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America (at Her Best)

Like all great friendships, the one between America and the Jews rests on a foundation of shared values and aspirations



IT'S HARD to overstate the extent to which the United States is founded on ideals that are philosemitic by conviction, design, and effect.

The Puritans arrived in Massachusetts determined to make a New Jerusalem, modeled on the old: They settled their colony in towns named Salem, Sharon, and Rehoboth. Harvard awarded its first degree to a Jew, Judah Monis, in 1720; he was later hired (albeit after a dubious conversion to Christianity) to teach Hebrew. Francis Salvador, the first Jew to serve in a state assembly—South Carolina's—also became the first Jew to die in the service of American independence in 1776. Florida elected the first Jew to the United States Senate in 1845; California the first Jew to a

governorship in 1887; Teddy Roosevelt put the first Jew in the cabinet in 1906; Woodrow Wilson nominated the first Jew to the Supreme Court in 1916.

Today, the secretaries of state, treasury, and homeland security; the attorney general; the director of national intelligence; the chair of the Council of Economic Advisers; the chief of staff to the president; the governors of Pennsylvania, Illinois, Colorado, and Hawaii; nine U.S. senators, including the majority leader, and 26 members of the House of Representatives are Jewish. So are nearly one-quarter of American Nobel laureates—10 times our share of the overall population—as well as 6 of the 10 richest Americans, all of whom are self-made. (In case you're wondering: Steve Ballmer, Michael Bloomberg, Sergey Brin, Larry Ellison, Larry Page, and Mark Zuckerberg.) It barely rates notice.

America's Jews rose because we are blessed with a culture that values education, initiative, rectitude, hard work, personal responsibility, and full participation in the society of which we are a part. We rose, too, because, for the most part, the broader American society respected and even revered Jewish heritage instead of reviling it, and admired Jewish success instead of envying it. "The Hebrews," wrote John Adams in 1809, "have done more to civilize Men than any other Nation." Ninety years later, Mark Twain marveled, "The Jew... is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains."

America's Founding Fathers also understood, almost intuitively, that the fulfillment of American ideals regarding tolerance, freedom, enterprise, individual responsibility, and the pursuit of happiness, rested on the full equality of Jews as a central feature of our national exceptionalism. "To bigotry no sanction, to persecution no

assistance” — the words of Washington’s famous reply to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, R.I. — are among the great expressions of the American creed.

The question is: Will we remain that America for long?



In recent years, but particularly since October 7, there have been reasons to doubt it. In a previous essay in *SAPIR*, “Is There a Future for American Jews?” published in Autumn 2021, I noted a few of them — profound cultural shifts that augured ill for our place in this country.

- A Manichaean racial binary has replaced ethnic pluralism as the defining feature of American diversity—and most Jews, as “conditional whites” (to use the terminology of ethnic-studies curricula), are on the wrong side of that binary.
- The concept of success—rising on your own merits and being admired for it—is giving way to a notion of “privilege,” which rests on the belief that the “haves” are merely beneficiaries of a rigged system while the “have-nots” are its hapless victims.
- Intellectual excellence as a supreme cultural value is out of fashion; in its place there is “equity” — a word that, in practice, means a top-down system of racial gerrymanders aimed at achieving equality of outcomes irrespective of merit.
- Unconventional and often unpopular thinking, of the kind that Jews historically have delighted in, is increasingly difficult to express in an era of groupthink and cancellation.

- Conspiracy theories have gone mainstream. As I wrote then, “A nation that can bring itself to believe anything about anything will, sooner or later, have little trouble believing the worst about Jews.”

In hindsight, I missed two important points.

The first is the effect of ideological polarization in America on Jewish life—the hollowing out of the political center where most Jews had once comfortably sat (albeit usually to the left), and the growing strength of groups, ideas, and policy proposals formerly considered beyond the pale. Many of the most prominent Never Trumpers in the GOP are Jewish; their estrangement from the GOP has been accompanied by a sharp Republican tilt toward illiberal and isolationist views. Among Democrats, the growing strength of the pro-Palestinian (or rather, pro-Hamas) movement has left pro-Israel liberals feeling nervous and on the defensive and wondering whether Joe Biden will be the last Democratic president instinctively on their side.

