of the text, extracting layers of meaning from beneath the surface translation. Rare is the passage of Tanach that has not been elucidated by commentators across the centuries, deepened by midrashic allegory, or used as a proof-text to establish a legal or homiletical point. Jethro Fellows will find that biblical episodes with which they were already familiar from their own religious training acquire unexpected richness and relevance when viewed from a traditional Jewish perspective.

Less familiar to outsiders but no less vital to Jewish literacy is the Talmud, which, for 18 centuries, has been the paramount work of post-biblical commentary, law, moral instruction, and legend in Jewish life. Jethro Fellows will gain at least a glimpse of the Talmud's immensity and the revolution it worked in Jewish history. They will see how it exemplifies the uniquely Jewish religious passion for debate and argument, among contemporaries and across generations. And they will gain an appreciation for the religious alchemy through which the rabbis upheld the unquestioned authority of the Torah's words while dramatically reinterpreting

them, thereby ensuring the survival and relevance of Judaism long after the milieu in which it was born had vanished.

Another important takeaway for Jethro Fellows will be an understanding that Jewish law encompasses not just spiritual concerns but all of secular life. Part of their curriculum will focus on the preeminent code of Jewish practice and ritual, the *Shulchan Aruch* (the "Set Table") compiled by Joseph Caro in the 16th century. More than any other world religion, Judaism is a faith anchored in *commandments*, both positive and negative. Clergy whose own religious cultures may emphasize faith above works will learn that the Jewish approach has been different.

Every creed seeks to instill in its followers ethical values and moral teachings meant to guide them in all areas of life, including settings unconnected to religion. But normative Judaism fills even secular spaces with detailed laws and directives. Just as there are specific rules regulating prayer, the Sabbath, and kosher foods, there are equally specific rules that govern land ownership, criminal justice, labor relations, torts, and contracts—and the latter are no less integral than the former.

A leitmotif of the program will be the endurance of Judaism through millennia of upheaval. To that end, the Jethro Fellows will sample some of the vast body of rabbinic *responsa*, the written decisions from leading rabbis in response to practical questions addressed to them. These questions and answers often acquire precedential force, with rulings from one era guiding those drafted decades later. The *responsa* literature reflects the wrenching changes in the conditions of Jewish life over the centuries; it was the vehicle through which ancient Jewish teachings were harmonized with transformations in society, technology, medicine, and economics. From the end of the Iron Age to the age of the Internet, the rabbis continually adapted venerable religious principles to real-world situations, thereby maintaining the vitality of the world's oldest faith.

Participants will sample one additional genre of Jewish texts: that devoted to moral and behavioral instruction. The exhortations of the

prophet Micah, the Talmudic tractate *Avot* (“Ethics of the Fathers”), and the classic 18th-century work *Mesillat Yesharim* (“The Path of the Upright”) exemplify Judaism’s emphasis on the importance of integrity, justice, and kindness. By the end of their sabbatical, it will be clear to the Jethro Fellows that the Torah and the Jewish religion are meant to be a blueprint less for believing the right things than for acting the right way—a “framework for the construction of a society,” as the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observed.

Finally, it is impossible to understand Judaism and Jewish tradition without grasping the centrality of the Holy Land to Jewish identity and faith. So Jethro Fellows will spend part of their time in Israel. A well-planned trip to Israel will add depth to much of what they will be studying—the significance of the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays, for example, the Torah’s insistence on the uniqueness of the land, or the miracle of Hebrew’s modern revival into the daily language of millions of native speakers. It will also let participants experience what life in Israel is really like, which may be quite different from what they have previously heard or read.

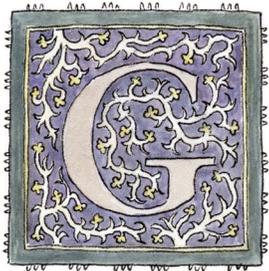


By and large, Jews have steered clear of providing Jewish instruction to non-Jews, to say nothing of non-Jewish clerics. The historical reasons for doing so are obvious. But in our era, when, despite rising antisemitism, so many members of other faiths are unabashedly philosemitic and openly grateful for the teachings of Judaism, this is an opportunity waiting to be seized. The Jethro Project will enable non-Jews who have found a vocation in their own religion to engage much more deeply with ours.

“No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny,” wrote the acclaimed Catholic historian Paul Johnson. “At a very early stage in their collective existence they believed they had detected a divine scheme for the human race, of which their own society was to be a pilot.”

In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Israelites that when they cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land, they are to erect giant stones and upon them “inscribe every word of this Torah.” The command ends with the words “ba’er hetev”—a cryptic phrase, commonly translated as “very clearly” or “most distinctly.” But Rashi in his classic commentary cites the Talmud’s explanation: The Israelites were to translate the Torah into all the world’s languages. To share Jewish wisdom with the nations around them is part of the mission of the Jews. Through teaching the clergy of other faiths, the Jethro Project would provide a new take on that age-old mission. Let us try it. *

Visionary Leadership for a Jewish Future



REAT JEWISH LEADERS dream big, articulate aspirations, remove barriers, engage in expert problem-solving, and then do everything within their power to bring their vision to reality — no matter how long it takes. When Moses took the Israelites out of Egypt, he had a singular goal: to get them to the Promised Land. Leading overwhelmed him with doubt and called for immense sacrifices. But after 40 years of managing conflict in the wilderness, he brought the Israelites to their crossing point. Moses didn't settle the people along the way and say "I tried" or "I failed forward." There was too much at stake. By Deuteronomy 34, his work was done, his legacy burnished. His leadership journey is the Torah itself.

In the words of Pete Davis in *Dedicated: The Case for Commitment in an Age of Infinite Browsing*, Moses was a "long-haul hero," someone who committed decades to public service, to staying in the fight. A long-haul hero leans in, even when it's hard and defeating, even when there's no end in sight, even when the goal may not be within his or her lifetime.

Jewish history is a continuous story of long-haul heroes. Esther used her royal platform to save her people. After the destruction of the Second Temple, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai shifted the centrality of Judaism from the sanctuary to the study hall — and we are still living in the shadow of his leadership decision. Rashi audaciously wrote a commentary on the entire Bible and Talmud but died in the middle of interpreting a tractate — and his work is studied intensely almost a thousand years later. Herzl had a crazy dream of statehood to ameliorate the crushing problems of European antisemitism. He never lived to see his Altneuland, but young adults with no background in agriculture came from Eastern Europe to make good on his dream, plowing fields in the nascent State of Israel. And more: Great Hasidic leaders rebuilt their decimated communities after the Holocaust. Jewish leaders galvanized volunteers in their long fight for Soviet Jewry. Israel's rescue planes flew to Entebbe, to Yemen, to Ethiopia.

The work has been complicated and demanding, but the missions have been clear.

We are in desperate need of long-haul heroes today, visionaries who are prepared to make personal sacrifices for the sake of local and national reform. When one of my own long-haul heroes, Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, gave his investiture speech as chief rabbi of the United Congregations in Britain, he made this clear: "I will never give up or relax or despair." Leadership begins with a vision bound by hope and the daily discipline of thousands of incremental covenantal commitments.

Our missions also need to be compelling. Today, however, our capabilities far exceed our aspirations. American Jews are more influential than at any other time in our history, yet we frame our work more around organizations than causes. We talk — always — about how much money we're raising, but not about the problems we're solving. In the words of leadership expert John Kotter, we are over-managed and under-led. We organize, staff, program, and plan when we first need to create a bolder and more inspiring vision, set

directions, align people, motivate, and heighten impact. Provide the aspiration, and the funding will come.

Long-haul heroes have what Dan and Chip Heath in their book *Switch* call a destination postcard: a visualization of an alternate reality that requires imagination but, with enough grit, is possible. We have many Jewish destination postcards: former slaves living in a land of abundant springs and fruit trees, planes with “Fasten Your Seatbelt” signs in Hebrew and filled with persecuted Jews finally coming home, tens of thousands of people across the globe completing a seven-and-a-half-year cycle of Talmud study.

One of our most aspirational and enduring destination postcards comes from the Hebrew Bible: “*There shall be no needy among you*—since the Lord your God will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion” (Deuteronomy 15:4). The ragtag Israelites, weary from their long trek, were given a vision of the future without the stark economic disparities they experienced in Egypt. They were told that their former vulnerabilities would disappear forever and for everyone. Only three verses later, however, we read a contradictory postscript: “*If, however, there is a needy person among you... do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman*” (Deuteronomy 15:7). One verse almost guarantees a world without poverty, the other confirms it.

This contradiction presents a foundational and revolutionary Jewish way of looking at the world and the central task of leadership. By beginning with a vision of a nation free of poverty, the verse implicitly suggests that we can never accept moral failure as woven into the fabric of our existence. *It will always be this way*—but we cannot assent to this type of resignation as normative. *There’s nothing we can do*—yet Judaism commands that we do something. *These things happen*—and still we believe that the inequalities of the world do not have to happen.

In the brokenness of our lived realities, when we *do* encounter people in need, Deuteronomy exhorts us never to harden our hearts, lest we contribute, as individuals, to the breakdown of our

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collective aspiration not only to reduce poverty but to eliminate it altogether. In Jewish tradition, one must always believe that the most pervasive and accepted ills of society are actually never acceptable. If we were truly living our ideals, we could eradicate suffering by virtue of our virtue.

While these verses point to the responsibility of individuals, the achievement of a just society is primarily entrusted to its leaders. Deuteronomy later describes the Israelite desire for a king upon settling the land. There are a few limitations placed on a king and one unambiguous demand: A Torah scroll must “remain with him,” and he must read it all his life. Through his physical proximity to the materiality of the scroll and its study, the king is reminded of the majesty of its human dramas and his humility in relation to them. Through faithful observance and attention to law and story, the king understands that promoting God’s aspirations for the nation falls chiefly on his shoulders.

The two Deuteronomic texts above invite us to reflect on our current state of leadership. Today we do not have kings; we have politicians. We do not have heroes; we have celebrities. We do not have prophets; we have philanthropists. We do not have leaders; we have fundraisers. We do not have visionaries; we have supervisors. Creativity, civility, sensitivity, and literacy take a back seat to “capacity.”

At a time of rapid change, however, we need soulful Jewish dreamers. Instead, it seems that our communal leadership aspirations have

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become too social, too parochial, and, frankly, too intellectually uninteresting to match Isaiah's timeless mandate, "And nations shall walk by Your light, kings, by Your shining radiance" (Isaiah 60:3).

It's time for those leading the organized Jewish community, like our ancient king, to open Torah scrolls and study. There they will find an expansive vision of justice, knowledge, and spirituality that has always characterized Jewish leadership. The rest is management.

Let us not impoverish ourselves.

Here are a few Jewish destination postcards that require long-haul heroes:

- universal Jewish education for children;
- a new, fresh, massive, affordable, and accessible online and in-person educational framework for adult Jewish learning, because good ideas happen when we nourish our souls and minds;
- a Jewish world that welcomes an exploration of faith without cynicism and skepticism, allowing us to appreciate ritual, rest, friendship, ethics, and community *together*;
- local, large-scale, outward-facing social justice projects — chief among them the elimination of poverty and hunger — that require a lowering of organizational walls and a raising of the human spirit;

- a reimagining of the role of synagogues beyond buildings and denominations and instead as a place where rabbis work together to incubate communal dreams and their implementation;
- a renewed commitment to Israel as the most significant project of the Jewish people and as a central address for the formation of Jewish identity;
- a recognition that a revitalization of the Hebrew language in North America is one of the chief ways we can repair fractures to Israel/Diaspora relations, binding us together with a shared language;
- a defanging of political polarization that has made those within our tribe act too tribally;
- giving circles that focus entire communities on specific charitable problem-solving, led by philanthropists who engage everyone in a collective endeavor;
- a radical reorientation of board composition to reflect real economic, gender, professional, political, religious, and demographic diversity;
- rethinking board service as a hospitality and relationship-building commitment;
- a separation of function for senior professionals from the work of institutional advancement, because leaders can't hold up destination postcards when they're too busy asking for checks;
- more opportunities to sing together — think multiple, large-scale communal concerts — because music gives us each a

voice to build collective sacred spaces that harmonize rather than fracture;

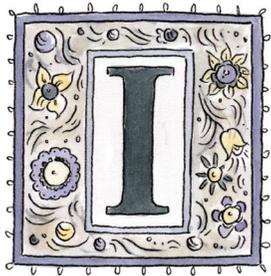
We have our work cut out for us. To achieve any of these goals, I believe that we have to do some or all of the following:

1. We need to end siloed territoriality, which damages community-minded behaviors. There are very few centralized or shared email lists. Everyone is so preoccupied with losing donors, clients, and stakeholders that we withhold precious resources, even when people might be better suited to other organizations. And we need to embrace mergers and acquisitions for organizations that cannot, or should not, go it alone. We need to increase, not decrease, our capacity to work *together* on the large issues that demand cooperation.
2. We must fundamentally shift the relationship of lay leaders with professionals. Organizations — from large, national organizations to schools and synagogues — should chiefly be led by professionals and supported by lay leaders. In many Jewish organizations today, lay leaders make decisions that professionals operationalize. This would not be tolerated in virtually any other private or nonprofit sector. Professionals do not rotate out of position every few years. Peter Senge in his chapter “A Shift of Mind” from the leadership classic *The Fifth Discipline* notes what happens to organizations when those who make the decisions are no longer in a position to understand the implications of their decisions.
3. Professionals have the education, the expertise, and the commitment to see projects through to completion. And when they are not given sufficient autonomy and respect, they leave. And they are leaving.

4. Build professional leadership from the inside. We have way too many external searches for executive positions, often prompted by disgruntled and powerful board members. I believe the number of searches has multiplied in line with the increasing wealth and authority of boards. Instead, let's invest more money in training, preparing, and coaching senior professionals and the boards they work with. Searches are important but can destabilize organizations for close to two years.
5. We have no Jewish frequent-flier programs. National organizations search for silver bullets to “engage” those who are disengaged rather than reward those who are already engaged but struggling to afford their Jewish lives. As a result, we have parents who want but cannot afford to send their children to Jewish day schools and summer camps, while college students are offered large financial inducements to participate marginally in Jewish life. Small stipends are insufficient as handouts. We have put an unfair onus on families. Many of these costs should be shouldered by communities if we are serious about wanting genuine Jewish commitment in the next generation.
6. We have to let go of the language of engagement and embrace the language of deepening commitments. Journeys need destinations.

Make no mistake: This is the work of visionaries. Our leaders must be dreamers. A long time ago, when Joseph's brothers saw him alone, they cried out, “Here comes that dreamer!” They did not mean it as a compliment. The literal Hebrew translation is not a dreamer but an “owner of dreams.” Joseph owned his dreams. Even in his hardest, darkest days, he did not relinquish them. The dreamer became a leader. *

A Vanguard of Rabbinic Unicorns



IMAGINE you're the rabbi of a synagogue on the more traditional end of the Conservative spectrum. As the synagogue prepares to recruit a new rabbinic intern, the Search Committee informs you that the leading candidate is a fiercely anti-Zionist rabbinical student, a signatory to the recent letter denouncing Israel as an apartheid state guilty of ethnic cleansing. You know this is morally twisted and want nothing to do with it. But the Search Committee is populated with a couple of powerful people in the congregation and is backed by several more.

So now you have a choice: You can object, putting your job and family's well-being at risk. At a minimum you'll have made lifelong enemies out of lay leaders whose support you will probably need to do an effective job. And who knows if your protest will even move the needle? Or you can begrudgingly capitulate to the hire, hoping that at least you'll have retained your job security. And, of course, you may still end up alienating the other members and leaders of your congregation who share your feelings about Israel.

I wish this were a hypothetical example, or at least a rare one. It's neither. In fact it's only one example of the many ways that the structure of Jewish communal life is binding the hands of our rabbis—the very people who are supposed to lead the Jewish people courageously and boldly through our time of profound challenge and immense opportunity.

It's become common to lament that the Jewish community has had a tough track record producing rabbinic visionaries who can serve as distinctive Jewish voices in great moral conversations, both national and global. If the 20th century yielded leaders, thinkers and scholars such as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, or Rabbis Norman Lamm, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jonathan Sacks, and Judith Hauptman—just to name some prominent figures from the Diaspora—what have we got to show for ourselves since then?

Few are willing to recognize that the problem is self-inflicted. It begins with the incentives we've created through our communal institutions, which virtually guarantee that the leaders we seek—the ones that Western society desperately needs us to produce—will see their careers wither and their visions dim from a thousand seemingly minor cuts like the one above.

