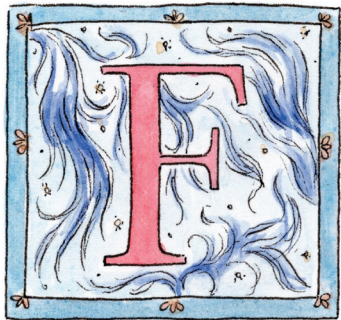


MICHAEL STEINHARDT

Israel Is Doing Fine; We're the Ones Who Need Help



FOR GENERATIONS, Diaspora Jews have seen Israel as a hardship case requiring the urgent mobilization of resources. Even today, we hear that Israel is “surrounded by enemies,” facing “existential threats unlike any other country.” Without our help, and especially our money, Israel will surely fail.

All this may once have been true. But it isn't anymore. Yes, there is terrorism, Iran, and the Palestinians. There is periodic political turmoil. But these do not amount to an existential crisis. They are no longer the stories that define the country. And until we recognize this change, we will forever be confused by the smoke and mirrors of a billion-dollar nonprofit industry telling us we need to “save” Israel.

Israel is no longer poor. In per capita GDP, its economy today compares with those of the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan. With an annual government budget of over \$140 billion, it certainly isn't being "propped up" by American government support (around \$3.8 billion) or American Jewish philanthropy (\$1–2 billion). In short, the era of Israel's economic dependence on America is over.

Israel is not weak, either. It has by far the most sophisticated military in the region. Its one major enemy, Iran, is much less powerful than it once was. Israel long ago made peace with Egypt and Jordan, the countries flanking its longest borders, and has more recently made peace with the UAE and Bahrain, resulting in billions of dollars in trade and tourism. Its hostile northern border with Lebanon hasn't seen a major conflict in a decade and a half.

If Israel is doing so well, isn't it fair to ask whether it really needs the Diaspora's financial support—and whether we haven't been using our donations as a way of avoiding our own, much deeper problems?

The fundamental issues plaguing non-Orthodox Jews, especially in North America—assimilation, disengagement from Jewish life, poor Jewish education—have not gone away. Synagogue attendance, already in long decline, took a beating during the pandemic and has not come close to recovering. And then there's the increasing pressure of antisemitism on campuses, city streets, and in public institutions. Taken together, these constitute a well-documented existential threat to Diaspora Jewry that is far more immediate and profound than anything Israel faces today.

Of course, many pro-Israel organizations, Israeli nonprofits, and the Israeli government itself benefit from the narrative of Israeli dependency and will do everything they can to perpetuate it. There's a great deal of money involved.

But the moment we dispense with the old narratives, that billion dollars a year in donations to Israel—covering everything from

ambulances and bulletproof vests for IDF soldiers to universities and hospitals and national parks—begins to look a little strange. After all, these could all be paid for by Israeli donors or taxpayers, just as they are in any other prosperous country.

One of the most glaring examples is the trees that people continue to plant in Israel through the Jewish National Fund. Each year, Americans spend millions of dollars on those trees. It's a nice tradition, a symbolic gesture, a way to connect with the Jewish state in one's own mind.

But as a form of philanthropy, it's completely disconnected from Israel's reality. If you ask any Israeli, "What are the most acute needs facing the Zionist enterprise in the Land of Israel?" you'll discover that trees are (and have possibly always been) very low on the list. Urgent defense needs, economic development, immigrant absorption, water resources, its constitutional crisis and political deadlock—the list goes on and on. But trees? Surely Israel no longer needs handouts to cover its landscaping bills.

All things considered, Israel is doing just fine. We non-Orthodox Diaspora Jews, on the other hand, are not. "Supporting Israel" has become a kind of narcotic, giving us a sense of self-worth and achievement that allows us to ignore the tempest that has put our own future in doubt.



Can we imagine a different relationship between the world's two largest Jewish communities? Such a shift is long overdue. To make it happen, we Diaspora Jews will need to stop focusing on what we think Israel needs from us and instead ask *what we need from Israel*.

The most obvious thing we need can be summed up in two words: Jewish pride.

The culture of Israel is profoundly different from that of non-Orthodox American Jewry. It is loud, messy, slapdash, confident, and proud. And it is incredibly innovative, a creative problem-solving culture of which the high-tech sector, the “start-up nation,” is only the tip of the iceberg. It’s also a culture that knows how to come together in times of crisis and work together, as we saw most recently during the pandemic. While America was tearing itself to shreds and politicizing everything, Israelis were busy mitigating, vaccinating, and getting their lives back to normal as soon as possible.

What I’ve learned from my many trips to Israel and my encounters with Israelis over more than half a century is this: Whatever it is that we are lacking in the non-Orthodox Diaspora, Israel has it. A fundamental will to thrive and flourish, an inner spark, a collective determination, a gutsiness, a joy, a passion—all channeling centuries of Jewish excellence into building a proud, successful, secular Jewish reality. If Jewish pride is what we need, they’ve got it in spades.

We Diaspora Jews can learn a great deal from the Jews of Israel, but only if we find pathways to much greater exposure to Israeli culture. And that costs money.