Between the Israel-hating Left and the liberalism-hating Right, the space for Jewish political influence is becoming dangerously narrow. What could follow is antisemitism on a scale that makes even the present moment seem tame.

This is bad enough. But the second point is more serious yet: A growing number of Americans, especially younger ones, have little to no idea of what it means to be an American. They have a weak grasp of the principles on which the country was founded. They have been told many stories of the country’s many sins but fewer ones of its greatness and virtue. In 2021, a poll of 18- to 34-year-olds (that is, Gen Z) found that 54 percent of them view capitalism negatively while 51 percent view socialism positively. More alarming, 31 percent of Gen Z-ers agreed with the proposition that “democracy is no longer a viable system, and America should explore alternative forms

of government.” Another 28 percent “neither agree nor disagree.”

It may still be improbable that Americans will abandon the founding tenets of our system—younger people always incline toward radicalism, and with age often comes wisdom. But nobody should suppose that it’s impossible. Saving America for itself, and thus saving it as a haven for Jews, will take work that Jews can’t do alone. Fortunately, we still have many friends for this common endeavor.



Who are they? One way of thinking about it is to draw up lists of specific demographic groups: pro-Israel Evangelical Christians and many Catholics, American Hindus and East Asians, middle-of-the-road liberals and conservatives, Flyover Country USA, and so on. There’s value in seeing specific points of commonality among Jews and other groups and finding ways of building alliances with them.

But while making and maintaining specific allies is important, it isn’t sufficient. What has protected Jews in the United States since our arrival in North America in 1654 is not that we made common cause with other ethnic or religious groups. It’s that we exemplified and championed powerful ideals—none more powerful than the ideals of America itself. We have made and will make friends with people of any group—racial, religious, ethnic, political, social—who share those traditional ideals.

Here are 10 of them.

1) *Merit*. The furor that led to Claudine Gay’s departure as Harvard’s president wasn’t only about her incompetence as a leader after October 7, her performance before Congress, or her plagiarism. It was about a system that promoted a person with a thin scholarly record to the pinnacle of American academia, almost certainly on account of her race and gender. And it showed that the principles of meritocracy

are still something that millions of Americans treasure and would like to see restored, especially in educational institutions that are supposed to exemplify it. Jews — among the great beneficiaries of American meritocracy — can help ourselves by championing it, vocally and consistently, in the institutions we lead, advise, or serve.

2) *Patriotism*. America has been good to Jews as has no other country in history. Where is the sense in not expressing our gratitude? Yes, part of being a patriot also means being a critic: You can't create a "more perfect union" without noticing the many ways we remain imperfect. But patriotism also means rebutting the self-loathing that now typifies so many discussions about America's past and present — from the notion that our Founding Fathers were nothing more than hypocritical racists to the argument that white supremacy remains the dominant fact of American life. Most Americans intuitively understand that these beliefs are outrageous distortions of reality. They understand, too, that a nation that despises itself does irreparable damage to the fabric of its society. It's a trend Jews should fight.

3) *Integration*. One of the paradoxical challenges facing Jewish continuity in the United States, where we've found so much acceptance, is how to remain a nation slightly apart — to honor what makes us distinctive without ghettoizing ourselves. But that's a good problem to have, just as it's good to honor the American ideal of *e pluribus unum*. American Jews can nurture our identity as a people, a culture, and a faith without contributing to the balkanization of American life through reflexively divisive forms of identity politics — usually expressed in mindless disdain for mainstream American culture and the fetishization of small differences.

4) *Free enterprise*. The American Dream, which continues to draw millions of people to our shores, is largely an economic dream: not just of prosperity, but also of the opportunities that lead to it. No

minority group exemplifies the possibilities of that dream as clearly as the Jews do. Our family stories — almost always involving an ancestor fleeing oppression and coming to America with no money, no English, and next to no education — refute the narrative about an intolerant system invariably favoring the established elite. That’s a story we need to tell ourselves as well as others, while helping ensure that our system, from the tax code and business regulations to charter schools and admissions practices, always tilts in favor of those who believe in aspiration, not entitlement.