“In early modern times,” writes historian David Ruderman, “the rabbinic office was more clearly defined, more professionalized, and more circumscribed by the lay leadership than ever before.” In the American context, being a rabbi is a vocation—rabbis are members of a professional class, the “rabbinate.” They serve in well-defined institutions and carry out well-defined functions. Becoming a rabbi, like choosing any career path, means enrolling in a school and earning a degree. Having graduated, it means competing for a very small number of open pulpits.

In such a market, even the most creative, brilliant, capable rabbis will be much more risk-averse than they'd otherwise be. If you're one of the lucky few to secure a pulpit, your incentives are clear: Be as inoffensive as possible. Keep your board, your donors, and various committee members happy. And try to stay as far away as

possible from anything resembling controversy. Forget articulating great Jewish ideas for the wider society — rabbis who want to keep putting food on the table will have little reason to stand up for basic truths in their own backyard.

Notably, the constraining factor is not the quality of the overall talent pool. Anyone who has spent even a modicum of time with younger rabbinic cohorts, from Gen X to Millennials, will be struck by their brilliance and vision. The problem is rooted in incentives.

How do we realign rabbis' incentives with the pursuit of world-class excellence in the realm of global moral vision? It won't be enough to create yet another fellowship with an annual stipend. Recipients would know that as soon as the fellowship runs out, they'd go back to being at the mercy of their institution, with dozens of people willing to step into their job if they refused to conform to expectations for blandness.

If we wish to inaugurate a new golden age of Jewish intellectual and social leadership, the path forward is not to temporarily change a rabbi's checking account. It's to fundamentally transform his sense of what is possible and to give him the training, tools, and back-end support to execute that vision. Consider a business analogy: Instead of incentivizing rabbis only to create small-scale mom-and-pop shops (where they can be independent), or to serve as middle managers at legacy companies (where their vision will be constrained), we should also work to create rabbinic unicorns. The strategy for doing so should proceed in three stages: catalysis, growth, and support.

Our first task is to catalyze new talent by placing high-upside bets on emerging rabbinic talent. The ideal cohort would comprise figures with enough of a track record to justify confidence in their future potential, but early enough to not have been captured by the existing communal incentives. With initiatives like the MacArthur Fellows Program or the Templeton Prize as models, the goal in this first stage would be to convey to rabbis, synagogues, and world Jewry at large that the Jewish community is serious about

How do we realign rabbis' incentives with the pursuit of world-class excellence in the realm of global moral vision?

cultivating intellectual excellence coupled with the ability to articulate great Jewish ideas.

Executing this through a prize with a considerable award amount would have several benefits. First, like the MacArthur "genius" program, it would directly support individuals, rather than institutions. This will demonstrate that we value singular creativity and vision. And it will encourage rabbis to begin thinking big about what they can accomplish outside the standard, stultifying institutional frameworks that currently exist. Second, a large enough award would be newsworthy, thereby calling serious attention to the recipients, boosting their creative efforts and putting them in the public eye both within and beyond the Jewish community. Finally, these effects would give recipients the financial breathing room to develop their intellectual horizons and social vision outside the confines of the institutional world.

But such catalysis would be only the first stage. After all, no prize amount could feasibly be large enough to free awardees from institutional shackles for an entire career. At a certain point, as recipients will foresee, the funds will run out. Without a plan to capitalize on the prize's momentum, we'll simply have purchased an expensive ticket right back to square one.

Instead, we should look at the prize as creating a runway. From the moment the award kicks in, the objective must be to help recipients grow as much as possible before they return to the Jewish communal marketplace.

What would this look like? We'll need to create a first-class

Once awardees are in long-term positions — whether existing or newly created — the time will have come to support the exponential growth of their creativity.

network of mentors, teachers, and amplifiers. Rabbis in the early stages of their career will need role models: other rabbis, public intellectuals, or personal exemplars. Every Joshua needs a Moses, every Rabbi Meir a Rabbi Akiva. Young rabbis will need people of this nature they can reliably spend time with on a regular basis, not necessarily for the purpose of learning anything specific, but rather to absorb wisdom through watching. As the Talmud teaches, “attending the wise is greater even than studying with them.”

Study is important as well. Younger rabbis will have enough experience in Jewish educational settings to make smart, informed choices about what and with whom to study if given sufficient opportunity. We will need to connect them with the best in the business on everything from the study of Middle Eastern history to the influence of Jewish wisdom on the American republic. This study phase will also include experts on the procedural, technical, and operational sides, including coaching from the best public writers, podcasters, and organizational leaders. These ongoing opportunities will give young rabbis the knowledge and skills they can use to further bolster their teaching portfolio, leadership capacities, and public profile.

But content means nothing without distribution. The last component of the growth phase, therefore, will be to connect prize recipients with those who can amplify their work, from newspaper, magazine, and journal editors, to TV and podcast bookers, to

communal or institutional venues looking for speakers. This will get rabbis used to teaching and writing publicly for broader audiences — from the global Jewish community to Western society at large — and get larger audiences used to engaging with them.

The objective of the growth phase is to ensure that when members of this cadre of rabbis take their next steps, they will be able to stay laser-focused on excellence. If they choose to reenter the Jewish communal market, they will be able to take the kind of risks essential for leading with moral clarity in the coming generation. After all, with a very limited number of communal positions open, the difficulty of standing out usually means that even the most suitable candidates for global Jewish leadership are entirely at the mercy of boards and committees. But if we seize the post-prize window of opportunity, we can put awardees in a much more favorable position. They will be highly sought after by prospective communities and institutions, rather than vice versa, and those who bring them aboard will be far more likely to encourage them to speak their mind and to lead with ideas — which is what made them so attractive in the first place.

The growth phase will also encourage out-of-the-box thinking about next steps. The breathing room afforded by the prize will already have planted the question of whether great Jewish intellectual and spiritual leadership in the future needs to tether itself to the legacy institutions of today. For recipients who wish to pursue leadership *outside* the existing institutional landscape — by building something new on their own — the activity undertaken during the growth stage will help generate some escape velocity. Given the right incentives, mentors, and network, what new initiatives for serving the Jewish people and wider society could some of our most superlative young rabbis dream up that will allow them to make it on their own? If run well, this phase could unleash a new golden age of rabbinic entrepreneurship.

Once awardees are in long-term positions — whether existing or newly created — the time will have come to support the exponential

growth of their creativity. Reaching world Jewry or global audiences requires a great deal of work that their jobs will not always allow them time to do. Even the most prolific writers, speakers, and creators need technical help. With a small but dedicated staff, the prize administrators will be able to provide critical back-end support to our growing cadre of rabbinic leaders. This could range from specialists in audio and video engineering to Web design and social-media management.

This kind of support will encourage and support rabbis in launching true “zero to one” ideas, a term coined by venture capitalist Peter Thiel to describe the process by which we create something wholly new. And though Ecclesiastes reminds us that there’s nothing new under the sun, our goal is to create a cadre of rabbis who think entrepreneurially. You can already see signs of this in the wild—from Zohar Atkins’s multiple Substacks revolutionizing Torah study, to Rabbi Noa Kushner’s synagogue start-up The Kitchen, to Dovid Bashevkin’s rethinking of Jewish education at 18forty.org. We need to help make these sorts of endeavors de rigueur in a field that tends to discourage them. That means making it a priority to facilitate as much entrepreneurial experimentation in different media as possible.

If we want more out of our rabbis, let’s do everything we can to bet on their creativity. Let’s show and not just tell aspiring rabbis that we value grand vision, risk-taking, and independence, and that we will support them as they go out into the world. Let’s send a clear message to our leadership that, in the words of King Solomon, it’s time to build. *

PART TWO

MOONSHOTS FOR
JEWISH CITIZENSHIP



Can a Year in Israel Transform Your Teen?



EW American communities worship the university as fervently as American Jews do. Yet no country is targeted on campus as harshly as the Jewish State is. Jewish parents are being taken for a ride. While spending big money to secure top credentials for their children, they are bankrolling institutions that increasingly reject the very values that helped American Jewry flourish: free inquiry and free speech, merit-based achievement, respect for religion and free enterprise, and a belief in the inherent worth of the American system. Many Jewish parents are fed up paying through the nose to get punched in the nose.

We don't have to accept the status quo. It's time to give generations of young Jews a year away from the illiberal liberalism that characterizes too many campuses today, a year of being wholly embraced by Jewish civilization, a year of leaving America behind so that they might understand it better and even help it mend.

Think Birthright Israel—only even more ambitious. Approximately 90,000 American Jews graduate from high school every year. The program we propose, Prep Year in Israel, will offer these young students the intellectual and spiritual equivalent of Pilates, strengthening the moral core of their Jewish identity while nurturing their engagement with the central ideas of Judaism, Zionism, the Western tradition, and American democracy.

To achieve that, we need to answer some basic questions. Why would 18- or 19-year-olds want to attend such programs? Why would their parents pay to support them? Why would Israel and the broader Jewish community invest in such programs? And how can this moonshot be a true gamechanger?

History offers some powerful models. In 1988, a few Israelis asked similar questions when Rabbi Eli Sadan launched Israel's first *mechina*, or pre-military preparatory academy, called Bnei David. Sadan and many of his fellow Religious Zionists felt stymied. Although Religious Zionism honored military service and recognized it as the stepping-stone into Israeli society, *dati*—religious—Israelis rarely became officers. The army seemed anti-religious, frequently turning pious recruits into secular veterans. Meanwhile, few IDF officers considered yeshiva boys to be officer material.

Eli Sadan proposed something new: a preparatory year of Jewish and Zionist study, along with pre-military psychological and physical training. Such groundwork could help religious soldiers become officers and commandos without losing their identities. Sadan had to sell his plan to high-school graduates, their parents, and army brass—who had to postpone interested recruits' obligatory service by a year—while financing the program.

The gamble paid off. Generations of committed, kippah-wearing, elite soldiers and officers have now served heroically while remaining passionate Religious Zionists—exiting the army as engaged Israeli citizens. Sadan's success inspired the founding of the first secular *mechina* in 1997, Nachshon, to foster democratic

idealism, patriotism, and tolerance among Israeli youth after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination.

Today, nearly 50 *mechina kdam tzvait* (pre-military preparatory) academies attract 3,300 teens annually. The programs are religious, secular, or mixed. Many of Israel's best officers and soldiers, along with Israel's top activists and educators from across the religious and political spectra, are *mechina* alumni.

Both of us have spent countless hours over many years engaging or debating Israeli and Jewish communal leaders as to how to bolster Israeli gap-year programs. It's time to take the discussion public. We need to learn from some recent successes, as well as our perennial failures. And we need to take bold action now.

Since the 1980s, the yeshiva gap year in Israel has become an accepted rite of passage for Orthodox high-school graduates, as it has long been for rabbinic students of all denominations. At the same time, the Birthright revolution shows how even a 10-day Israel experience can launch young Jews' Jewish journeys. Masa Israel, which mixes learning, volunteering, and working in more than 200 different programs of four months to a year, demonstrates how longer experiences can provide the ideal follow-up (or alternative) to a Birthright trip. Studies show that almost every Jewish communal leader and every *oleh* (immigrant to Israel) has enjoyed a serious, transformational, Israel experience.

Nevertheless, gap years are still widely perceived by non-Orthodox teens as a wasted year "off," and only a few hundred spend the year between high school and college in Israel. Contrast this with the 700,000 young Jews who have participated in Birthright Israel since its inception in December 1999, peaking at nearly 50,000 annually. Clearly, the challenge involves mindset, not simply money.

It would be foolhardy to stand between young American Jews and their rush toward college. Many young Jews and their parents

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see a gap year as a needless detour from their cultivated career paths (which in some cases began with competition to get into the right nursery school!). Our effort will succeed only if American Jews recognize en masse that a gap year is, in fact, a not-to-be-missed opportunity that better prepares their children for college emotionally, intellectually, ideologically, even socially.

A Prep Year in Israel wouldn't have to start from scratch. We already have many of the needed tools at our disposal. The existing gap-year programs should be evaluated and—insofar as they are working—expanded. We can connect to the assets of other types of programs, such as Reichmann University's excellent "Live in Israel Study in English" programs, Shalem College's efforts to bring a liberal-arts education to Israelis, Tikvah Fund's programs teaching foundational Western texts to Jews (including to students on gap-year programs), the Shalom Hartman Institute's identity-building and Israel-engagement initiatives, and thoughtful, extended programs such as the Dorot Fellowship in Israel.

But new Prep Year programs must also appeal to American Jewry's most ambitious and academically sophisticated 12th-graders. We need a raft of new, redrawn, and scaled-up programs that model the kind of classically liberal approach to critical thinking that universities once fostered. The programs will build students' skills in these essential areas, while also strengthening their connections to Jewish civilization and to other young Jews and Israelis. They

We still see in the Zionist idea and the Israel conversation the balance that healthy democracies need and that good educators should nurture between being stouthearted and staying open-minded, between identity and freedom, between having patriotic pride and being self-critical, between being the oldest of nations and the Start-Up Nation.

ought to offer college credit as well, making them seem even less like a year off and more like a way of preparing for and easing into the college experience.

These programs will cost money, because families have to recognize them as investments in their futures. Ultimately, these educational adventures should become résumé boosters, like the 10-week Birthright Israel Excel program and Masa's Israel Tech Challenge, which place superstar students in top Israeli companies for internships and, potentially, careers. American Jewish families will have to decide whether, along with the test prep and college prep so many families spend thousands of dollars on, they will also invest a bit in Moses, Miriam, Maimonides, Herzl, and other models of life prep.

As American Jews reimagine Israel's role in their children's lives, Israel will have to do some reimagining of its own. Israel's leaders initially hesitated to finance Birthright. Many wondered: Why should Israeli taxpayers bring "rich" Americans to Israel? Ultimately, subsidizing Birthright became the first phase of a massive paradigm shift in the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. As American

Jews continued contributing to Israel, Israel gave them something back: a material shift in the ways that young people understood their relationship to Israel and to their Jewish identity.

Because our proposal is less directly linked to Jewish identity-building, it marks a bigger step. Israel would be tackling a broader American educational problem while burnishing mostly American-oriented credentials. Still, there would be some clear benefits, particularly for Israeli universities that would stand to gain in money, reach, and prestige by becoming universities for the Jewish people as a whole, not just for Israeli citizens.

To do so, those universities will need to offer more courses in English and also in "American"—meaning using teachers who are skilled in the delivery of liberal-arts teaching to foster critical thinking. While improving their current course options, Israel's universities must also develop stimulating new courses that major American universities can accredit. And the government must prioritize this initiative, incentivizing universities to make the necessary adaptations.

Beyond the new programs, young Jews and their parents need a mass consciousness-raising initiative. Boosted by a popular educational advertising campaign, this expanded infrastructure can change the conversation in the Jewish world. The excitement should sweep up those who go to Israel and even those who choose not to go. That's their right, but at the very least the existence of a compelling, ever-more-popular Prep Year might get them to start thinking differently about Israel, Zionism, and Jewish identity, to say nothing of the crisis on so many American college campuses.

Many may wonder: Why Israel? And how can programs celebrating Israel, Zionism, and Judaism also foster the liberal values and critical skills colleges should cultivate?

Our bias here is clear. We still see in the Zionist idea and the

Israel conversation the balance that healthy democracies need and that good educators should nurture between being stouthearted and staying open-minded, between identity and freedom, between having patriotic pride and being self-critical, between being the oldest of nations and the Start-Up Nation. Israel today has many educators who juggle these values effectively.

If done right, these programs just might awaken students to the exciting opportunities of Jewish identity, peoplehood, and statehood. By getting a grounded perspective on Israel and its dilemmas, in an environment encouraging analytical skills and vigorous debate, many students could emerge as involved insiders rather than dismissive outsiders. They might be less willing to abandon their Jewish state even if it occasionally disappoints or embarrasses them among their peers. A newfound aptitude for understanding and living with complexity, built in one of the most complex places on earth, will be profoundly useful when students get back home: in conversations about Israel and about America, in debates about the past and the present, in the ability to criticize without denigrating or delegitimizing.

So let the brainstorming begin! Let's talk about a month-long Hebrew intensive course and a year-long seminar on Jewish citizenship 101; about a flagship Rhodes Scholar-type program with everyone living in one renovated mansion; about regular *tiyulim* (trips), holiday celebrations, and weekend happenings. Let's also change the conversation on the American side about what we expect from young people, how we educate them, how liberal arts and liberal-democratic values are essential to American Jewish survival, how we want them to think about the Jewish future and the role that Israel can play in their lives.

We would love to see America's first-class universities return to their initial mission of fostering critical thinking and open debate or see new colleges and universities emerge to fill the void. It's an essential national mission for America. But we can't wait. If this moonshot takes off, our young Jewish students can get the prestige

payoff and professional launch that many seek from higher education, without paying the high ideological price. They will have a head start by arriving prepared morally as well as academically.