Can we imagine an American Jewish community, say, 20 years from now, that has redirected that billion dollars a year to projects that build Jewish pride in the Diaspora through bilateral engagement with Israel, rather than trying to “support” Israel with our money?

The result, I have no doubt, would be a far stronger, more coherent, more engaged, and prouder Diaspora.



Where could all that money go? I can offer a few concrete ideas.

One is to invest heavily in Hebrew language education. For generations, North American Jews haven’t learned much modern Hebrew—

despite the obvious fact that modern Hebrew is the most important tool for connecting with Israelis and consuming Israeli culture. This is in part because there is a dearth of highly qualified, professional Hebrew teachers, which results in very few reliable paths to studying modern Hebrew at a serious level. We need a vast expansion of master's-degree programs in teaching Hebrew as a second language, as well as many more serious course offerings that can teach Hebrew effectively to students of all ages, including adults.

A second area for investment would be building on Birthright Israel's success by creating similar large-scale programs, whether free or subsidized, that bring Diaspora Jews to Israel at different stages in life. The landscape of Israel trips has changed dramatically since I helped to create Birthright in 1999; it's time to rethink and rationalize the Israel-trip sector and to scale up many of the trips that already exist. Bar and bat mitzvah trips, trips tailored for families with teenage children, honeymoon trips, trips for influencers, mid-career networking trips for a wide range of professions, even two-year programs offering placement for a first job after college in the high-tech sector—all of these can have a long-term impact on secular Jewish identity if done right and at scale.

A third arena for investment would be Israeli culture, with sizeable funds devoted to bringing music, film, art, literature, and more to the Diaspora. We all know about *Fauda* and Gal Gadot and writers such as Amos Oz. But for every artist you have heard of, there are ten more potential stars who, for lack of resources at a critical juncture, never break out: The cost of translating a book, commissioning a screenplay, traveling to make distribution deals, or hiring the right people to market the product may be prohibitive. Artists also need to build relationships—with agents, producers, editors, directors, and so on. I can easily imagine a major, regular cultural showcase that brings together Israeli creators with

American industry professionals covering everything from books to movies and more.

Each of these ideas leverages Israel's success for our benefit, imbuing Diaspora Jews with Jewish pride and inspiring them through Israel's unique spirit. Studies have shown that even a single trip to Israel can correlate with a rich, Jewishly engaged life many years later: One study of Birthright Israel alumni, conducted almost two decades after their trip, demonstrated that in contrast to their peers who had not taken the free, 10-day trip to Israel, alumni were “more likely to raise their oldest child Jewish, to have *brit milah* for their oldest son, to be connected to Israel, to be synagogue members, to volunteer for Jewish or Israeli causes, to participate in events sponsored by Jewish organizations, to have Jewish friends, to celebrate Shabbat, to attend Jewish religious services, and to celebrate Jewish holidays.”

In a world where just “being Jewish” feels increasingly precarious, knowing that you are part of a people with a thriving homeland steeped in Hebrew culture and language, confident and proud, that cares about *your* fate is an invaluable path to courage, engagement, and character.

Can you imagine 20 years from now, a Jewish world where 100,000 non-Israeli American Jews are fluent in modern Hebrew, where subsidized trips to Israel are a lifelong opportunity rather than just a rite of passage, and where access to new Israeli cultural products is much easier and broader than it is now? Can you imagine how much more *interesting* Jewish communal life would become?

You can do a lot with a billion dollars a year.



The burden, however, should not be just on American Jews. I, for one, am baffled that the Israeli government hasn't invested a much larger amount in supporting the Western Diaspora than they have.

The success of the Israeli government's investment in Birthright should be all the proof they need: For a few tens of millions of Israeli taxpayer dollars a year, Birthright has brought more than half a million young Diaspora Jews to Israel and recouped the investment many times over. Participants spend money in Israel then and on subsequent trips, and also later through donations and investments in Israel that otherwise they may not have made. Birthright alone has laid the groundwork for a generation of increased global support for, investment in, and even immigration to Israel. It has redounded to Israel's benefit in profound ways—and this should be only the beginning.

Israel could easily dedicate a billion dollars out of its annual budget to the programs I outline here, and to more we haven't yet imagined. It may take some time for Israeli decision-makers to come around to the idea. But a powerful logic suggests that they should, and eventually will, invest in many of these projects.

This same logic has brought countries around the world to invest heavily in spreading their culture abroad. France, for example, runs hundreds of French Institutes and Alliance schools around the world, dedicated to promoting French language and culture. The Qataris spend millions of dollars a year to support the study of Arabic in American public schools and universities. Even the government of Thailand, a country much poorer than Israel, has been the quiet financial force behind the proliferation of Thai restaurants all over the world.

If Poland, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Qatar, Japan, South Korea, and others think it wise to invest in the worldwide study of their language and the export of their culture, why shouldn't Israel?

Once American Jews have flipped the paradigm concerning the role Israel plays in their lives and Israelis see the value of investing in the spread of their language and culture, we will suddenly be talking

about billions of dollars a year potentially being put into important, pride-building projects for the Diaspora.

But for that to happen, both Israelis and Diaspora Jews need to recognize that we are in an entirely new phase of Jewish history. We no longer need to save Israel. We need Israel to help save us. *

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