5) *Free expression.* There is a view that the rise in antisemitism over the past decade is somehow a function of too much free speech. The opposite is closer to the mark: Antisemitism has become more pervasive in one of the most censorious periods of American history. Why? Perhaps it’s because the speech police, whether on college campuses or in the media, are only selectively intolerant — some forms of speech are strictly forbidden, while others are tolerated and even embraced. It’s how a society that cannot permit even quotations of racial epithets has come to be so tolerant of chants calling for the destruction of the only Jewish state. For Jews to embrace free expression as a supreme democratic value should never mean gratuitously offending anyone. It does mean refusing to bow to a self-anointed elite that thinks it has a right to determine what can and cannot be said.

6) *“Think different.”* Apple’s famous marketing slogan from the late 1990s could also be the motto of the Jewish people, with similarly broad appeal. America — founded by Protestant “nonconformists,” better known as the Puritans — has always had a soft spot for all sorts of free thinkers, dissenters, and originals. A disproportionate number of them, from Joseph Pulitzer to Richard Feynman to Elaine May, have been Jews. A culture of argument, skepticism, and independent thinking has made Jews an abiding source of inspiration

and creativity to many Americans. It's something that, with a bit of courage, we can continue to model.

7) *The content of our character.* It wasn't long ago that the most famous phrase from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech—immediately preceded by a prayer to ignore the color of skin—was an article of American faith. That faith has been eroded by the relentless racialization of American discourse and practice, so much so that King himself would be considered a white supremacist according to the leading ideologues of critical race theory. Yet most Americans still hold to the ideal of a society that judges people by their virtues, not their identity; that rejects every form of racial essentialism; that, even when it can't quite see past skin color, at least makes the attempt. That's a dream from which Jews have greatly benefited—and that we should keep alive.

8) *Self-empowerment.* People often sympathize with victims; they rarely admire them. The story of the Jewish people could easily be one of almost relentless victimization—except that Jews have consistently refused to play the part. It is the reluctance of Jews to think of ourselves as victims that not only explains our endurance as a people but also accounts for the philosemitism from which we have also benefited, above all in the United States. It says something that, despite rising antisemitism, Jews, as of 2023, remain the most admired religious group in the United States—not because Americans always love a winner (although we usually do), but because we respect those who, to paraphrase the old song, pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and start all over again.

9) *Zionism.* A clear majority of Americans admire the Jewish state because it exhibits many of the same traits that Americans have long admired in their Jewish neighbors: resilience, feistiness, resourcefulness, against-the-grain thinking, reverence for the past, confidence in the future. That remains true in the midst of the current war:

According to a Gallup poll from December, 62 percent of American adults say that U.S. support for Israel is either “the right amount” or “too little,” as against 36 percent who say it is “too much.” Americans are often mystified (or put off) by the ambivalence or disdain that liberal or progressive Jewish Americans sometimes express about Israel. Such selfloathing, as the French saying has it, is worse than a crime, it’s a mistake. People admire those who respect themselves. That makes American Jewish support for Israel critical— not just for Israel, but for American Jewry itself.

10) *Heritage*. Freedom not only of but also from religion is a precious American inheritance, one for which all American Jews feel particularly grateful. But Jews are the People of the Book—and reverence for that Book is what largely accounts for America’s centuries-old fondness for its Jews. Secular Jews (including me) ought to be mindful that our friends go far beyond Evangelicals whose fervor some of us find off-putting and whose political views are often well to the right of our own. Our friends are Americans who understand that a Judeo-Christian heritage is the bedrock on which our democratic experiment is built. We should treasure our status as the originals in a common tradition that is central to how hundreds of millions of people understand themselves.



These are the ideas that make America what it is. They are the basis on which America’s love for the Jews and the Jewish love for America were first built and can still be sustained.

The greatest danger for American Jews does not lie in the rise of pro-Palestinian sentiment among younger Americans, bad as that is. It’s in the abandonment or rejection of the ideals that have made the marriage of America and the Jews such a long, fruitful, and happy

one. Today, we are fighting not simply to keep America good for the Jews. We also have an opportunity to return the original favor by championing the ideals listed above, so that American exceptionalism and the American Dream can maintain their promise for all those we count as friends.

The essays in this issue of *SAPIR* explore the pitfalls and the possibilities. *

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