Ultimately, in proposing this Prep Year in Israel moonshot, our goal is simple: From now on, rather than having every significant adult in their lives ask Jewish high-school students, "Where are you going to college?" we want young Jews to be asked, "Where are you spending your year in Israel?" And we hope our students will be able to answer thoughtfully, choosing from an extraordinary array of life-changing programs, preparing them not only for college but also for life. *

The Case for Secular American Yeshivas



YOU DON'T NEED me to tell you that the American educational system is failing our students, from the very youngest through those enrolled in graduate and professional schools. But let me tell you about one particular problem that I confront as a professor of classics and linguistics: Many students would appear never to have been taught how to read.

I am not talking about illiteracy. I teach at Princeton University, after all. What I am talking about is a lack of attention to the fabric of language—to text, a modish but useful word related to “textile” that English has borrowed from Latin (*textum*, “woven stuff, web”). Language is a wonderful, intricate web, and when students skim rather than read deeply, they necessarily miss the ways in which word choice and word order structure an argument or narrative. Furthermore, many seem unable to tell an elegant sentence or paragraph from a lousy one, which means that their own writing is often filled with malapropisms, non sequiturs, and

bizarre punctuation. Without philology—literally “love of words” in Greek—no one can properly follow, reproduce, or debate the merits and failings of a text.

And yet, sidelining philology is what most humanities departments have been doing for decades. All too often, professional humanists, and therefore also their students, do not so much read texts as approach them with one or another deliberate lens. They prioritize what is typically referred to as theory, believing—in large part in order not to seem irrelevant in a progressive world—that the central mission of education is not the search for truth but rather innovation, however wacky, for the sake of innovation. Textual tradition be damned.

It is because they value approach over text, theory over philology, that my colleagues in the Princeton classics department felt in spring 2021 that we could eliminate our language requirement, allowing classics majors to graduate without even a single semester of either Latin or Greek. Although I am sure they would deny the charge, a great many people who make a living studying and teaching Homer, Aristotle, Cicero, and Ovid do not care enough about what the ancient texts actually say, or exactly how they say it.

If I sound like a cranky professor, it's because I *am* one. I appreciate innovative thinking as much as the next person, but I also believe in tradition, and it is baffling to me that there are classicists who don't. Still, inattention to language poses problems well beyond the academy.

The fact is that certain texts, maddeningly obscure though they can be, are the bedrock of our society. Not to read and not to engage with them is to give up on responsible citizenship. But how many people have actually read the Constitution, not to say absorbed it? How many people remind themselves of this document's guarantees before weighing in on the latest Supreme Court decision (usually without having bothered to consult the opinions)? How many people take the time to read about the hot-button issues of

the day from all sides, assessing arguments and sources dispassionately rather than throwing out 280 ill-informed characters based on a sound bite or two from a single media source?

What is the solution to the problem? I have been asked to suggest a Jewish answer. Since Jews famously care about tradition but also—stereotype alert—have a reputation for innovative thinking, there is a theoretical reason to believe that everyone, regardless of faith (or its absence), may benefit from looking at Jewish practice. But experience suggests that the reason is far from merely theoretical. The fact is that many of my very best students over nearly a quarter of a century of teaching have been Orthodox Jews who studied at a midrasha (for women) or a yeshiva (for men) before arriving on campus as college freshmen. These are young people who have been trained in the deep study and interpretation of text: They know the Torah intimately, they know the debates in the Mishnah and Gemara, and they—stereotype alert, again—love to argue.

Introducing Project Sefer (Hebrew *sefer*, “book”). I propose that we build a series of secular institutions across the country modeled on schools of Jewish textual learning. While I have no personal experience with yeshivas (never mind midrashas), I recall with great fondness the many Talmudic hours that I—and in two especially wonderful cases also my most learned colleague at Princeton, the intellectual historian Anthony Grafton—have spent at a table with one or another student trained in Jewish scholasticism. The scene: There we are, hunched over some text or other—in Hebrew, in Greek, in Latin, in English—arguing cheerfully but with determination over the interpretation of a given word or phrase.

I like to think that this is what life is like behind the scenes at the Supreme Court, which in April of last year handed down an opinion that hinged on, of all things, the meaning of the word “a.” Is this silly, idle philology? Not to Augusto Niz-Chavez, whom the government was blocked from deporting thanks to a remarkable 6–3 decision in which three conservative justices and three liberal

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ones agreed on a strong interpretation of the indefinite article in the phrase “a notice to appear.”

As this example shows, philology is not—or at least should not be—a right-wing exercise. Take the two Orthodox Jewish students who worked with Professor Grafton and me, one of them surely the only person ever to graduate from an American university with an undergraduate degree in “philology.” Both are considerably to my left politically. The debates we sometimes had as we moved from old texts to present concerns were part of the fun. Philology helped make such debates possible: Despite our differences, we knew we were united in a good-faith effort to interpret a shared document.

And so: Project Sefer, which I think of as a Jewish-inspired but secular complement to the extraordinary rise across the country of classical schools—frequently classical Christian schools. The distinguished Renaissance historian James Hankins recently coined the term “Edexit,” writing of the collapse of K–12 education that “it’s time to organize a major exit from unionized public schools.” But whatever type of education you receive through 12th grade—and indeed, especially if you received a shoddy one—I propose to give you the opportunity to participate, cost-free, in a gap-year program that stresses textual tradition and good-faith argument. It would

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be a year spent reading (really reading!) the texts that make up our American story: founding documents, famous speeches, and the canonical works that influenced them.

I imagine that for most, the experience—which, if popular, would necessitate a substantial change to our educational infrastructure—would take place immediately after high school, though it would also be available to those who feel the need for something different after their undergraduate freshman year. Most important, it would be open to everyone, not just those who are labeled, or label themselves, academically talented. The goal is to save both academia and society at large by creating better and more-engaged citizens of all stripes: plumbers as well as professors, landscapers as well as lawyers.

I admit that until recently I was skeptical of the value of non-standard educational tracks. I'm an institutional guy through and through, the son of a professor myself, and I thought we could fix colleges and universities from within. I still hope we can. At the same time, I've also come to see the value in new institutions. I am, for instance, proud to be a founding member of the Board of Advisors of the nascent University of Austin, an enterprise that only a couple of years ago I would have said was crazy.

To paraphrase Tevye: Project Sefer, sounds crazy, no? I don't think it is. A major issue, of course, is how to pay for it. But because the project is about texts and arguments, not ideology, I believe that charitable foundations across the ideological spectrum will support the goal: to produce responsible citizens who can read and listen closely, express humility in the face of the unknown, and duke things out respectfully.

Imagine the scene: small groups of 18-year-olds sitting around a table hunched over some text or other and arguing cheerfully but with determination over the interpretation of the Second Amendment. Or the difference between the coverage of some event in the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Examiner*. Or the meaning of statesmanship, as defined by Plato, George Washington, and Barack Obama. The discussion of a given text or set of texts could go on for hours or days or weeks: There would be no formal curriculum, just a sense of doing philology, which Friedrich Nietzsche described as “slow reading.” I love this picture. *

The Media Are Broken. Here's What Could Be Next



DO YOU REMEMBER the episode of *Sex and the City* when Carrie brings her new boyfriend, Berger, to meet her friends for the first time? As they sip cocktails at some chic restaurant, Miranda tells everyone about a date she recently went on. She thinks it went well, though she isn't sure:

He couldn't stay over because he had an early-morning meeting, but he said he had a terrific time and that he'd call her soon. After the ladies offer supportive oohs and aaahs, Miranda asks Berger what he thinks, and she gets a shockingly unvarnished verdict.

BERGER: He's just not that into you.

[*The table explodes.*]

CARRIE: That is ludicrous! What about extenuating circumstances? What about, you're stressed out? You're on deadline? You have a migraine?

CHARLOTTE: Or a lot of guys are afraid of getting their feelings hurt! And they don't want to ruin a friendship...

MIRANDA: Or they're freaked out by their own feelings? There's a lot of push-pull out there, a lot of mixed messages...

BERGER: There are no mixed messages.

MIRANDA: But I've spent my whole life deciphering mixed messages.

CARRIE: I've made a whole *career* of it.



This is what flashed in my mind when I received the prompt that led to this essay: *We were thinking that you might offer thoughts on how to fix our broken media, specifically in ways that make it less relentlessly hostile to Israel and the Jews.*

There is no way to “fix” our current general-interest media landscape. The *New York Times* does not care about you or your concerns. You cannot change it, because the people who run it want it to work the way it does, and, no, it is not because there are two or three or seven bad apples on the masthead or because no one has written a powerful enough takedown that shows them the error of their ways. It is also not because the Sulzbergers are secretly self-hating Jews. There is, in fact, no push-pull out there; there are no mixed messages. They're just not that into you.

In their glory days, which are long past anyway, newspapers were mirrors; in front of each one stood a group of readers, receiving a desired reflection. For decades, American Jews were a vital cohort in the group standing before general-interest titles—a small crowd over there in the back, but colorful, noisy, important. The other people in the shot weren't surprised to see us in the shared reflection, nor we them.

But we aren't, in any communal way, in that crowd anymore. Our fault? Someone else's? It's the Left! It's the Right! It's Big Tech! Please, *yidn*, please stop. The next time you get angry about what the *New York Times* or some other outlet says about Jews or Judaism or Israel, I want you to imagine yourself in the fitting room at

Loehmann's, yelling about how you can't see yourself because all the other women are crowding the mirror. The whole scene is just embarrassing.

Okay. So what now?



For roughly a century, American journalism was a pyramid.

At the very bottom was a layer of hyper-local outfits: neighborhood papers, supermarket circulars, county weeklies. Above them were the metro dailies, or major metros if you lived in or around an urban environment with one of them: Chicago, Atlanta, Detroit, et al. Above those were the big nationals — the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, etc.—the fancy journalism brands standing for Truth and Integrity and Civic Expression that people love to make corny movies about. Above them were newsweeklies, *Time* and *Life* and *Reader's Digest* and so on. And at the very tippity-top were the thought-leader magazines — *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, et al. Whatever level you found yourself in, you read that layer and every layer underneath it. Some people read only their county weekly, but no one who read *Harper's* didn't also read a local daily and a national newspaper and probably more in between.

It's important to understand that newspapers and magazines were profoundly, even genetically, different. Newspaper journalism turned on *closeness* — on offering readers naturalistic reflections of their daily existence, which could be created only from what may be metaphorically referred to as street-level details. This was true whether the beat in question was geographic or topical. In either case, the work consisted of intimate and long-term — to the point of gritty — contact with the people, places, and atmospherics that made a specific universe run.

As a result, newspapers were what you could call a hot medium. Readers were supposed to read them, slam down their

There is no way to 'fix' our current general-interest media landscape. The *New York Times* does not care about you or your concerns.

coffee mugs, throw their paper on their kitchen table with loud "thwacks!" and exclaim something about the state of their elected officials, neighbors, bank accounts, weather, etc. If it was a really good story, they would also then feel the urgency to do something about it — at the local school, on their lawns, at the ballot box.

By contrast, magazines — especially the thought-leader titles — were a cool medium. They turned not on closeness but on the benefits of *distance* — on decidedly *not* being of a specific place or community, a distance that enabled their editors and writers to offer readers the very different vista of a wider mirror. Great magazines were framing devices, each of which offered a unique posture, an attitude, a perspective. If the job of the newspaper's mirror was to give readers a clear reflection of their lives — how their realities looked in their current clothing and makeup and hangovers and whatever else — it was in the magazine's mirror that they could learn how to strike a pose.

Now go all the way down, down, down to the very bottom of the pyramid. It is that layer — the layer of the local, down-market, and utilitarian — that infused the whole system with trust and credibility.

How could that be? Those rags didn't win any awards! They almost never broke news interesting beyond their ZIP code.

True. But the reporters and editors putting out these stories were, more often than not, your neighbor, your kid's best friend's parent, the guy you regularly sat next to at the local bar. More important, they published things that people could, with their

For millions of Americans, for decades, ‘journalists’ as a class were trustworthy because the particular journalists *they knew* were trustworthy, which made them instinctively trust other people with the same job description, all the way up the pyramid.

own eyes, see were true: The stoplight at the intersection had in fact been fixed. Orange juice is indeed on sale with this coupon, which I know because I just used it myself and paid the lower price. The school-board president was definitely ousted, and in fact I might even know whether the article about this story was right or wrong because I was present at the meeting where it happened.

For millions of Americans, for decades, “journalists” as a class were trustworthy because the particular journalists *they knew* were trustworthy, which made them instinctively trust other people with the same job description, all the way up the pyramid. In other words: The national elite outlets didn’t give credibility to everyone in the layers below them. It was the other way around.

We don’t need to do an autopsy over how this journalistic model was vaporized—the bottom layers first by Craigslist and then by Facebook, etc., etc.—to know that this pyramid of trust no longer exists. For those interested in addressing the problem, though, there are two options.

One is to ignore everything I just wrote. Keep the faith! Hold on to the *New York Times* like Kate Winslet’s character does with that slab of icy wood in *Titanic*! Throw a bunch of resources at “swaying”

or “responding to” or “fighting” the prestige general-interest outlets. This is expensive but easy, since all it really requires of you is to sit back and watch as everything gets worse.

The other option is to rebuild the pyramid—or *a* pyramid, in this case a Jewish pyramid—from the bottom up, reconnecting high-grade Jewish intellectual, cultural, and political content to actual people... to *amcha*, your people, the Jewish people.

In the past, a system like the one I described connected communities that were geographically diverse. In our case, it gives us the power to coherently join together cohorts of American Jews that may seem distinct, but that appear to be in the process of creating an emerging new American Jewish community.

The best description of this phenomenon was laid out by Liel Leibovitz in *Tablet* last May, where he noted an increasing split in broader American society between what he called team A and team B:

People on team A sometimes identify as woke. Many of them believe, or accept when others say, that America is a problematic country that [sprang] from the soil of slavery and therefore can never make any claims to goodness, let alone greatness. The same goes for the West at large. Members of team A are inherently suspicious of institutions, whether broad ones like synagogues and churches or narrow ones like the nuclear family, which they see as nothing more than tools for the powerful to subdue the powerless. They curb religion by casting all faith as a cynical ploy to keep down women, gays, transgendered folks, and people of color. They target the family by having fewer children than any other generation in American history, and arguing, as the Black Lives Matter movement bluntly does in its manifesto, that true justice can’t come until people learn

to reject the nuclear family and instead embrace egalitarian groups of peers. They couch some of this argument in economic terms, because people on team A also tend to be deeply uncomfortable with the accumulation of capital, and support a whole host of policies that come down to redistributing wealth in one form or another.

Like any, most, or all of this? Team A is for you.

Members of team B are driven by a different set of beliefs: That private property is personally rewarding and socially generative; that capitalism and invention fuel growth and happiness; that there's absolutely no substitute to raising and being part of a family; that nation-states, flawed as they may be, are the best expression of some unique, mysterious, and indelible collective character (which means that Israel—which combines population with religion, ethnicity, and culture in the form of a state—is not some “unprincipled exception” but actually a superior example of what all countries should aspire to); that the West, however flawed, remains committed to expanding freedoms, however slowly it may proceed; that universal kinship can only come if and when people are first tethered to one specific tradition that teaches them the basics of living with others; that there's some sort of divine force guiding the storm, whatever you choose to call it and whatever you think it demands of your life. If the above feels more or less right to you, you're on team B.

Leibovitz went on to argue that the same split is mapping on to Jewish life as well, where only one of these camps will be friendly to Zionists and Zionism. Just as in the broader American context, all of the old labels (Reform/Conservative/Orthodox, left-wing/right-wing) are increasingly irrelevant, with people reshuffling themselves in new and unexpected ways, dividing

By creating a way to see and hear what's going on in their bottom layers, and to filter it up into the ideas-generation, policymaking and national trendsetting of the uppermost layers, we'd re-create the best of what the former media pyramid did for communal and civic life.

themselves from institutions and people with whom they once reflexively associated and finding themselves drawn to strange places and surprisingly bedfellows.

Team B seems to include traditional political right-wingers and the Orthodox, but joined by majorities in the ethnic and recent immigrant communities of former Soviet Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and Persian Jews, as well as a cohort of stunned college kids and a swath of normie American Jews newly aware of how their old-line definitions of liberalism and even soft lefty Zionism are turning them into outsiders.

It is team B that I want to focus on here, since in its fundamental newness and diversity it feels both compelling and also generative for the creation of a new communication system. What I'm proposing here is to see in these people the potential to close the democracy deficit in Jewish communal life, by giving some portion of philanthropic power over to them.

