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Zionism and Liberalism in America

*The fates of Israel and world Jewry are entwined.
The liberal order is essential for both*



VERYWHERE one looks on the American Left, its relationship with Zionism is under extreme strain. Given the changes in both movements—the Left’s shift from liberalism to progressivism and nearly four uninterrupted decades of right-wing Israeli policies to defend—it has become increasingly uncomfortable to be unapologetically Zionist in left-wing circles. If Zionism is to remain a significant presence on the Left, it will depend on the resilience of the camp that operates in both spaces.

That doesn’t mean hunkering down and waiting for political and intellectual tides to turn. It means adopting tactics designed to change the broader conversation, including the paradigm that prioritizes a

hierarchy of oppression, which is never going to be hospitable to Zionists or Jews. If we are to reinvent the Zionist Left, both *Zionism* and the Left need to reimagine themselves.



For decades, the heroes of the U.S.-Israel relationship were Democrats: Presidents Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy, Senators Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. By contrast, its rockiest stretches were under Republican administrations: Dwight Eisenhower during the Suez crisis, Ronald Reagan during the fight over arms sales to Saudi Arabia and Israel’s invasion of Lebanon, and George H.W. Bush following the Gulf War. Liberals and progressives viewed the Jewish state as a prime example of an oppressed minority group’s achieving national liberation.

The irony of the monumental shift that has taken place on the Left with regard to Israel is that the importance of the very qualities that formerly contributed to a favorable judgment of Israel has not dissipated. Instead, these qualities are now advanced as reasons to condemn Israel. But the fact that Israel is now seen as oppressing Palestinians and creating a separate refugee crisis does not erase the underlying reasons for the bond between Zionism and the Left, even if they are buried under a formidable pile of modern challenges. Digging out from under the pile means returning to the success stories that already exist for left-wing Zionism.

The first step is rejecting the assumption that the Left is or should be monolithic. The Jacobinism that reigns on many campuses and among some civil-society groups is loud, as the most radical movements and voices tend to be. But there are divides within the larger left-of-center universe; some parts of the political and cultural Left establishment will be more hospitable to Israel than others will. Those

divides should be mined for allies rather than interpreted as cause to write off the Left entirely as implacably hostile.

When we look for ideological allies on the Left, we need to differentiate between 1948ers and 1967ers: between those who object to Israel's existence and those who object to some of its policies. 1948ers are unlikely to be swayed by arguments about failed rounds of diplomacy, the historical persecution of Jews and their miraculous return to their spiritual homeland, or the fact that a majority of Israeli Jews are neither white nor European. The ideological zeal of this group—much of which skews younger—may temper over time. But positive engagement will be difficult in the current atmosphere.

The 1967ers, by contrast, may also be angry at Israel. But they are determined to end Israel's military occupation and halt the de facto annexation of the West Bank that is the result of expanding Israeli settlements. 1967ers fit into the paradigm that led to the original alliance between Zionism and the Left. Their argument is that Israel is failing to live up to its own liberal values—the values that initially attracted them to Zionism in the first place. Much of the BDS movement's success on the Left has been due to a perception, fueled by the movement's leaders, that it is an anti-occupation movement rather than an anti-Zionist one. While there are some serious disagreements within the Left between pro-Israel advocates and anti-Israel 1967ers over issues such as culpability, power, and agency, they are ultimately policy squabbles rather than fundamental differences.

Such disagreements are features of any big-tent movement. Without engaging the 1967ers and fostering an intellectual environment in which critics of Israeli policies are not deemed identical to those who deny Israel's basic legitimacy, the 1948ers will only grow in strength. That path leads to a wholesale divorce between Zionism and the Left.

Instead, left-wing American Zionists should adopt the model of the Israeli Left, which is at times hypercritical of the Israeli gov-

ernment and its policies in a way that can shock American Jews. Yet it almost never resorts to anti-Zionism. It routinely talks about occupation, warns starkly about the consequences of leaving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict unresolved rather than waxing about its complexity, and points to figures such as the firebrand MK Beza-
lel Smotrich as greater dangers to Israel’s liberal-democratic future than some of Israel’s actual foes. In the U.S., these approaches are often considered out of bounds in more establishment circles on the Jewish Left, which widens the sense of isolation for many pro-Israel voices on the broader Left.



These differences in approach can be attributed to the fact that Israeli liberal Zionists and American liberal Zionists are not operating on the same playing field.

There is a widespread wariness in the American pro-Israel community of criticizing Israel from afar without having to bear the direct consequences for policy choices as do those who pay taxes to the Israeli government and serve in the IDF. Many also fear that criticism of Israel that is too harsh or too direct will be appropriated by Israel’s enemies. These concerns are understandable, but the sharp rise in antisemitism in the context of the current war makes it clear that our communities are more connected than ever. One maxim of Zionism is that the fate of world Jewry is bound up with the fate of Israel, which means we all have a stake in the decisions of the Israeli government. A more resilient American Zionism is one that acknowledges the reality of its essential boundedness to the Jewish state and is therefore more confident about criticizing it.

Finally, resilience for the pro-Israel community on the Left cannot be passive. If Israel’s liberal supporters are feeling squeezed between

their Zionist commitments and their liberal commitments, the answer cannot be to downplay their Zionism or to withdraw from the Left's institutions. Both of these approaches, in effect, urge pro-Israel Jews on the Left to cede their territory to those who do not share their principles or values.

This is a false choice. Resilience is not the path of least resistance. By definition, it entails a measure of hardship and loneliness. The key is not to quit or become quiet, but to engage with even greater vigor. The way to protect and expand the space on the Left that is hospitable to Israel and Zionism is to identify allies, create visible fortresses, and fight for a Zionist vision that others find compatible with authentic left-wing principles rather than declaring these things impossible to reconcile.

We are all aware of the vociferously strong voices on the Left, both in politics and in intellectual circles, who do not shy away from their Zionism while proudly identifying as progressive. They don't accept the charge that they are "PEPs"—Progressives Except for Palestine. They point to Zionism as a movement that empowers history's most oppressed group, and to Israel as an immigration success story of refugee absorption and indigenous return. They do not accept the idea that Israel cannot or should not be criticized, but they see Israel as an integral part of standing up for justice and as a necessary sanctuary for Jews. Their Zionism is a foundational part of their identification with the Left. It is not a compromise, but a natural symbiosis.

Boosting this trend is not only important for the American Jewish Left. It is important for all American Jews, no matter their political or ideological persuasion. American and Israeli Jews are different in many ways, but if Jewish peoplehood is to have any meaning beyond a slogan, it is that our destinies are entwined. What happens over there reverberates in our lives over here more than ever, as the post-October 7 world has made clear. American Jews must understand that writing

off the Left as irredeemable will have consequences for all American Jews, and not only the ones who find themselves pushed out of progressive circles. It is naïve to believe that animosity toward the Jewish state and its people will not morph quickly into animosity toward Jews irrespective of national boundaries, so repairing the relationship with the Left should be an American Jewish project, rather than one that only the American Jewish Left frets about.

Intellectual and demographic trends will continue to create tension for the pro-Israel community that identifies with the Left. While such tension is not desirable, it cannot be allowed to drive Zionism out of the political and cultural camp that has been the natural home of most American Jews for a century. The struggle to retain that home will require terraforming the Left for American liberal Zionism. If the pro-Israel community wants to reset its relationship with the part of the Left that remains amenable to it, this process cannot wait. *