

# 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

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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. \*