The inspiration here are DAOs, or decentralized autonomous organizations, which are digital platforms controlled by members. In DAOs, the rules are embedded into code, so no managers

are needed, thus removing any bureaucracy or hierarchy. We'd do something a bit different, as in our entity there would be a top layer, but — like with any good government — it would not control the voting below; it would provide only whatever it was the people voted *for*.

Let's call this the American Zionist DAO, with specific founding members defining the goals and purpose of the collective. Anyone can become a member if they invest a small amount — say \$18 a year — though moderators retain the right to eject any member who violates any foundational term of the group. In exchange for that, members are granted the ability to vote each year on an intramural contest of communal priorities. In the first round, ideas can come from any member and can be anything — a day school, a soup kitchen, a health-insurance co-op, trips to Israel for a certain cohort, a fund to help students at a local campus fight BDS, whatever. Only the ideas with X amount of votes advance — and so on for several rounds, until the entire DAO membership is, at the end of each year, voting on the final set of projects to be funded. Grants should be numerous and individually large enough to command attention and inspire mass participation (say 20 to 25 \$1 million ideas each year.)

In seeking votes, nominators are forced to find and lasso allies who may be from different communities but are kindred thinkers — thereby creating connections between the “citizens” of this new Jewish community. And we address a gnawing disconnect between *amcha* and the Jewish philanthropic and communal leadership who believe they are using their resources to serve them.

By creating a way to see and hear what's going on in their bottom layers, and to filter it up into the ideas-generation, policymaking, and national trendsetting of the uppermost layers, we'd re-create the best of what the former media pyramid did for communal and civic life. And we would have done so by doing what Jews have always done best: capitalize on the burden of outsidership by innovating

in ways that soon become not just the envy of but a model for other communities around us.

Forget Harvard, forget Goldman Sachs, forget the *New York Times*. Remember our opening scene? He'll regret having let you get away. *

Invest in Democracy



ESPIE the Jewish people's almost instinctive belief that our problems are unique to us and meant for us to solve alone, the truth is that almost none of the big challenges we face are the product of our own making.

The Enlightenment, which wasn't about us, wreaked havoc on the self-evidence of the claims of Jewish theology and epistemology that governed how Jews understood ourselves, God, and the world. Jewish faith and practice have been on the defensive ever since.

The imperfect processes of emancipation in the West, which were only partly about us, gave many Jews access to the benefits of citizenship, chief among them free agency to pursue our own voluntary associations and communities, often at the cost of collective identity. We are still trying to put the pieces back together.

Nationalism, which was also not about us, has enabled the Jewish people to flourish as a political entity but has also opened us up to nationalism's many pitfalls.

Industrialization and ongoing technological revolutions, which are much larger than we are, separate us ever further from the domesticity and the communitarian ethos that held together Jewish praxis and sacred community. They now pose threats to humanity itself, in the form of climate change.

And yet, we still think we are always just a "big bet" away from addressing the challenges of being Jewish today. Do we really believe we can address the fundamental gaps in our existence and fend off the steamroller of modernity, if only we just had more money at our disposal?

I'm skeptical. Most of the time, Jewish philanthropy and Jewish institutions simply do what they have done for a long time: respond to trends larger than the Jews with small-scale adaptations to keep the community afloat, in line with the past and charted toward the future. And that is fine. I have a reasonable amount of trust in our institutions. We will find our way to some form of continuity of Jewish history, one way or another.

But what if we took a few moments to think really, really big? What if we started asking whether the unique conditions of the present moment might enable Jews to change the very conditions of history in which we are living? What if, instead of figuring out ways to respond to forces beyond our control, we actually challenged those forces ourselves? How do we address the prevailing ideological and political conditions of the societies in which we live? What conceptual tools do we need in order to lead not just our people but also our society through this exceptional time in history?

In both Israel and the United States, the principal civilizations in which the overwhelming majority of Jews live, liberal democracy is an essential, constitutive feature of what has enabled the Jewish people to thrive. And democracy as we know it is teetering against the threat from populism, as political scientist William Galston and so many other observers have argued.

"Democracy" includes the *institutions of democracy* such as

government; access to free, fair, and conclusive elections; an independent media; and a trusted judiciary. It also includes the *values of democracy*, including a universal commitment to human rights as well as civil rights; trust in government; pluralism; and equality.

In America, our collective commitment to democratic institutions and values is in jeopardy. I fear that many of us have forgotten the experience of living in non-liberal democratic political systems and have embraced our at-homeness to such a degree that we are playing along with the partisan efforts of other Americans — as though doing so was an act of good citizenship. In a democracy, we are bidden to prevent the collapsing of the categories of the moral, the political, and the partisan, lest we find ourselves in a holy war against our partisan enemies. Some measure of pluralism must coexist with passionate politics for us to have vibrant, robust, trustworthy, and stable institutions.

American Jews have thrived in no small part because we created a coherent assonance between our Jewishness and our understanding of American values and democracy. When we embrace the culture of partisanship that surrounds us, we imperil that thriving. We either think our side can win, or we become too afraid of losing. Either way, we are playing with fire. Any amount of money would be a small price for American Jews to pay as a debt of gratitude to support American civic institutions, civic education, and even politicians of integrity, to help reestablish what some of our major rabbis have called our *malkhut shel hesed*, our kingdom of kindness.

It is not the same story in Israel. The Israeli struggle for liberal democracy arises less from the demise of, or distrust in, systems and structures, and more from the Israeli tendency to treat democracy as a construct separate from Judaism, as merely a system of government under which Jews happen to live. It is a weirdly “diasporic” thing to do to imagine that Jews can be morally agnostic about the difference between living in democracy, ethnocracy, or autocracy, as long as Jews are safe.

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Israelis need a little bit of the notion that American Jews have already internalized — that liberal democracy is a framework that refines and redefines our very understanding of Jewish values. Some opinion polls show that when even secular Israelis have to choose between values that describe themselves as “Jewish” and those that describe themselves as “democratic,” they will choose the former. They have to learn to reject the question.

The overwhelming majority of American Jews support what we consider the Jewish values of human rights, pluralism, and democracy. Yet when it comes to philanthropic support for these values in Israel, we send over a pittance. This is absurd. Only liberal American Jews get scared off by the accusation that American Jews shouldn't reshape Israeli society in our image.

For example: The Israeli Right has profited off American Jewish largesse for decades in reshaping the map of Jewish territorial contiguity through Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. It has built a flourishing lobby for libertarian ideas that has deeply influenced the judiciary. It has supported entities that have harassed pro-democracy NGOs to the point of nearly criminalizing them in the eyes of the public, if not sometimes even the law. And those investments by American Jewish philanthropy often can be overtly anti-democratic. If American Jews who support illiberal visions for Israeli democracy do not shy away from using their philanthropic capital to support those efforts, why do American Jews who believe

There should be a far more visible, powerful, and moneyed American Jewish lobby that advocates fidelity to democratic values in the United States, one that would transcend partisan politics to act on behalf of liberal democracy itself.

in liberal democracy back away from playing the same game? And if the existential survival and the moral thriving of the Jewish state depend on preserving its democratic character, why would supporting liberal democracy be seen as anything but acting in the interest of the Jewish people and its future?

I want to propose two specific ways in which major philanthropic or entrepreneurial investment could make a material difference for the advancement of democracy in America and in Israel:

First, through advocacy and lobbying.

There should be a far more visible, powerful, and moneyed American Jewish lobby that advocates fidelity to democratic values in the United States, one that would transcend partisan politics to act on behalf of liberal democracy itself. And it should do so with teeth. Right now, no such lobby or PAC exists, at least within the Jewish world. Americans have atomized democratic values according to our own partisan instincts in such a way that we do not have the fortitude to advocate something bigger. Our moral, political, and partisan concerns do not need to be the same; being anti-insurrection and pro-voting rights are just two examples that could serve us all. But until we build an instrument that advocates collective, small-d democratic concerns, we will continue wounding one

another as Americans in order to “win” elections, only to discover there is nothing worth winning. Perhaps American Jews could use our inherited wisdom—Robert Cover’s idea that Judaism has a discourse of obligations more than it has a language of rights—to teach something to a broken America.

As for Israel, the idea that American Jews who care about liberal values have to stand on the sidelines of Israeli politics runs counter to Israel’s idea of itself as the nation-state of the entire Jewish people. The suggestion otherwise—the use of Israel’s security concerns as a means of deflecting substantive concerns about its policy choices—can sometimes be anti-democratic, as when it uses fearmongering to suppress legitimate discourse. Part of the reason that right-wing disinformation campaigns have worked in Israel against pro-democracy NGOs is that those NGOs are small, without the capacity to fight back against their attackers. Israelis tend to be an ideological people with a lot of fears, and democracy has to engage with Israeliness and make its case more effectively: in the education system, in Knesset lobbying, in the public square. This could just be a matter of money.

The second way to make a major difference, both in Israel and the American Jewish community, is to strengthen independent media.

The newspaper *Yisrael HaYom* changed the game in Israel. With the beneficence of a single philanthropist, it was capable of distributing its pro-Netanyahu message for free on Israeli streets. Yet the antidote is not just a more liberal version of *Yisrael HaYom*. It lies in changing the media landscape entirely, funding multiple newspapers from across the ideological landscape so that a broader spectrum of views can compete effectively in the marketplace of ideas. Israeli democracy can include some amount of anti-democratic voices if they can play by the rules. And given the prevalence of religious and national passions in Israeli society, those ideas will remain. Robust democratic institutions can allow them to flourish while remaining in check.

On the American side, our community desperately needs its own Jewish ProPublica, modeled on the Pulitzer-winning investigative nonprofit founded by two Jewish philanthropists 15 years ago. These are indications that the American Jewish community is internalizing an anti-democratic ethos, perhaps from its own surroundings, and we had best not be complicit with it. An independent, well-funded entity with the capacity and mandate to engage in deep investigative work on our own community could enable the American Jewish community to serve as a model for others for how a minority group doesn't just survive but thrives in a democracy—not by trying to protect itself from the dominant value system, but by serving as an exemplar.

Both of these suggestions are of a piece with a big idea: that liberal democracy stop thinking of itself as on the defensive all the time! To invest in liberal democracy—literally, in the infrastructure that holds and frames the Jewish experience of the modern world—is to detach us completely from the parochial instincts to which we default when addressing our big challenges. It takes seriously the fact that big ideas have defined the Jewish people until now and will continue to do so far into the future. It's a far-reaching play that addresses the conditions in which we live, and that serves our people's interests much more effectively than turning the dial on Jewish identities, ideologies, or behaviors that *respond* to those conditions.



A few years ago, a prominent philanthropist said to me, ominously, that our communal leaders had made a mistake by hinging the relationship of Jews to Israel too much on the idea of Israel as a thriving democracy, compatible with its Jewishness; but what would we do to cultivate support for Israel when it stopped being a democracy? It would be tragic for us to become fatalists about the only political system that can stake a moral claim on us equal

to our tradition itself. Since when are the Jewish people—and especially Zionists—willingly powerless to shape our political destiny? If we have seen the ways that liberal democracy has benefited and transformed our people, and we have the resources and fortitude to fight for it, then we are the generation to take up the fight.

And in taking up that fight, I offer a final hope and recommendation—that we do not treat an investment in democracy as a purely political or strategic exercise, exclusively in the interest of Jewish survival. At stake as well is the meaning, still to be determined, of Judaism in this age of democracy. What Athens has to do with Jerusalem is not a new question, and it has not always been a question specific to the Jews. But it is hard not to shake the sense that the present moment is the moment to invest in the fertile intersection between the universal and the particular, tradition and modernity, philosophical inquiry and inherited wisdom, rights and obligations.

If the Jewish people are to invest in democracy, it must invest not only in civic institutions here and there, in healthier nonpartisan instruments for voting rights and a free press, in politicians who believe in the social order, in advocacy for religious pluralism and human rights, in civic education. Let us also invest in Jewish ideas themselves. Right now, Jewish wisdom is balkanized in service of particular or partisan agendas, and the economy of knowledge does not privilege serious philosophical inquiry across disciplinary or ideological lines. This must be fixed. For while political solutions to present crises tend to be temporary, Jewish experience teaches us that hermeneutical innovation can be timeless. When our people can learn to integrate Jewish and democratic norms together—not just as an exercise in expediency but as mutually reinforcing values systems—we will have cracked modernity for eternity. *

Invest in Philanthropy



WE NEED a moonshot for Jewish philanthropy. Why not aim for universal Jewish giving?

This would mean not only that all Jews would give, but that some portion of every Jewish person's giving would go to Jewish or Israeli causes.

Such an idea touches on a core Jewish value: The Talmud teaches that giving is incumbent on everyone—“even a poor person who is sustained from *tzedakah* must also perform *tzedakah*” (Gittin 7b). For Jews, giving is not a rich person's game. It's supposed to be a mass, universal experience, and Jewish wisdom and history are rife with examples of why and how mass giving should happen. It's also an idea reinforced by the American Jewish experience of being expected, from the days of Peter Stuyvesant onward, to take care of our own, and nearly four centuries of proudly having done so.

This powerful idea can also serve as a rejoinder to contemporary complaints about Jewish philanthropy. Don't like what someone else gives to, what their politics are, or how they made their money? Great

news: Since you're also supposed to give, you can use your giving to help make whatever change *you* want to see in the world. Worried that your money doesn't matter? Join together with others, in a giving circle or a Federation or another collective giving enterprise, to have a greater impact than you could have on your own.

But the key takeaway is: No one is supposed to opt out—never mind opting out and then complaining.

American Jews are generous people. The exact numbers vary per study, but they generally agree: Jews give more to charity than most if not all other American ethnic or religious groups, and most Jews give. But it's certainly not universal. Nor, especially, is giving to Jewish causes. Pew's 2020 study of American Jews found that 48 percent of respondents said they had given to a Jewish cause in the past year. *Connected to Give* (2014), one of the few statistical studies of Jewish giving, found a slightly more encouraging number—58 percent.

There's no question that these numbers are shrinking over time, as barriers to entry to non-Jewish causes have vanished, and as Jewish affiliation and a sense of Jewish particularism weaken. Fewer dollars mean less good work can happen; fewer donors means decreasing diversity in the donor pool, concentrating disproportionate power—and burden—among those who remain.

Universal Jewish giving to Jewish causes is an excellent way to ensure not only that Jewish communal institutions thrive, but also that their work reflects the full diversity of the Jewish people itself.

How do we get there?

Tzedakah (giving, charity, philanthropy) needs to be embedded in all Jewish educational and engagement efforts. I'm not talking about fundraising. I'm talking about *tzedakah* both as a way into big Jewish questions and ideas, and also as a behavioral muscle that needs to be exercised. Everything we do in Jewish organizations and institutions can be deepened, illuminated, and explored by integrating

conversations about and experiences with *tzedakah*. Philosophically, discussing questions about giving (to whom, why, how, and how much) touches on the deepest questions about human responsibility and community. Educationally, there's no better way to learn deeply about any issue (Israel, gender, disabilities, etc.) than to survey the organizational landscape in service of investing in it.

And attitudinally, giving through the lens of Jewish wisdom can help build the type of Jewish citizenry we need: humble, generous, interconnected, knowledgeable, and engaged.

Maimonides, who wrote volumes on *tzedakah*, knew this well. His famous eight-rung ladder of charity, ascending from begrudging gifts to deep partnership, puts a primary value on the giver's humility and on respect for the recipient. Maimonides also made the thought-provoking argument that acquiring the trait of generosity was even more important than the impact of the funding on the recipient: If you have 1,000 coins, he wrote, you should give them away *one by one*, a thousand times, rather than all at once in a single gift. The repetition of the act builds the necessary muscle for generosity.

We're not starting from scratch in making Jewish giving universal, but we have a lot of work to do.

1 | *People need more, and more creative, ways to give.*

Getting more people to give requires creating many more vehicles that reflect the multiplicity of reasons why people give that are excellent, innovative, empowering, and responsive to the market. Everywhere people turn, they should come across a way to give Jewishly that reflects their interests, values, and income level: giving circles, teen and women's foundations, venture funds, and digital giving platforms. Let's create new enterprises and strengthen our existing resources. For more people to find their philanthropic homes, we need to build a lot more homes.

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knowledgeable, and engaged.

2 | *Articulate better ways for people to think through the importance of giving to Jewish causes.*

Jewish givers need to overcome the pressures of universalism that dampen or erase the sense that Jews have a special connection to and responsibility for one another. We need many loud, proud, joyful, confident answers to the question of why it is okay for Jews to care about other Jews and the Jewish state more or differently than they care about others. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has given us one helpful framing: "Start with your family first, then your neighborhood, your country ... expand philanthropy and *tikkun* work outward, until the whole world is perfected."

