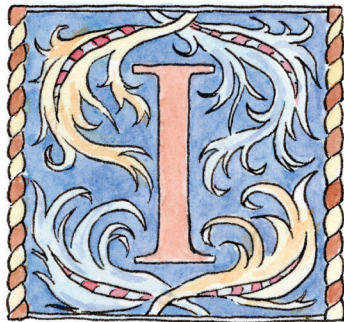


RABBI DEBORAH WAXMAN

# Israel Is in Danger of Losing American Jewry



ISRAEL is the place where I, as a non-Orthodox religious Jew who is immersed in multiple communities in the United States, can experience Judaism's annual cycle of holidays in consonance with the land rather than, as often happens, in contrast with it (think *Tu B'Shvat* in the dead of a Pennsylvania winter). It is where I can encounter Jews from across the Diaspora as well as those who have lived in Israel for generations. Israel is the place where, as a Jew, I can be at the center rather than on the margins, where political and cultural references draw on my history, animate my present, and point to my future. Israel is the place where Jewish concerns, both ancient and

contemporary, are the major conversation. To draw on Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983), the founding thinker of Reconstructionist Judaism, who taught that Jews in the Diaspora live in two civilizations, Israel is the place where I am immersed in Judaism as the primary civilization.

On a visit to the Israel Museum in the late 1990s, I walked through an exhibit of contemporary Israeli art and encountered an abstract painting full of wildly intersecting lines, titled *Lo Zu Haderekh* (This Is Not the Way). It was thrilling to connect the stirring and unsettling painting to Ahad Ha'am's equally provocative 1889 essay of the same name that made the case for cultural over political Zionism. Later that week, I saw Batsheva Dance Company's premiere of *Echad Mi Yodea* (Who Knows One, from a traditional Passover song)—a brilliant and staggering marriage of ancient religious custom and contemporary culture that explores (and explodes) oppressiveness in Orthodox Judaism.

Both of these cultural pieces are gorgeous, deeply Israeli examples of everything I love about being Jewish in Israel—the weaving of secular and religious, of past and present, into deep substance and outstanding quality, drawing on and pointing back to Jewish references. And although they were created by Israelis, both pieces also reflect a pain and an ambivalence similar to that which many non-Orthodox American Jews feel about Jewishness and Israel.

Ninety percent of American Jews identify as non-Orthodox, either culturally or religiously. Many of us are, after Ahad Ha'am, cultural Zionists who are variously oriented toward Israel, but with no plans to make aliyah, in spite of the ways that Israeli leaders stretching back to David Ben-Gurion have tried to narrow the concept of Zionism into a political commitment to *Medinat Yisrael* (the State of Israel). We are equally influenced by Kaplan, one of Ahad Ha'am's foremost disciples, who reinserted non-Orthodox religious sources and moti-

vations into his mentor’s adamantly secular Zionism. Kaplan’s genuine joy at the establishment of Israel as a center for Jewish life and a haven for Jews was equally tempered by his deep concerns about both the ongoing negation of the Diaspora that’s endemic to political Zionism and the potential oppression that could arise when religious authority is married to state power. The concerns he articulated in the 1940s were prescient: He worried about ethnocentrism and Jewish supremacism and the risks these posed to non-Jews in Israel, especially Arabs. He worried about religious freedom for non-Orthodox Jews. And he worried that traditional halakhic standards would marginalize anyone who didn’t meet them, not least women.

All of these concerns remain relevant today—indeed, they have only grown sharper. They constitute real pain points for many non-Orthodox Jews in our relationship to Israel. This pain sometimes registers as a one or two on the pain scale, balanced by true enthusiasm and engagement. Sometimes it approaches a nine or 10, as when Israeli political and religious leaders turn a scathing eye toward us.

Denigration of our seriousness, our commitments, and our choices; repeated efforts to pass legislation negating the legitimacy of our approaches to Judaism and questioning our very identities as Jews; barely nominal recognition and funding for non-Orthodox expressions of Judaism by Israeli authorities—these ongoing factors can be deeply alienating to many American Jews. Equally concerning is any rhetoric, action, inaction, or legislation that strips away the rights or delegitimizes the status of anyone who is not a “normative” halakhic male, especially women and queer people. These dynamics make Israel, the place where Jews are supposed to feel safe and free to fully express ourselves, seem deeply unwelcoming. It is also painful that our natural allies—secular Israelis who chafe at the rabbinate’s stranglehold on Israeli marriage, divorce, and death

rituals — do not rally more forcefully to a defense of religious pluralism that aligns with our vision, including arguing for an egalitarian prayer space at the *Kotel* (Western Wall). American Jews understand religious freedom to be equally about the freedom to embrace religion and to reject it, while secular Israelis largely seek freedom from religious authority that they legitimately experience as oppressive.

Moreover, many American Jews, informed by our commitment to democratic norms, our awareness of history, and by our own experiences as a minority, are deeply concerned about the rights and well-being of non-Jews, most especially Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. We recognize that Israel faces acute security concerns — and also that Israel's military, technological, and economic superiority place it in a radically different position than in the early years of statehood. Along with many Israelis, we have long felt distressed about how the Israeli government's apparent undermining of the two-state solution and the perpetuation of a 55-year occupation are eroding Israel's commitment to democracy. We feel this distress in principle and because it is a critical component of the synthesis between Judaism and democracy articulated by Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis that led him and so many other American Jews to become Zionists in the first place.

The November 2022 election that brought Israel's most right-wing government ever to power dialed our pain up to an 11 — or beyond. Many American Jews see in this government the same kind of ethno-nationalism that has narrowed public spaces for Jews in America, and that has accommodated and even fomented anti-semitism in the U.S. If ethno-nationalism is bad for Jews as a minority in the Diaspora, then ethno-nationalism practiced by Jews as the majority, holding state power, is also bad. This syllogism is

about more than logical consistency: It is about affirming a deeply held commitment to human rights as a Jewish value, regardless of location. In response to traditional or nationalist Jews who insist that human rights are not inherently Jewish, many non-Orthodox Jews point to the opening verses of Genesis, which assert that every individual is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. We believe this particular Jewish teaching applies to the universal goals of freedom and autonomy, both individual and collective, in all places.

Liberal Jewish communities in North America are succeeding in many ways in creating a diverse, intentionally inclusive, and joyful new chapter of Jewish life, one that is increasingly post-ethnic but not — as predicted by many — dying out. Rather, non-Orthodox Judaism is gaining layers and weaving in new strands as our participants become more diverse — more multiracial, more welcoming of queer people. We are expanding our reach and our appeal, in sharp contrast to Israel, which seems to be increasingly narrowing the kinds of Judaism and the kinds of Jews it is willing to validate.

A great many non-Orthodox American Jews remain deeply connected to Israel. Nonetheless, too often, we live the confusion depicted in the painting I described earlier. In the hardest moments, we feel like the dancer at the end of the chain in Batsheva's *Echad Mi Yodea* — showing up again and again, yet repeatedly being whipped and thrown to the floor.

As a Reconstructionist rabbi, I fervently pray that we find generative ways to center relationships among *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish people) in the strengthening of *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel), to the benefit of *kol yoshvei ha'aretz* (all Israel's residents). \*

---

RABBI DEBORAH WAXMAN is the president and CEO of Reconstructing Judaism, the central organization of the Reconstructionist movement.