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The Jewish Mainstream

We have been focused on the Jewish periphery for so long that we have forgotten about the center



IT IS MY JOB to pay close attention to outliers. As the executive director of the Natan Fund, a foundation that supports early-stage nonprofit organizations, I spend most of my time thinking about the people not yet included in Jewish communal life. Who have we been overlooking?

What new programs, approaches, or organizations might we create to give these people access to Jewish life? Such thinking is why Natan was an early funder of LGBTQ inclusion, Jewish farming and environmentalism, new models of synagogues and grassroots communities, and Jewish arts and culture.

There has always been risk associated with this kind of work. In trying to create new pathways into Jewish communal life for those who might feel ignored or excluded, we risk neglecting the needs of the core—those already on the inside.

Being at war, as Israel and the Jewish people now are on many fronts, we must change our calculus in assessing the costs and benefits of this approach.

While we are at such a momentous and perilous time in Jewish history, we need to direct much more of our communal attention—expressed in organizational activities, public discourse, and funding—to the Jewish mainstream. American Jewry remains solidly supportive of Israel, as do most Americans. We need to draw strength from this, feel pride in it, shout about it from the rooftops, and ensure that our many and diverse communal assets are aligned in bolstering it.

I'm not suggesting that we put our support for the outliers on hold. But it's critically important to remind ourselves as a community that our first responsibility must be to support those already firmly in the Jewish, Israel-supporting tent. You can't expand the tent unless its original supports are strong, and recent events make it very clear that the "Israel-supporting" part of the tent needs to be shored up. October 7 reminded us that Israel remains under the kind of existential threat that we thought was long past, and the antisemitism and anti-Zionism that have exploded in its wake have put Jews around the world, including in North America, on uncertain footing.

In this moment, how should we think rationally about Jewish communal life?



Since October 7, rabbis are reporting unprecedented increases in synagogue attendance. Hillels and Chabads on campus are selling out Shabbat dinners for the first time in years. UJA-Federation of New York gained 30,000 new donors for its Israel emergency campaign, and Federations across the country are seeing similar trends—they

are overwhelmed with individuals offering their ideas and time. The Federation system alone has raised \$750 million for Israel, and this doesn't count the surely hundreds of millions more in direct contributions to Israeli organizations. Unprecedented numbers of Jews have responded to the horrific events of October 7 and beyond with love, commitment, and generosity.

Long before the events of October 7, the Pew Research Center's "Jewish Americans in 2020" survey found that 82 percent of American Jews said caring about Israel was an essential or important part of what being Jewish meant to them. Nearly 6 in 10 felt a personal, emotional connection to Israel. Now those numbers are even higher: A November 2023 poll from the Jewish Electorate Institute found that 82 percent of respondents felt an emotional attachment to Israel; 91 percent believed that it's possible to be critical of Israeli government policy and still be "pro-Israel." That's a lot of support — as well as a solid refutation of the notion that Jews think all criticism of Israel is antisemitism. Even a recent survey of Bay Area Jews, arguably the most progressive American Jewish community, found that 89 percent believe that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state.

It couldn't be clearer: All across North America, most Jews support Israel. That doesn't mean they agree on every aspect of the war or Israeli politics generally. (Why should they?) It does, however, mean that standing with Israel is the dominant position. It's an expression of pride in the existence of a Jewish state, allied with a renewed understanding that Israel must have security in the face of enormous threats. Underneath this lies a natural sense of connection to the Jewish people and our ancestral homeland.

This should be the story we tell about our community, especially at this time of crisis, and we should be doing everything we can to strengthen those telling this story. We must fortify institutions and

establishments that represent majority Jewish opinions. We must state proudly and assuredly what we — nearly all of us — feel.

The corollary is that we must not allow ourselves to be distracted by loud voices from the Jewish fringe who are uncomfortable standing strongly with Israel.

For a long time, these two themes have set the tone in Jewish communal conversations:

- *We should meet young people where they are.* If they're saying they're more distant from Israel, and even rejecting Israel as a part of Jewish identity or peoplehood, then we should listen to them and create Israel-free Jewish spaces. That's just where the community is going!
- *Israel is the third rail of American Jewish communal life.* Complaints from rabbis and organizational leaders about the impossibility of discussing Israel with their communities often carried a subtext: These backward, reflexively pro-Israel people are behind the times. This dynamic has led too many leaders to avoid discussing Israel altogether. Israel's critics — and its haters — happily filled the void.

It's time for us to change our approach on both fronts. Jewish communities are full of people who are grateful for Israel's existence, who feel solidarity for its people, and who understand the threats to its existence — all while understanding the imperfections that need to be fixed. This should be our narrative — we should articulate the consensus with pride. We need to shift from meeting people “where they are” to providing them with opportunities to learn and engage and invite them over to where *we* are, where most Jews are. We shouldn't be so accommodating that we turn our communities

upside down or compromise on core tenets that are existentially important to nearly all of us.



We must also pay attention to our future leaders. Rabbis should represent us and inspire us: We need to invest in a talent pipeline that produces rabbis who share the sentiments and opinions of their future congregants. If Jewish leaders, especially rabbis, are afraid to talk about Israel, then we need to give them the knowledge and confidence to do so.

Remember the May 2021 letter signed by more than 90 rabbinical and cantorial students excoriating Israel for its “abuse of power and racist violence” and “apartheid,” and wanting to hold Israel accountable for its “violent suppression of human rights”? While those rabbis represent a growing generational divide, they still don’t represent the views of the majority of Jews.

As a community that now clearly sees the threats arrayed against us, we must ensure that we are attracting and training a cadre of rabbis who reflect the communal consensus, who are aligned with the Jews whose spiritual lives they will be responsible for.

This same line of thinking should pervade our Jewish institutional leadership. I have heard many stories of employers conducting interviews trying obliquely to determine whether a job applicant believes in Israel’s right to exist. From now on, let’s just cut to the chase. Say it loudly: Our institutions are proudly Zionist. Please join this awesome organization, and feel great about the place you work. Employees should represent the constituents their organizations serve.

This is the time to maximize our efforts to make sure our existing institutions are attractive to our existing members, and that they

are able to provide strength and support in a time of great need. I'm not saying anything revolutionary. Debate about Israel is fine. We will always argue about the thing we love this hard and this much. Inside Jewish spaces, let's invest our energies in making sure that the countless number of people who already want to support Israel and mainstream Jewish life find our mainstream institutions attractive, appealing, and accessible. Foundations, donors, and Federations should double down on their Jewish and Israel education and engagement portfolios, and seek new ways to support the core institutions that engage the most number of Jews.

Out of the horrific events of October 7 and the shocking responses to them ever since, a new opportunity has arisen. Jews want to learn. They want to engage. They crave connection and community. We must capture this moment by being there for those who are desperately reaching out to us, wherever that is. The Natan Fund supports innovation in Jewish life because we want more Jews engaged, and today is a good time to remember that the "more Jews" we might be missing are those right under our noses—those already deeply aligned with us, but who don't know where to turn because we haven't mapped out a route for them.

Devoting attention to the mainstream is not only strategically appropriate. It will also nourish our spirits to know that we are not on an island with our "traditional" views, but that we are part of a courageous and passionate majority who support and believe in Israel. This awareness should give us *chizuk* (strength) for the challenge. *