3 | *Bring Jewish ideas into American conversations about giving.*

Ideas about giving permeate Judaism and Jewish culture, and the ideas are beautiful. The moral and behavioral values of generosity and humility, the need to care for the vulnerable, mutual responsibility, communal thriving: Jewish wisdom has something to say about all of this. Let's do a better job of sharing these as broadly as possible. I was once at an event—a Jewish event—where the speaker praised "the Mormon tradition of tithing." Although more Mormons might tithe than others, they got that idea from the Jews. Let's find

There's very little that a donor could be interested in that can't be supported through a Jewish or Israeli organization.

ways to infuse the public sphere with Jewish ideas that can guide *anyone's* giving. We have tremendous wisdom to share.

4 | *Raise awareness of the breadth of Jewish and Israeli causes.*

Years ago I observed a focus group of foundation directors and philanthropic advisers discussing why their Jewish donors and clients didn't give to Jewish causes. The consensus was that Jewish giving was "personal" rather than "strategic"—a stereotype easily countered by the many foundations, Federations, and individuals making strategic, data-informed philanthropic decisions every day. Another statement that caused heads to nod that day: "Jewish giving is all Israel, Federations, and synagogues, and my donor isn't interested in those things." This, too, is far from accurate. Fifteen years of running Natan, a venture philanthropy focused on supporting emerging Jewish and Israeli organizations, taught me that there's little a donor could be interested in that can't be supported through a Jewish or Israeli organization. We need to be telling these stories; we can't afford the inefficiency of ignorance.

5 | *Invest in philanthropic matchmaking.*

If we want every donor to be able to find something to which they're inspired to give, we need to be actively, and proactively,

connecting givers with recipients. Federations, community foundations, and new national and local philanthropic entities need to devote considerable time and talent to actively inspiring donors with the wide range of causes their charitable dollars might support. This isn't simple or cheap. Excellent philanthropy professionals marry professionalism with savvy, knowledge with feeling, and mechanics with emotional intelligence. Philanthropy is both art and science. We need to be recruiting, developing, and sustaining talented professionals for whom inspiring and enabling others to give is a mission and a calling.

6 | *Further develop Israel as a philanthropic destination.*

Israel is a country with all of the elements for charitable support that inspire giving elsewhere: health care, poverty, education, religion, culture, security, academia, etc. Anyone who cares about these issues can find them in Israel, often with fascinating twists that lead to a much deeper understanding of the country and its people. For those who are concerned about aspects of Israel's policies, *investment* is a much more productive response, with more immediate results, than *divestment*. Philanthropy provides an unparalleled opportunity for people to engage with, and take a stake in, the very real challenges and opportunities of this very real place.

7 | *Grow the pie, rather than argue about how it's divided.*

We live in a time where Philanthropy—capital P—is the focus of a great deal of criticism. But the critics would better spend their time building up the organizations they like instead of tearing down the ones they don't. The world needs more giving, not less. The critics tend to ignore that giving in America has always been a mass enterprise. Foundation giving represented only 19 percent of American

giving in 2020. In the Jewish community, one recent estimate posited that the largest 250 foundations (many of which are unstaffed, technical vehicles through which wealthy people give) made up a similar one-fifth of the total. Why obsess over how a few people are spending their money? The way to universalize, and thereby democratize, Jewish giving is to bring many more people into charitable giving.



For any of these changes to happen effectively and at scale, major Jewish funders need to invest in Jewish philanthropy itself. We need sophisticated funders who are used to supporting capacity building, infrastructure, and field-building to invest in systemic change. “Funding philanthropy” is a tough sell, in part because it results in empowering some people to give to causes you might not like. But without infrastructure investments, without efforts to move us toward universal giving, even your own favorite organizations are in peril. It’s like planting a tree in poor soil and wondering why it’s not thriving. The tree will wither if the soil isn’t nurtured and watered.

There are some models to look toward.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has become a preeminent funder of American philanthropy, with The Giving Pledge (“a promise by the world’s wealthiest individuals and families to dedicate the majority of their wealth to charitable causes”), the Giving by All initiative (supporting “research, experimentation, and product development to understand how to motivate and amplify generosity by everyday givers”), and Gates Philanthropy Partners (a public charity enabling anyone to make use of the foundation’s expertise and align his or her giving with the foundation’s priorities). Who will take on this responsibility for Jewish philanthropy?

There’s also a collaborative playbook to follow: From 1998 to 2008, with funding from 15 major foundations (including Ford, Kellogg, and Rockefeller), the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers ran New Ventures in Philanthropy, a multipronged

initiative to expand the number and types of people giving in America; to support philanthropic infrastructure like donor-advised funds, community foundations, and giving circles; to build partnerships to promote philanthropy; to conduct vital research into American giving; and to support research and media to draw attention to the benefits of philanthropy. It would be easy for Jewish funders to join together to create this type of collaborative, systemic approach to strengthening Jewish philanthropy.

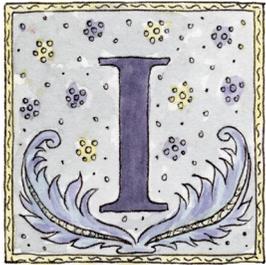


Years ago, the head of a major new foundation asked me for suggestions about areas the foundation should focus on. I suggested philanthropy. “No, we’re looking for the next Big Idea,” she said, “the next Birthright Israel.” I knew what would happen: She would hopefully find a Big Idea and launch it into the world. Soon, she’d turn to the usual major funders to support it. Assuming a few signed on, they’d have a few good years before, inevitably (and correctly), the funders would say: “This is such a great program! And we’ve engaged so many people! Why are we the only ones funding it—where are the individual donors?”

Then those funders would be where I am now: wondering who’s tending the soil, who’s shoring up the foundation, who’s fixing the furnace of Jewish philanthropic giving itself.

We need a broad-based, diverse, and multifaceted approach to get us to universal Jewish giving, supported by a collaboration of major funders, including Federations. The COVID-19 pandemic inspired record amounts of American and American Jewish giving—proving definitively that *so many more people will give, and give more*, when properly motivated. We need to revitalize and expand the ecosystem of American Jewish giving. Our efforts need to touch millions of American Jews, at all income levels, ages, and religious and political persuasions. Universal Jewish giving needs to reflect the dreams and dispositions of us all. *

Enchantment and the Black-Jewish Divide



HAVE ALWAYS had one foot in—and one out—of the worlds of black America and Ashkenazi-Jewish America.

I grew up Christian while observing many Jewish customs. I was raised to keep the holy days of the Torah and to shun mainstream Christian traditions such as

Christmas and Easter. At the same time, as a black American, I carry a historical memory of slavery and Jim Crow and the freedom struggles that emerged in response. My education included the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and the inspiration of Martin Luther King Jr., who believed in waging spiritual warfare against racism and hatred. Like Am Yisrael, Dr. King believed in building “The Beloved Community,” a society based on justice, equality, and love of one’s fellow human being.

Blacks and Jews have both made vast contributions to this country. At times, those contributions have cross-pollinated—from the civil-rights movement to uniquely American art forms such as jazz, dance, film, and comedy, to politics, academia, and business—in ways

that have made us all freer, better, more creative, and more empathic. But the two communities have also developed their own responses to their respective traumas and persecution. Those responses have shaped, and also misshaped, the relationship between the communities in ways that have harmed us all.

It should matter deeply that we heal this breach, not only for the benefit of blacks and Jews, but also for the civic and moral health of the United States. To do so, we first have to understand the moral and psychological roots of our responses to our traumas. Only then we can start thinking constructively about how to move forward together.



In 1931, Earl Little, a Baptist preacher and organizer for Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, was run over and killed by a streetcar in Lansing, Michigan. Many in the black community believed that this was no accident, but rather the work of a white-supremacist group called the Black Legion. Black Legion members had frequently harassed the Little family and had burned down their home two years earlier. Earl’s son, Malcolm, later described the terror of that experience:

I remember being suddenly snatched awake into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke and flames. My father had shouted and shot at the two white men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us.

This origin story is instructive. While most of us know about the man that Malcolm X became—leader in the Nation of Islam, railor against “the white man’s America,” and advocate for black separatism—we know less about the conditions that produced the attitudes that Malcolm X acquired.

Both he and Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, grew up as the sons of preachers who, in traditional Protestant fashion, preached their own messianic vision of a coming apocalyptic hellfire in which all would be damned unless they found salvation. But Muhammad and Malcolm were already living in a kind of hell, one in which brutal lynchings of black Americans occurred regularly before their own eyes; in which their terrorizers all shared the same pale skin; in which salvation was a matter of survival in this world, not the world to come.

It's easy to see how some people who were hated, beaten, and bloodied for their dark skin would be motivated to proclaim that the very thing that made them hated by others was what made them beloved by God. It's also easy to see how those same people would view all others who claimed to be God's chosen people as usurpers, a threat to a hard-fought sense of purpose and belonging in an unforgiving world.

The roots of the Nation of Islam's relentless demonization of Jews come from various sources, many of them religious. But the *psychological* attraction of that antisemitism—the reason the Nation has had such success in attracting both converts and admirers—derives at least partly from a sense of competition for chosenness. Not for nothing does Louis Farrakhan constantly accuse Jews of being imposters.



In many ways, Meir Kahane's Jewish Defense League was a mirror of the Nation of Islam in the Jewish world. In his *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist*, Yossi Klein Halevi, who had been a member of the JDL in his youth, recalls growing up in Borough Park, Brooklyn, as the son of a Holocaust survivor. Halevi felt the full emotional weight of the Jewish people's historical defenselessness. Like Malcolm X, Halevi believed he was a member of the “most hated of peoples.” For Halevi, joining the JDL was a way of marrying

It's easy to see how some people who were hated, beaten, and bloodied for their dark skin would be motivated to proclaim that the very thing that made them hated by others was what made them beloved by God.

vulnerability to fury in the service of radical liberation. Kahane's fanatical concern for the welfare of his fellow Jews bled easily into a more generalized racism against blacks and Arabs, as well as into angry contempt for liberal Jews who simply didn't agree with his ideology and methods—people Kahane denounced as fake Jews.

In time, Halevi cut his ties with the group. (Malcolm X also eventually cut ties with The Nation after realizing it no longer aligned with his evolving beliefs.) He came to understand the temptation that supremacist tendencies could present to any ill-treated community, a temporary relief against the tortured feeling of existential inadequacy. And he came to appreciate the ease with which fanatics could slide into the kind of behavior they condemn in their enemies. They stereotype in response to being stereotyped, hate in response to being hated, terrorize in response to being terrorized.

“We too were being transformed into freaks,” Halevi recalled, “ghettoized and demonized, until we turned grotesque with rage.”

In the end, extremist groups like the Nation of Islam or the JDL invariably fall into a co-dependent relationship with their opponents—at once violently hostile and also mimetic. James Baldwin's observation that “the oppressor and the oppressed depend upon each other” rings true here. Instead of offering liberation, these groups create a closed and oppressive system defined entirely by

Enchantment is an experience of wonder with a thing we didn't know before. It starts with curiosity, rather than recrimination. It delights in our shared humanity, as well as in the differences that make human beings and human societies so fascinating.

their relationship with those whom they denounce as oppressors. To break with that destructive pattern, they would have to renounce their very reason for being, which helps explain why they have been able to persist for so long while failing to achieve the kind of spiritual transcendence that's required for actual liberation.



The Nation of Islam and the JDL are, of course, at the fringes of their respective communities. So why do I discuss them?

First, because the *impulses* the groups represent are more widespread than the groups themselves. Second, because the two groups (or at least those who might still gravitate toward their messages) stand at the pointed ends of their communities' most destructive emotions, which need to be reckoned with. And third, because they offer a view into the psychology of damaged relationships—of pain turned into anger, anger into bigotry, and bigotry into politics.

How do we overcome all of this—what's my “moonshot” approach for building a different relationship between racial and ethnic groups?

First, while it is definitely an anti-racist moonshot, it is not the

same as the current popular wave of what John McWhorter, of Columbia University, calls “third wave anti-racism” and even “neo-racism,” which, he argues,

teaches that racism is baked into the structure of society, so whites' “complicity” in living within it constitutes racism itself, while for black people, grappling with the racism surrounding them is the totality of experience and must condition exquisite sensitivity toward them, including a suspension of standards of achievement and conduct.

This form of anti-racism may sound like an antidote to racism, but it is in many ways simply a replica of it. Far from being an extension of the legacy of historic civil-rights leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Dr. King, or Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, this version of anti-racism often has more in common with the Nation of Islam, or, for that matter, the JDL.

Instead of doing away with caricature and stereotyping based on skin color, this form of anti-racism actually *incentivizes* people to caricature and stereotype. Instead of *overcoming* historic racism and its social and intellectual underpinnings, many of today's anti-racist efforts simply invert the original white-supremacist doctrine: Just as the classic white supremacists said that to be black was to be inferior and to be white superior, this anti-racism equates blackness with goodness and whiteness with evil.

The result is predictable: Telling people they are defined by the color of their skin, indicted by immutable characteristics, can only breed frustration, paranoia, and resentment. Such a worldview of scarcity—a zero-sum, us-versus-them mentality—only perpetuates racial power struggles. It's one of the reasons race relations in the United States seem to have gotten worse, not better, in the era of “anti-racism.”

This is not the direction society needs to go. Luckily, there is an alternative.

For years, I have been at work on what I call the “Theory of Enchantment.” The word “enchantment” suggests magic, and in some sense that is exactly what I mean by it: the enchantment of seeing a world filled with everyday people whose gifts—at first hidden from others, or even from themselves—can redeem, heal, and save us.

But enchantment, more basically, is about human psychology: about what we fear or love; about how we *choose* to see the world; about the nature of our relationships with others; about the nature of our relationship with ourselves. The concept of enchantment matters in everything from marketing and branding to art and real estate to courtship and marriage. And it matters in terms of how we change our perceptions of others, both individually and as groups.

The concept of enchantment begins with Walt Whitman’s assertion that human beings “contain multitudes.” None of us are reducible to a single thing, belief, or identity, whether racial, ethnic, or religious. Whitman wrote in the first person—“I am large, I contain multitudes”—and knowing this about ourselves means acknowledging it in others. To see all human beings as complex creatures—irreducible to skin tone or background, capable of evil *and* good—is the first way of checking our own prejudices and the stereotyping of others.

Where many of today’s anti-racists are more often interested in appearances than in possibilities, in counting up what a person or an organization lacks (namely, participation by minorities), enchantment asks us to imagine, and work toward, what we and our institutions *can become*. Where zero-sum-game anti-racism marinates in division, resentment, and mutual recrimination, literally dividing people into race-based “affinity groups,” enchantment asks people to take deeper notice of one another, not just in terms of what confounds or confronts us, but also in what delights and dazzles us. Enchantment is an experience of wonder with a thing we didn’t know before. It starts with curiosity, rather than recrimination. It delights in our shared humanity, as well as in the differences that make human beings and human societies so fascinating.

Enchantment is a form of anti-racism that entails mindfulness practices, requiring regular repetition and application if we want it to become part of a new way of life. It’s a way of discovering how to be in better relationships. And it’s something that black and Jewish communities can find ways to practice together.

All of this might sound like proverbial psychobabble. But the direct, concrete challenge we face in improving race relations in this country, including between blacks and Jews, has its roots in psychology. To wit: How do we go from being threatened by each other’s diversity to delighting in that diversity, knowing that it is nothing more than a reflection of our own? How, more specifically, do we reclaim the understanding that the black freedom struggle, from Douglass to Dr. King to my own generation, and the Jewish freedom struggle, from Moses to Ben-Gurion to my Jewish friends and colleagues, are in many ways the same struggle, the same story?

We do so by re-enchanting ourselves with one another, by delighting in difference, by looking for complexity where it might be easy to see simplicity.

Imagine individuals from each community doing so as personal friends or professional colleagues, in book clubs, reading circles, activity groups, or Shabbat dinners. Imagine Birthright-like trips for teenage black Americans to Israel, or March of the Living-like trips to Auschwitz. Imagine Freedom Summer-like trips for students in Jewish day schools to the American South, tracing the story of civil rights from Atlanta to Birmingham to my hometown of New Orleans—with plenty of detours for great music and food.

The greatest American moonshot of the past 100 years wasn’t John F. Kennedy’s idea of landing a man on the moon. It was Dr. King’s idea of fundamentally transforming national consciousness across lines of color. The current moment calls on us to do this work again, beginning by repairing the wounded but necessary friendship between blacks and Jews. *

PART THREE

MOONSHOTS FOR
ISRAEL



What Will Stop the Islamic Republic of Iran



AN THE Islamic Republic of Iran—the radical theocratic regime, that is, as opposed to the nation it tyrannizes—fall by the year 2030? That would be a moonshot for the Jewish people, though it would take a bold gambler to answer yes. Let's think through the possibilities.

The supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, is 82 and has battled cancer. It's possible to imagine scenarios after his death where contending factions divide the ruling clergy and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, leading to regime collapse. It's also possible to imagine outside powers convulsing the theocracy—foreigners have often changed the course of Iranian history—leading to massive demonstrations and a successful insurrection. The two could even intertwine. Neither seems very likely, however, although the second scenario is more conceivable.

Khamenei may well be weakening the ruling elite by demanding too much personal loyalty from those who want to be in his inner circle. When diehard, accomplished revolutionaries such as former president Hassan Rouhani or former speaker of parliament Ali Larijani are treated shabbily and cast out, it becomes clear that Khamenei doesn't practice what he preaches about a big revolutionary tent encompassing diverse opinions. His decision to select (not elect) the current president, Ibrahim Raisi—Khamenei's "mini-me," ruthless but without the supreme leader's curiosity and intellectual depth—was surely dictated in part by Khamenei's desire to close ranks in preparation for his passing. The senior political clerics once angry about the *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the jurisconsult), Ruhollah Khomeini's innovation that allows one cleric to rule above others, probably don't have much influence: Khamenei has been purging the clergy since succeeding Khomeini in 1989. Ditto the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. Those who wield real power today are the supreme leader's men. They will most likely back the dispensation that Khamenei leaves them, including his selected successor.



A crucial point that optimistic outsiders need to appreciate: Future Western sanctions are unlikely to crack the regime. Donald Trump gave it his best shot. His unilateral measures, even more punishing than the Euro-American sanctions unleashed during the first term of Barack Obama's presidency, damaged the Iranian economy, depleting the regime's hard-currency reserve and further debasing the rial. The nationwide demonstrations that struck the country in 2019, in which protests sparked by a reduction in fuel subsidies accelerated into deadly clashes with security forces, were what many advocates of sanctions policy had longed to see: regime-threatening internal unrest. Even better, the protestors blamed the theocracy, not Trump and America, for their problems. But the regime hit back hard. Security forces remained loyal, killing their own countrymen with gusto.

Hundreds died within days. Thousands were arrested and tortured.

And Khamenei became noticeably cockier and more dismissive of dissent. The supreme leader had been confused and hesitant, even a bit remorseful, after he crushed the pro-democracy Green Movement back in 2009. Protestors had hit the streets, millions strong, after an obviously rigged presidential election. This time, however, the Revolutionary Guards applied the lessons learned a decade ago: They and their underlings (the well-organized, decently paid, and reliably vicious street thugs in the Basij) killed quickly. The most intense nationwide protests against theocracy since the Islamic Revolution collapsed.

Regardless of what happens with Joe Biden's efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Barack Obama's nuclear deal, the president isn't likely to embrace sanctions the way his predecessor did. They are too provocative and require increasing intestinal fortitude as the Iranian regime draws ever closer to having sufficient highly enriched uranium for a bomb. Barring an incredibly stupid terrorist action (and Khamenei is capable of letting hubris get the better of him), it's inconceivable that Biden, who has been more intense and probably more sincere in his "forever wars" rhetoric than Trump ever was, would commence another conflict to stop the clerical regime's nuclear ambitions. Fear of the Iranian bomb is much more likely to cause the White House to fold and to promise significant sanctions relief in exchange for measures that don't even meet the fading requirements of Obama's accord.

A new, massive influx of cash to Tehran certainly won't solve the myriad problems that gnaw at the theocracy's base and legitimacy. It won't lessen the corruption and *étatisme* that chew up money and crush initiative. It will give relief to some Iranians, but more important, a fillip of pride to Khamenei and his men. They believe they defeated Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign (they did), and that additional money from the United States will be proof they have pushed Trump's successor into an extortionate arrange-

Fear of the Iranian bomb is much more likely to cause the White House to fold and to promise significant sanctions relief in exchange for measures that don't even meet the fading requirements of Obama's accord.

ment in which Tehran gets billions in hard currency in exchange for the export of enriched uranium—which can be easily created by the ever-more-efficient centrifuges that the JCPOA allowed and that Biden won't stop.

If we continue down this path, by 2030, the clerical regime's position in the Middle East and at home will be only more secure. American retrenchment, which started under Obama and gained speed under Trump and Biden, won't reverse in the next administration, barring some terrorist event or war that forces America back into the region.

If Republicans win the White House and Congress in 2024, it's possible that new waves of sanctions could buffet the Islamic Republic. By then, however, the clerical regime will probably have had four years to recover its economic footing and intensify its ties, open and covert, to the outside world, especially with China. The theocracy may even have tested an atomic weapon. No Republican administration is going to get into a sanctions war with China over a nonnuclear—and definitely not a nuclear—Islamic Republic. China can keep Iran's oil-based economy breathing by itself, if it chooses. And the clerical regime now has considerable experience living under sanctions. Tehran advanced the nuclear program significantly under Trump, even as the economy contracted and the country reeled from COVID-19.

If we rule out the remote possibility of American preventive strikes on Iran's nuclear sites, we are left with only one thing that hasn't been tried: Israeli military strikes against the atomic program.

The year 2030 will come quickly, probably too fast for economic hardship to generate sufficient societal pressure to once again push young Iranians onto the streets for another round with machine-gun-wielding security forces. There is no regime-change strategy that works—unless the security forces crack.

But the primary venue for putting real, bloody pressure on the Guards has been out of bounds under both Republicans and Democrats. Washington has stubbornly refused to implement a containment policy, which would entail, at minimum, a much more muscular deployment of U.S. forces to the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Syria, and the Persian Gulf. Containment is regime change: the methodical, patient application of pressure until internal contradictions sap the enemy's will and capacity. By its nature, it risks war by putting down redlines all over the map.

On the ground, Iran's position in Iraq is by no means secure. But Iraqi nationalism and democracy, which have troubled the Islamic Republic's attempt to gain predominance among the Shia, would surely block any American attempt to increase the deployment of U.S. soldiers and their use. (The White House and Congress would abort the idea even earlier.) In Syria, the United States is still blocking a strategically important highway from northern Iraq. That's something, particularly for the Israelis, who would have much more

trouble finding and destroying Iranian military equipment (especially medium-range missiles) and personnel if that road were wide open. But this action has no reverberations on Iran's internal politics, since it doesn't really challenge the axis that dominates the Levant: the clerical regime, the Assad Alawite mafia, and Vladimir Putin. Serious American containment would reactivate the Sunni rebellion against Assad. For many reasons, some of them sensible—it could flood Europe with more refugees—Washington, no matter the party in power, isn't likely to go there.

In the Persian Gulf, the United States will hold for the time being, possibly setting the stage for confrontation between the United States and Iran before 2030. Washington may no longer guarantee the unharassed movement of energy supplies through the Gulf; after Trump's failure to retaliate against Tehran for attacks in 2019 on shipping and Saudi oil facilities, which temporarily knocked off-line much of the country's refining capacity, it's no longer certain what America will do to protect shipping and Saudi oil. But Washington is unlikely in the next decade to abandon its air and naval bases in the region, which at least check any overt, conventional Iranian aggression, such as a military incursion in Bahrain. As with the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, as long as the United States is in the region complicating Tehran's ambitions, Iran could lash out, possibly crossing an American redline.



For the clerical regime to collapse by 2030, something unexpected has to shock the Islamist system, something that might cause a chain reaction that the theocracy can't handle. If we rule out the remote possibility of American preventive strikes on Iran's nuclear sites, we are left with only one thing that hasn't been tried: Israeli military strikes against the atomic program.

Discussions about cyber warfare and possible CIA or Mossad covert action, as intriguing as they might be, don't belong in this

conversation. They just don't have the capability: Langley would take years, probably after awful mistakes, to develop a competent, big-project, covert-action team. Regardless, such action wouldn't have the required impact. Without Israeli military action, the status quo likely holds. Tehran wins.

The military option is, as it's always been, a wild card. We have no idea whether an Israeli raid would succeed in destroying the clerical regime's nuclear sites, especially the buried-beneath-a-mountain cascades at Fordow. The odds against success are likely steep, which may be one of many reasons why the Israelis, despite a lot of harsh, menacing rhetoric, haven't yet chosen to raid. But such a military operation would unavoidably upset the region's pomegranate cart, probably leading to Iranian reprisals, including another surge of Iranian-sponsored terrorism.

Escalation is key. If the Iranian regime just absorbed the hit, didn't retaliate, cried foul at the United Nations, and tried to rally anti-Israeli Europeans, then this tactic would probably flop.

On the other hand, depending on the Iranian response, they could easily find themselves in a war with both Israel and the United States. The Revolutionary Guards could get badly mauled. If any attack were made against a U.S.-flagged vessel in the Gulf, the U.S. Navy might well obliterate Iranian naval bases on the Gulf and in the Indian Ocean. If Iran successfully activated the Lebanese Hezbollah and it let loose thousands of missiles, Israel would be obliged to commence a massive air campaign, possibly even another invasion. American sanctions would intensify. The Europeans might even be obliged to join, depending on how egregious Iranian reprisals were. (Europeans also might try to sanction Israel, though Continental unanimity on that issue is unlikely.) With the West, Japan, and South Korea on alert, the Iranians would have a vastly harder time importing dual-use items to rebuild what the Israelis had destroyed — unless the Chinese decided to aid Iranian ambitions.

Internally, after an Israeli attack, the theocracy would certainly

try to rally around the flag. In the short term, that could work. In a year or two, however, the cost of the conflict would come home, especially if Israel were successful in destroying the nuclear sites and killing key personnel. The loss of face would become undeniable: Regime propaganda regularly depicts Israel as too small and weak to stop Iran's advance. And — perhaps — distaste for the theocracy, which is widespread and deep throughout society, could explode and convulse the country. If Khamenei were to die during this stressful time, the succession might become much more complicated. Indecision at the top would feed anger below. Countrywide demonstrations of sufficient size could overwhelm the security forces, which aren't numerous, given the size of the country and the population.

The beginning of the end might start with an Israeli air raid.

Barring that eventuality, with all of its uncertainties, it seems highly likely that the Islamic Republic will be with us in 2030. Since 1989, when a Tehran soccer riot went anti-regime and the Revolutionary Guards decided to create a mobile force to suppress urban malcontents, the theocracy has feared and prepared for the unexpected spark. Khamenei, who is the most accomplished Middle Eastern dictator since World War II, isn't today easily surprised by his enemies. We can only hope that his equanimity and plans founder on the unexpected and unforgiving. *

Zionism's Next Great Task



IN 1971, the Knesset assembled to commemorate the 85th birthday of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. It was to be the elder statesman's last significant public appearance, and he used it to lay out what he hoped would be the eventual completion of the Zionist founders' project by their successors: To continue the ingathering to Israel of most Diaspora Jews and secure the strength of the Jewish state through technological preeminence.

In the half-century since then, Ben-Gurion's vision has to a great extent been accomplished. There are now virtually no remaining Jewish individuals or communities who cannot return to Israel if they so wish. Every year, some 30,000 do. While Israelis now number about one-half of the world's Jews, up to two-thirds of Jewish children born every year are Israeli. Even moderate growth scenarios for Israel now have it with a population of some 16 million by its 100th anniversary in 2048, 80 percent of them (about 13 million) Jewish. It's not implausible to imagine 30 or 40 million Israeli Jews by the year 2100.

The technological preeminence of Israel is also evident. The Jewish state has the second-largest number of technological start-up companies in the world (after the United States) and one of the highest per capita rates of patents filed and produces many more scientific papers per capita (1.9 for every 100 Israelis) than any other country.

But even these extraordinary numbers fail to capture the unprecedented place Israel has earned in Jewish history. The vast majority of Israelis now speak, read, and write in Hebrew, a supposedly impossible feat of resurrecting a buried ancient language. And they live in an independent and distinctly Jewish state, something that the vast majority of people around the world, including most Jews, considered a fantasy only a century or so ago. We may truly recall the words of Ezekiel (37:10) about the valley of dry bones: that "the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great host."

The strength of this threefold golden thread — the return of a majority of the nations to their land, the revival of Hebrew language and culture, and the restoration of an independent Jewish state — will be essential in addressing the next great challenge facing the Jewish people: the future of the communities outside of Israel. Ben-Gurion knew this as well: His last speech also stressed that, for all the friends and allies that the Jewish state might gain along the way, the pillar most essential to its prosperity would always remain the Jewish people. Threats to Diaspora Jewry pose threats to Israel as well.

Israel's success stands in stark contrast to a perilous future for the communities of the Diaspora. While many Jewish communities are currently enjoying unprecedented levels of material prosperity as well as social and cultural vitality, their long-term future appears dim. Declining birth rates, widespread intermarriage, loss of communal

commitment, and an ever-weakening sense of Jewish identification are some of the more evident indicators. As if this were not enough, the pull toward Israel is strongest among those most committed to a fully Jewish life, with the result that Diaspora communities are losing many of their most committed members to *aliyah*.

If these trends continue unabated, within a couple of generations, most Jewish communities around the world will have effectively disappeared or will be a mere husk of what they were. A handful of the largest Jewish communities, particularly those in the United States, France, and Argentina will persist, but even these will have dwindled to a shadow of their former size, composed mainly of Orthodox communities in the larger cities. By 2100, there might be just 2 million or even 1 million Jews remaining outside of Israel.

Some see these trends as inevitable and seek merely to manage the wind-down gracefully. Others try to deny the problem by arguing that intermarriage and a loss of commitment to community are the natural future of Diaspora Jews, suggesting that a kind of watered-down, lukewarm Jewish identity is the best we can expect from among those of some Jewish descent.

There is an alternative. Rather than manage decline, it's possible that Diaspora communities could follow the Israeli path of striving to recover the pride and particularly the energy of Jewish identity—including among those with only partial Jewish ancestry.

Notwithstanding its many critics—and with its very real faults—Israel has now become the undisputed focus of identification and cultural capital for the vast majority of Jews worldwide. It has dramatically transformed the way Jews are viewed around the world. Antisemitism still abounds, often now wearing the garb of anti-Zionism. But at the same time, there has also been an unprecedented development on the opposite front: There is exponential growth in the number of non-Jewish individuals and communities who are proud of having some Jewish descent or affinity.

Up to a generation ago, it was still common, even in Western countries, for people of Jewish descent—including the successful

Rather than manage decline, it's possible that Diaspora communities could follow the Israeli path of striving to recover the pride and particularly the energy of Jewish identity—including among those with only partial Jewish ancestry.

and prosperous parents of former secretaries of state Madeleine Albright and John Kerry—to hide this heritage from their own children. This was even more the case with many families of Jewish heritage in Russia and Poland under Communism, as well as in Latin American families that had traditions of being descended from Jews forcibly converted to Christianity. Further afield, there were many people of no Jewish background who nonetheless harbored deep personal admiration for the Jewish people and its state.

These tendencies have been upturned in the past two generations. Despite (or even, perhaps, because of) the voluminous global criticism of Israel, unprecedented numbers of people on the periphery of the Jewish nation are increasingly “looking into” their Jewish roots with real interest. Some are actively “moving in.” As established by an Israeli Diaspora Ministry committee that I have chaired, such individuals and groups already include several millions around the world. It seems likely they might become many more in the near future.

The Jewish nation must decide how to address this development. It can either ignore or resist the newcomers, or it can welcome them to a dialogue and a partnership. The first approach is not only morally miserly, but also self-defeating. When so many young Jews are

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dispiritedly gravitating away from community life, the best way to infuse communities with new energies is to welcome those who are approaching the Jewish people with interest and even enthusiasm.

Most of those in the new circles growing around the Jewish core are not currently seeking to become Jewish. Rather, they are interested in learning more about their shared inheritance and in connecting in some active way with Jewish communities and the State of Israel. A minority of this new periphery will in time consider actively joining the Jewish people, and some eventually will. It is pointless to speculate today about the actual numbers of either group, because we are only seeing at this point the tip of the iceberg—an emerging new periphery. But it is not impossible that this development could, by the end of the century, result in millions joining the Jewish people, with tens of millions more regarding themselves as connected and committed to the prosperity of the Jewish nation. The examples are more numerous than you may think:

- In Italy there are some 8,000 recorded Jewish households. Yet every year, about 80,000 Italian households choose to devote 0.8 percent of their taxes to the Union of Italian Jewish communities. Who are those tens of thousands?

- In Colombia, the established Jewish communities count some 3,000 members. Yet several new unrecognized *bnei anusim* (descendants of forced converts) communities are already estimated to be 20,000 strong and growing. What are the implications of such a situation?
- In Poland, there is a growing wave of “red *anusim*” who have discovered that their families converted or hid their Jewish identity under Communism and now wish to return to the fold, to the point that a majority of the Warsaw Jewish community now consists of members who did not grow up as Jews. How many more such people are there in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union?

Beyond the obvious direct benefits of such a development, it will also transform Jewish life in Diaspora communities with an infusion of those who are eager and enthusiastic about Jewish life and values. It would be anti-Marxist, in the Groucho Marx sense—there are people out there who *do* want to belong to a club that would have them as members.



How would such a great endeavor come about?

Instead of piecemeal responses by individual communities or organizations or Israeli officials, we need a wider reckoning about the scale and significance of this development. Significant resources and several decades will be necessary to properly meet this challenge. It will require a joint effort between Jerusalem and the communities of the Diaspora—where, after all, much of the actual engagement with newcomers will take place—to build up a wider House of Israel.

To begin with, a serious program should be developed and offered to the members of the new periphery. Let’s call it “Affinity

Birthright,” to educate them about Jewish history and values, as well as Jewish communal life and the State of Israel. A visit to Israel will be beneficial but will not suffice. It should be complemented by a visit to a significant Jewish community in the Diaspora with which most members of the new periphery are not familiar. Such a trip would entail encounters with educational, religious, and social institutions, and participation in their activities, even a weekend spent with families in the community. The goal would be to expose the visitors to the full life of a living Jewish community, so that they could help rebuild their own communities accordingly.

At the same time, a significant research-and-education institute (and eventually several) must be founded, possibly named after one of the more famous forcibly converted Jews who later returned to the fold, such as Maimonides or the Lisbon-born Doña Gracia Mendes-Nasi. Such an institute would study the as-yet mostly unknown history and current state of peripheral communities, as well as offer education catered to those among these communities who will wish to gain it, be it Jewish history, Hebrew language, or religious studies. Their numbers will eventually reach tens of thousands, and perhaps more.

Moreover, it might be expedient not to limit educational efforts only to specific centers, but rather to reach out to peripheral communities, with small groups of young Jews from Israel and the Diaspora that would be trained to visit these communities and impart basic education in Jewish subjects. In the same way that many young people are drawn to programs like the Peace Corps, so, too, could an affinity-based program appeal to peripheral communities and assist them in various ways. In the process, these young Jewish ambassadors will be fortified in their Jewish identity and practice.

Eventually, there should be a significant Jewish organization, devoted to organizing and giving a voice to these individuals and communities who are reaching out to the Jewish people. In the 1920s, a “Jewish Agency for the Land of Israel” was founded as a

partnership between the fledgling Zionist communities in the Land of Israel and the great Jewish communities and organizations of the Diaspora. To a great extent, it achieved its goals admirably. Similarly, in the 2020s it is time to consider a “Jewish Agency for the Dispersed of Israel,” to be created as a partnership between the Jewish people and the State of Israel, with the emerging peripheral communities.

Although this will be a decades-long and many-faceted endeavor, its effects would start to be evident quite soon, especially within the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, which will be energized by this common effort to build “a highway for the remnant of His people” (Isaiah 11:16). Ingathering from the four corners of the earth, not only the scattered from the tribe of Judah but also those seemingly lost, the dispersed of the house of Israel, must become the next great and necessary task of the Jewish people and their state. *

Make Zionism Sexy Again



ZRA had a habit of irritating the rabbis of Plonsk, Ukraine. Founded by David Grün when he was only 14, the underground Zionist organization offered Hebrew lessons, fundraised for pogrom victims, and encouraged emigration to Palestine, much to the fury of local Jewish leaders.

In the early 1900s, Zionism was widely seen as an offense to God, so much so that Plonsk's rabbis forbade synagogue congregants from marrying into Zionist families. But Grün carried on, angering not only the rabbis but also the Jewish Labor Bund, a political party of fellow socialists—and staunch anti-Zionists. He was known for taking center stage at the Plonsk synagogue against a Bundist opponent, a spectacle so popular that the entire town flocked to see it. As Michael Bar-Zohar, one of Grün's biographers, writes:

The Bund emissary would appear at the Plonsk Synagogue, wearing a pistol and accompanied by two bodyguards. Opposite him, David Grün would get up on the stage. In a dramatic, tense atmosphere,

they would look at each other; silence filled the synagogue and the verbal duel would begin.

The constant conflict of ideology was essential in forming Grün's character. Nine years after starting his organization, he changed his surname to Ben-Gurion.

As the future prime minister of Israel battled with a Jewish world that was either vehemently opposed or reluctant to support him, Theodor Herzl was feverishly publishing utopian novels, organizing Zionist congresses, begging wealthy Jews for loans, and buckling under the feeling of imminent doom for his people. The skepticism of the Jewish community toward Zionism frustrated him. "If Jews are capable of accepting my efforts in such an undignified manner," he wrote in a letter, "then I regret (my) time, effort and sacrifice of all kinds."

Ben-Gurion would move to Palestine, survive a nearly deadly bout with malaria, lay the foundations of the Israeli economy, government, and military, carve out a Jewish state from the Ottoman Empire, and serve as its leader for decades. Herzl would die much sooner, having accomplished far less. But when declaring the Jewish people free and independent for the first time in 2,000 years, Ben-Gurion stood in front of an enormous—and now iconic—portrait of the melancholy Hungarian playwright who was known to erect a Christmas tree on his living room floor. These two men, young outcasts swimming upstream, saved the Jewish people.

Seventy-plus years later, the lie that "Zionism = Racism" has permeated left-wing politics, resulting in discrimination against Jews in institutions and harassment against us as we walk home from shul. The response to May 2021's fighting between Israel and Hamas demonstrated this clearly. Anti-Israel sentiment became

ubiquitous on social-media platforms frequented by the young. Groups of ostensible Jewish leaders (rabbinical students, academics) penned open letters unilaterally condemning Israel's actions. Jews were assaulted on the streets of New York, Los Angeles, and other cities in ways that European and Latin American Jews are all too familiar with. A widespread feeling of panic descended on our community: How could we possibly have gotten to this point? What on earth do we do next?

What's clear is something needs to change.

Instead of Jewish leaders asking themselves how to do more of what they're already doing—more Holocaust curricula, more Israel trips, more advocating for other groups' causes in the hope they'll advocate on behalf of ours—we need to be asking a different question: *What does the anti-Israel movement have that we don't?*

The answer is chutzpah. In Ben-Gurion and Herzl's day, Zionism was revolutionary, bold, rugged, scrappy, punk. Zionists were changing the status quo, upending existing structures, bringing a dream back to life after 2,000 years. And their work was physical: Work the land, drain the swamps, build up the state, defend it against attack.

Now Israel is established. It's the legacy organization of the anti-Zionist's start-up. The anthem for a Jewish state has turned from “work the land” to “guard the land,” a notably less exciting motto. The Zionists are defensive, shooting arrows from a fortress, terrified the walls will be breached by ideas and policies that will imperil our safety.

Anti-Zionists, on the other hand, are progressing *toward* something, fighting for change, rebelling, sticking it to the establishment. I recently surprised a Chabad rabbi who asked me why young Jews were turning away from Israel with the response “because anti-Zionists are sexy,” a riff off of novelist Dara Horn's term for them: “the cool Jews.” It's true: Zionism has a bad case of unsexiness.

To a generation marinating in the juices of social justice, joining with the group that pitches itself as revolutionary is irresistible. The

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anti-Zionist movement's strategy is to march alongside every trendy protest, whether the crowd is rallying for climate justice or defunding the police. After a while, the causes blend together. Everyone is marching for the same vague utopia. But in all cases, the existence of a Jewish state is apparently an affront.

In order to bring back the bravado of Golda Meir smoking dozens of cigarettes a day while plotting to take down the terrorists of Black September, I propose a revolution in American Jewish affairs: Let young people rebrand the spirit of Zionism.

A growing cohort of pro-Israel activists under 30 has been ringing alarm bells for years about the unique dangers of contemporary antisemitism on the Left. We're from the Left ourselves, and we've experienced this first hand in our high schools, universities, and activist circles. Every year we grow more vocal, more popular, more influential.

Think back to the days of the Zionist pioneers, before or after they were in the Yishuv: Jewish liberation has always been a young person's game, full of the intellectual, emotional, physical, and revolutionary fervor that young people crave. Ambitious thinkers meeting face to face to argue politics, drafting and reading manifestos and biographies, listening to speeches by academics and journalists, learning to speak and read Hebrew, organizing civil disobedience and marching in the streets, raising money for those

Instead of changing the image of the Jew, we are vocally rejecting calls for us to change, knowing all too well from history what happens when a new universalist ideology mandates that we check part of our identity at the door.

in need, and turning to Jewish ritual to replenish their souls. These are the elements of a vibrant movement into which we need to breathe new life.

The good news is that we've already started. Just in the last couple of years, promising organizations, activists, and influencers have emerged on campuses, schools, and social media. Jewish On Campus is documenting the stories of Jewish college students across the country and advocating against antisemitism on social media. Students Supporting Israel chapters are hosting important lectures and discussions with relevant thinkers in our community. Club Z is building a network of Zionist youth in attempt to revolutionize pro-Israel education. Noah Shufutinsky, also known as his stagename Westside Gravy, is a Black and Jewish rapper who sings songs of Jewish survival. Sabrina Miller is a young journalist in the United Kingdom who exposes anti-Jewish hypocrisy in academia. Ysabella Hazan is a student in law school who launched a line of clothing to inspire Jewish and Israeli pride. Jack Elbaum, Lewis Sorokin, and Josh Feldman have organized book clubs, fundraisers, and debates for young Jews to learn from. Chloe Santaub recently addressed an audience of European elites in Krakow on the threat of anti-Zionism on campus and beyond. There is clearly no dearth of talent or opportunity in the Jewish ecosystem.

We're engaged in a battle. We challenge assumptions and arguments against Israel in our circles. We point out hypocrisy, double standards, and the reinvention and revival of ancient antisemitic tropes. In a post-truth world, we're fighting for truth. In a society obsessed with the word "justice," we are insisting that Diaspora Jews and Israelis (Jews and Arabs alike) deserve justice as well.

My own organization, the New Zionist Congress, has been operating since March with online programming designed to empower the next generation of Zionist leaders. We plan to establish chapters in as many cities as possible in the United States and abroad, where young people can do what young people want to do: meet regularly to talk and debate. Was the arrest of Women of the Wall justified? Do Ethiopian Israelis have equal opportunity? Is Israel's Nation-State Bill discriminatory? Should we march on our state capitol to protest resolutions to boycott Israel? We are rekindling the energy of Ezra, restoring pride in Zionism. Giving young people opportunities to wrestle honestly with Israel's problems and complexities provides a more sustainable sense of strength than promoting false images of Israel's perfection.

Simply put: The face of the pro-Israel movement should be changed to one under 30, something the anti-Zionist movement figured out long ago. Give us the keys. We need funding, mentorship, and promotion. We already have the passion and drive we need to succeed.

None of this is unprecedented. The late 19th century witnessed what historian Jonathan Sarna calls a "Great Awakening," a spiritual and organizational revival driven primarily by young people who wanted to build a confident Jewish communal sentiment that could withstand both antisemitism and assimilation. They created the Young Men's Hebrew Association (1874), which launched the JCC movement; educational institutions such as the Jewish Theological

Seminary; media enterprises such as the newspaper *The American Hebrew* (1879); compendious works of scholarship such as the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–06); and learned societies such as the American Jewish Historical Society (1892), the first ethnic cultural archive in the United States.

Another example: In 1964, Jacob Birnbaum founded Students Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), 20 years before “Freedom Sunday” commenced in Washington, D.C. Most people who marched that cold December day in 1987, in step to Natan Sharansky’s booming call to “Let My People Go,” were probably unaware that it was a slogan crafted by Jewish students and teachers on campuses across the country decades earlier. As Amy Fedeski writes:

SSSJ was a small, poorly funded organization—but it had an enormous impact. It pioneered activism on behalf of Soviet Jewry; it made contact with activists across the world; it kept the issue on the international agenda for nearly thirty years. Whatever Soviet—or American—leaders thought about the Soviet Jewry Movement, they could not ignore it. Soviet Jewish migration soared in the 1970s; a change that could not have happened without years of patient, painstaking work by SSSJ.

As I write this, I’m looking at a black-and-white photograph of a young man involved in SSSJ, in his 20s as I am now, walking with a sign reading “I Am My Brother’s Keeper.” In his face I see much of Jewish history. Responsibility, rebelliousness—and youthful activism. The question remains: Can the American Jewish community re-create that sense of purpose? The early Zionists dreamed of “New Jews” who would refuse to live under the constraints that society imposed upon them, and who would actively build their own, free, independent future. Who will be today’s “New Jews”?

My own generation of “new-new Jews” is not here to discard history and tradition, but to put it to good use. Instead of changing the image of the Jew, we are vocally rejecting calls for us to change,

knowing all too well from history what happens when a new universalist ideology mandates that we check part of our identity at the door.

We need to reclaim not only words like “justice” and “progress,” but also the conviction that we, too, can define the “right side of history.” Young people have the chutzpah to believe that the world can change: That is what our ancestors have done, in so many ways, throughout our history. It would be a catastrophe to see their vision become vapid and their spirit static because Zionism had become establishment. There’s a new generation of young activists, often raised in and nourished by Jewish organizations of all kinds, who are ready to lead. What we need is the mentorship, the confidence, and the investment to do so. *

Surfing the Tsunami: Demography and Education in Israel



KEY UNDERLYING TENET of the Jewish people's DNA can be captured in a paraphrase of James Carville's famous maxim: "It's the education, stupid."

The written word has held our people together for thousands of years. The knowledge that we accumulated and passed from generation to generation has not only kept us alive; it has also enabled us to thrive and provided a beacon for the rest of mankind.

When Israel was created, the young state's emphasis on education was vital in spurring its extraordinary 25-year growth sprint. Despite years of food rationing and successive wars of existence, Israel did not lose its focus. By the early 1970s, the country was home to seven major research universities.

And then it happened. The 1973 Yom Kippur War was followed by a subsequent national pivot, with historic consequences. Contrary to popular belief and political excuses, what followed

had nothing to do with Israel's neighbors, and everything to do with a domestic upending of Israel's national priorities. We chose the easy populist path. Sectoral and personal interests replaced national ones, placing Israel on an unsustainable long-run trajectory, with existential implications. Changing course will require a moonshot-like effort, one that Israel's current government may be uniquely capable of accomplishing.

Nearly half a century later, that populist veil of perception over substance poses a direct threat to Israel's future. Today, Israel is ranked third worldwide in the average number of school years per person and fourth in the share of people with an academic degree. Sounds impressive. But the quality of education in core subjects is at the bottom of the developed world's in the most recent OECD PISA exam, which measures 15-year-olds' ability to "use their reading, mathematics, and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges." Not coincidentally, the high-tech sector is starved for qualified personnel, even though there is an ostensibly sufficient supply of such graduates on paper.

Rampant neglect of Israel's physical and human capital infrastructures now places Israel's output per hour below that of most developed countries. The country's labor productivity (the common term for output per hour worked), which had been rapidly catching up with that of the developed world's leaders until the early 1970s, then shifted to a much slower trajectory. Israel has been steadily falling further and further behind the leaders, with the gap between average gross domestic product per hour worked in the Group of Seven countries and in Israel rising more than threefold since the mid-seventies.

The country that built research universities where there were none lost its way. While the existing universities provided Israel with the ability to become the "Start-Up Nation" during the high-tech boom, the rest of Israel was left perilously behind. The number of

research university faculty per capita, which had risen exponentially until 1973, has since fallen by over 50 percent. Roughly half the children of Israel receive what amounts to a third-world education, with the vast majority of them belonging to Israel's fastest growing population groups—all of which underlies the unsustainable long-term trajectory on which Israel finds itself.

In 2020, 22 percent of first-graders were Arab-Israelis. This group's most recent international test scores in math, science, and reading (PISA 2018) were not just low: Arab-Israelis scored below nine of the 10 predominantly Muslim countries that participated in the exam.

Twenty-one percent of Israel's first-graders are Haredi, the vast majority of whom grow up without even studying the material and do not participate in the PISA exams. If they did, it would only exacerbate the already abysmal Israeli national outcomes. The share of Haredim in Israel's population has roughly doubled from one generation to the next (3.3 percent in ages 75–79, 5.9 percent in ages 50–54, 13.8 percent in ages 25–29 and 23.7 percent in ages 0–4). The Central Bureau of Statistics estimates that by 2065, half of Israel's children ages 0–14 will be Haredi.

In addition to the Arab-Israeli and Haredi children, who alone constitute nearly half of Israel's first-graders today, there are scores of additional non-Haredi Jewish children receiving third-world levels of education in the country's many geographic and social peripheries.

These factors have a corrosive impact on domestic politics. They are making relations with other liberal societies increasingly dicey. They are widening the chasm between the Jewish state and much of the Jewish people abroad. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. When an increasing number of Israelis receive a third-world education as children, they will be able to maintain only a third-world economy as adults. This cannot support the first-world abilities needed to defend Israel in the world's most dangerous region.

Demographically, Israel faces a democratic point of no return, after which laws and systemic reforms already extremely difficult

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to pass and implement will cease to remain political options in future Knessets and governments. While education is not a sufficient condition for safeguarding Israel's future, it is certainly a necessary condition. If this issue is not addressed comprehensively nationwide—and very soon—then an Israel unable to defend itself will not become a third-world nation. It simply will not be.

The writing is on the wall in one socioeconomic sphere after another. Already, half of Israel's adults are so poor that they do not reach the bottom rung of Israel's income-tax ladder and pay no income tax at all. The burden on the top income quintile (primarily Israel's most educated and skilled workers) is slowly rising, with 20 percent of the population accounting for 92 percent of Israel's entire income-tax revenue in 2017. Young people with options abroad do not have to remain and shoulder an increasingly heavy burden if they do not see any hope of improvement—further accelerating Israel's already rapidly changing demographics.

The merging of Israel's extremely deficient education system with its exponentially growing population is akin to surfing on a tsunami. It cannot end well. Israel's fertility rate (3.1 children per family) is a full child greater than that of the second-place OECD country (Mexico, with 2.1 children per family). Population density in 2065 is forecast to be 922 people per square kilometer. Only Bangladesh is more crowded today than Israel will be then.

The most important common denominator between low pro-

The national core curriculum must not only be uniform across the country, including in all Haredi schools, but it must also be significantly upgraded to provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities required in modern global economies that expect increasing worker flexibility and adaptability.

ductivity growth, high poverty rates, and exploding demography is the deficient quality of education provided to a large and growing share of the population. Turning this one issue on its head may not be enough to save Israel, but not doing so will most certainly bury it.

Israel's education system has been extraordinarily lacking in its ability to cope with the huge gaps that the country's pupils bring with them from home. The common political solution has been to throw ever-greater sums of money at the system, without dealing with its fundamental problems. Consequently, education expenditures have surpassed Israel's defense spending, becoming the largest item in the government budget. But the country's average score in core subjects still remains below that of every single developed country. As if this were not enough, achievement gaps between Israeli children, as well as the percentage with failing scores, are by far the highest in the developed world.

A leading excuse given for the poor results is Israel's overly congested classrooms, with the number of pupils per class in Israel far above the OECD average. Yet the number of pupils per full-

time equivalent teacher is nearly identical to the OECD average in primary schools and is actually lower in Israeli high schools than the OECD average. In other words, we pay for enough teachers, so why are our children's classrooms so crowded?

Another leading excuse is insufficient instruction time. However, the number of instruction hours in Israel is greater—often far greater—than in the large majority of developed countries. Yet each of these other countries produces higher scores in the core subjects. More to the point, there is no international correlation between the number of annual instruction hours provided in a country and the scores of its children in the basic subjects.

And then there are the teachers. Seventy-nine percent of people studying education in Israel are enrolled in some two dozen teaching colleges, another 15 percent in non-research colleges, and the remaining 6 percent study in research universities. The problem is one of quality. The psychometric score (serving a similar function as the American SAT) of first-year education students in the research universities is 9 percent below the average for the remaining university students. The score of those studying in teaching colleges is 23 percent below the research-university average, while those studying in non-research colleges score 32 percent below the university students. How can individuals unable to get accepted to universities be expected to bring their pupils up to that level?

When compared with their developed-world peers, literacy-skills teachers in Israel are less knowledgeable (according to the OECD's PIAAC tests for adults) than similar teachers in all but one country in the developed world. The knowledge levels of Israeli math teachers place them dead last on the list.

Here too, the common refrain is to raise teachers' salaries. Indeed, monthly salaries in Israel are lower than the OECD average. However, when taking into account not only what is paid but also what is received, and controlling for differences in living standards across countries, Israeli salaries per teaching hour are higher—considerably higher in high schools—than the OECD average.

The time has come for serious people to implement serious measures to save Israel's future, and this begins with systemic education reform. Such a reform must be based on three primary building blocks.

1. *Core curriculum:* The national core curriculum must not only be uniform across the country, including in all Haredi schools, but it must also be significantly upgraded to provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities required in modern global economies that expect increasing worker flexibility and adaptability.
2. *Teachers:* Individuals considering teaching careers should first get accepted and complete degrees in the disciplines that they would like to specialize in, and complete their teacher training and certification process afterward.
3. *Decentralization of the public education system:* Principals should be given the authority to run their schools, subject to a body above them similar to a corporate governing board composed of people from the Education Ministry, the town or city administration, parents, and teachers. The principals should submit their strategic plans for board approval and then be given the independence to attain their goals, including the decisions regarding whom to employ and how much to pay each person.

Many of the challenges described above are not unique to Israel. What is unique is the severity of the situation and the existential implications of not resolving these issues.

The outcomes of Israel's 2021 elections provide an extraordinary opportunity for the tectonic changes that Israel's future depends on. The current government brings together parties from

across the political spectrum—Right and Left, religious and non-religious, Arabs and Jews—to form a political coalition unlike any other in Israeli history. Since this unusual political combination precludes any possibility of a breakthrough on the Palestinian issue that has overshadowed Israeli politics for more than half a century, the only viable alternative for the government leaders is to develop a serious domestic agenda. My colleagues and I at the Shoshon Institution have briefed all the key leaders of this government on our findings. One can only hope that they will be able to find the wherewithal to do what needs to be done to return Israel to a sustainable long-term trajectory.

Getting education right will not only help make Israel the country of choice for our most educated children and grandchildren. Such a country will also be one that our Jewish sisters and brothers abroad will be proud to identify with. *

Israel Wins the War of Ideas



OR 20 years, I have been giving speeches to predominantly Jewish audiences on Israel-related subjects. Few of those speeches go by without someone asking, “Why does Israel have such lousy PR? Is there anything that can be done to turn Israel’s image around?”

I’m no public-relations expert. But I am in the arguments business, and after so many years of fielding the questions, it’s inevitable that I’ve given them some thought. My answer to the second question is: Yes, of course something can be done. As for the first, the problem is that Israel’s usual defenders keep trying to win over the wrong kinds of people with the wrong kinds of arguments in the wrong kinds of places.

Who are the wrong kinds of people?

I do not mean ordinary critics, who object to this or that Israeli policy without questioning Israel’s basic legitimacy or defaming it with outright falsehoods. I mean anti-Zionists of all stripes, people

who deny Israel’s very right to exist as a Jewish state, who belong to the Blame Israel First crowd, who think that the words “apartheid” or “genocide” or “racist” attach to Israel the way that “juice” attaches to “orange,” and whose views generally stem either from ignorance that is irremediable or hostility that is irredeemable.

For decades, many of these critics have played a rhetorical game of “When did you stop beating your wife?” designed to bait Israel’s defenders into grappling with one false premise after another. (E.g., “Why does Israel kill so many Palestinian children?”) Merely to engage with their charges is a loser’s game, because it legitimizes bogus assumptions and bigoted arguments, and because liars always retain the local advantage in the territory of lies. The best response to this kind of criticism is not agitated outrage. It’s indifferent silence.



What are the wrong kinds of arguments? The list is long, but let me mention a few.

- *The legal-historical case:* This argument often comes laden with references to distant events such as the San Remo conference of 1920, or to details such as the missing “the” in Resolution 242. Unfortunately, the battle for Israel’s good name isn’t being duked out between scrupulous pedants.
- *The Israel-as-the-bigger-victim case:* This is a common theme at pro-Israel events, in which videos are sometimes shown of Israelis seeking cover from Hamas’s rockets under the blare of air-raid sirens. But a major military power is never going to win an international pity contest, nor should it want to: Israel came into being to *end* Jewish victimization, not to showcase it.
- *The Israel-the-virtuous case:* This one seeks to remind people of all the ways in which Israel has repeatedly exited conquered

territories, offered Palestinians a state, saved Palestinian lives in Israeli hospitals, and performed other good deeds. But if this line of argument did any good, elite public opinion in much of North America and Europe would not have shifted *against* Israel with every conciliatory step Israel has taken over many decades.

- *The Israel-versus-terrorism case:* This is an argument about the *means* being used by Israel's enemies, which most everyone condemns. But the Palestinian rebuttal—that their land has been stolen—is an argument about *ends*. The asymmetry between means and ends will usually favor the side speaking about ends, provided it can make people believe that the ends are inherently justified.

Each of these arguments may be right on the merits, yet they rarely do more than preach to the converted. As for the unconverted, the best argument is that Israel is under no obligation to justify its existence to anybody, least of all those who despise it; that, like any democratic and sovereign nation, it has every right to do what it must to safeguard its vital interests and security; that it isn't interested in winning popularity contests; and that sincere and constructive criticism is always welcome, but its policies won't be swayed by those who fundamentally wish it ill.

What are the wrong kinds of places?

Israel's defenders seem intent on fighting their battles in the settings where they are most likely to lose: elite universities, prestige media outlets, and other venues where opinions tend to range from the left to the far left. This has led to depressing spectacles such as an Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom being rushed out of the London School of Economics by her security detail, or a former Israeli foreign minister being called "smelly" by a student at Harvard Law School, or anti-Israel calum-

Why run after people who keep running away from us, instead of reaching out to those who are reaching out to us?

nies in the media being met by indignant, if somewhat pathetic, 200-word Letters to the Editor by leaders of Jewish organizations.

Might things change if only better pro-Israel speakers appeared on campus, or if more energy could be invested in correcting media misreporting, or if more people could show up at pro-Israel rallies? It's always worth a try. But decades of effort and failure on both scores don't give good grounds for hope.



Which isn't to say the situation is hopeless. Far from it.

Year after year, perceptions of Israel at places like Northwestern, NYU, and even some rabbinical seminaries—that is, enclaves of progressive self-righteousness—seem to worsen, causing intensifying bursts of anxiety within the Jewish world. And yet, year after year, positive perceptions of Israel among the American public at large have generally risen, according to Gallup, from a low of 58 percent in the wake of 9/11 to 75 percent in March 2021. This should be a source of satisfaction to Israel's supporters, even if not everyone in the Jewish community is keen on the sources of that support, much of it from the political Right. It's also an indication of where Israel's supporters can make further inroads in terms of outreach, programming, and philanthropy. Why run after people who keep running away from us, instead of reaching out to those who are reaching out to us?

Outside the United States, things look even more promising. For decades, it has been conventional wisdom that Israel would find itself

Israel needs to win the battle of ideas in places, and among people, where it can do more than just maintain an intellectual stalemate.

totally ostracized unless it withdrew to the 1967 lines and meekly acceded to various Palestinian demands. Israel largely refused. Yet it has forged increasingly close relations with formerly unfriendly states, from Uganda to Greece to India to the United Arab Emirates. These countries do not want better ties because Israel caved to the demands of larger powers, but rather because Israel resisted them. They are less interested in Israel's concessions than they are in its resourcefulness, its capabilities, its ability to add value in common causes. What others lament or envy about Israel, they tend to admire. They are the countries toward which Israel must turn to make new friends and influence people.

How so?

By winning the battle of ideas in the philosemitic (or, at the very least, potentially philosemitic) world.

How might an Emirati tech entrepreneur, an Indian aerospace engineer, a Vietnamese agronomist, a Mexican anthropologist, or a Colombian cybersecurity expert meet his or her Israeli counterparts? Barring an expensive and time-consuming trip to Israel, or an encounter at an international conference or trade fair, or a politically fraught visit to an Israeli consulate or an embassy, the chances of such meetings are slight. The Jewish state exerts a global fascination on people from around the world, particularly those at the top of the knowledge economy. And yet, for most of those people, Israel remains a faraway destination, at best visited once in a lifetime.

To change this, I propose the establishment of a nongovernmental,

not-for-profit Israel Center, modeled on the British Council, which does so much to extend the U.K.'s cultural and linguistic footprint around the world. The purpose of the Center would be to give Israel—the country and its people—an institutional home in places far from the usual hubs of Jewish life. Chongqing. Taipei. Seoul. Osaka. Manila. Hanoi. Bangkok. Mumbai. Tbilisi. Tirana. Thessaloniki. Cordoba. Abu Dhabi. Casablanca. Kigali. Montevideo. Medellín. Monterrey. Salt Lake City. Bentonville. Calgary.

The first rule of Israel Centers is that they would be apolitical. They would not be places for Israeli officials or nonofficial spokespersons to deliver talking points about the conflict with the Palestinians or the threat from Iran, much less to comment on (or involve themselves in) the politics of their host country.

The second rule is that they would not be religious. That's not to say that religious people would be unwelcome, only that the Centers would not be in the business of offering religious instruction or being sites for Jewish services.

The third rule is that the Israeli government would have to honor the Centers' independence by not meddling in their activities, above all for covert purposes. For this, the Israel Centers would have to be independently staffed, funded, and governed.

The fourth rule is that all the Centers would offer courses in Hebrew, as well as in ancient and modern Jewish history, but otherwise would be free to determine their own programming, as befits different locations.

Finally, while open to all, Israel Centers would mainly seek to attract local elites with high-level programming in elegant, discreet, small-group settings. Their principal role would be to cultivate close relationships by offering opportunities for dialogue that could blossom into academic exchanges, business partnerships, and other fruitful ties.

What would Israel Center programming look like? Imagine a Center in, say, Osaka, Japan, inviting an Israeli Nobel Prize-winning chemist to visit the city for a week. Along with the usual sightseeing,

the Center could host a reception and a dinner in the scientist's honor, inviting deans from the science faculty of Osaka University to join in the evening. The dinner could be followed by a formal lecture and perhaps an opportunity to teach a seminar to the University's top graduate students. Following the visit, an Israel Center headquarters in Jerusalem could reciprocate by hosting Japanese faculty for a week- or monthlong program in Israel, or even a year-long sabbatical.



As with chemistry, so, too, with everything from astronomy to linguistics to zoology. And not just academia. Israel Centers should be destinations for Israeli archeologists, film producers, celebrity chefs, marine biologists, social entrepreneurs, water-management experts, winemakers, app designers, robotics engineers, medical-device makers — you name it. They should be places of culture, exchange, collaboration, partnership; places to communicate the vibrancy and excitement of a country that consistently punches above its weight; places to form deeper bonds in settings where political questions aren't allowed to get in the way.

And what does this have to do with winning the battle of ideas?

Not everything: There will still be many occasions when the case for Israel will have to be made in the usual places, before the usual audiences, with the usual arguments.

But arid fields can be plowed only so many times. Israel needs to win the battle of ideas in places, and among people, where it can do more than just maintain an intellectual stalemate. It needs to do so not through mainstream or social media, where Israel's enemies have the advantages of scale and moral fervor, but in small-group settings among thoughtful people who exert a quiet but powerful influence in their respective countries and communities. It must put Israel's greatest strength to the fore, which is the quality of its

human capital, not its uneven efforts at *hasbara*. It should have confidence that, for all the loud haters, there are also potential admirers who can be engaged in long-term relationships *without asking them to take a political position*. It should have faith that the best way to get other people to support Israel isn't by making arguments, but by inviting them to fall in love with a country and its people.

As in personal affairs, so, too, in international ones: People tend to find reasons to like, and defend, what they already love. The core problem with most pro-Israel arguments is that they ignore this basic point of human psychology, trying to win the argument first and the person second. The point of the Israel Centers is to win the person, first and last.

I have no illusions that this idea can be brought off on the cheap or that it can achieve a quick payoff. It's a philanthropic commitment of many millions of dollars to a decades-long project. If that seems too costly or time-consuming, consider the cost, and the waste, of doing things as before while expecting different results. *

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וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת
רַגְלָיו כָּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבִנְת הַסְּפִיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטֹהַר:

— שמות כד:י

Why not solve the unsolvable problems,
change the social order, undo the bad years, do the things
that were supposed to be impossible?

DARA HORN · 8

From now on, rather than having every significant adult
in their lives ask Jewish high-school students, ‘Where are you
going to college?’ we want young Jews to be asked,
‘Where are you spending your year in Israel?’

NATAN SHARANSKY & GIL TROY · 60

The fact is that certain texts, maddeningly obscure though
they can be, are the bedrock of our society. Not to read and not
to engage with them is to give up on responsible citizenship.

JOSHUA T. KATZ · 68

The idea that American Jews who care about liberal values
have to stand on the sidelines of Israeli politics runs counter to
Israel’s idea of itself as the nation-state of the entire Jewish people.

YEHUDA KURTZER · 84

How do blacks and Jews go from being threatened by
each other’s diversity to delighting in that diversity, knowing that
it is nothing more than a reflection of our own?

CHLOÉ VALDARY · 100