

S A P I R

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

THE SECOND ISSUE ON

ASPIRATION



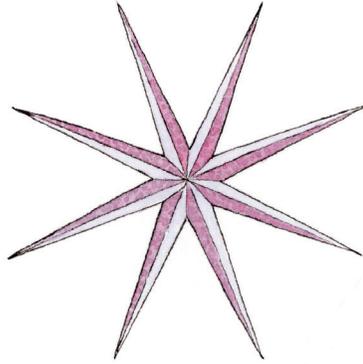
Volume Twenty



Winter 2026

*And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.*

—Exodus 24: 10



Bret Stephens

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Mark Charendoff

PUBLISHER

Ariella Saperstein

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

Philip Getz

MANAGING EDITOR

Felicia Herman

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Isaac Hart

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Katherine Messenger

DESIGNER & ILLUSTRATOR

Note on the cover: It is nearly impossible to overstate the symbolic power of Jerusalem in Jewish existence. Bamidbar Rabbah 14:12 speaks of Jerusalem as having 70 names, 70 being the Jewish tradition's numerical representation of variety. Here, the various structures of Jerusalem exhibit its many versions of aspiration rising from the ground, bound together as a bouquet, representing a people with a shared, multifaceted flowering.

SAPIR, Ideas for a Thriving Jewish Future. ISSN 2767-1712. 2026, Volume 20.

Published by Maimonides Fund.

Copyright © 2026 by Maimonides Fund. No part of this journal may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of Maimonides Fund. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

WWW.SAPIRJOURNAL.ORG

WWW.MAIMONIDESFUND.ORG

S A P I R

CONTENTS

7 *Editor's Note* | *Bret Stephens*

14 JOSHUA FOER & WILLIAM FOSTER
What Makes a Moonshot?

Community

26 RACHEL KAY
Attracting Top Talent

34 SHUKI TAYLOR
A Judaism of Doing

44 MIJAL BITTON
The Future Is Sephardic

56 ADAM TEITELBAUM
Boyz II Mensches

Education

68 DARA HORN
How to Teach the Jewish Story

78 BRET STEPHENS
Israel Studies Can Redeem Academia

90 ADAM LOUIS-KLEIN
Defeating Antizionism

- 98 MOSHE BEHAR & AVITAL BEN SHLOMO
An Education System Worthy of the Jewish State

Israel

- 108 EVE BARLOW
Queers for Zion
- 118 YONATAN ADIRI & SHACHAR LOTAN
The Silicon Dome
- 128 YEDIDIA STERN
An Israeli Constitution
- 136 YAROM ARIAV
Israeli Brain Gain

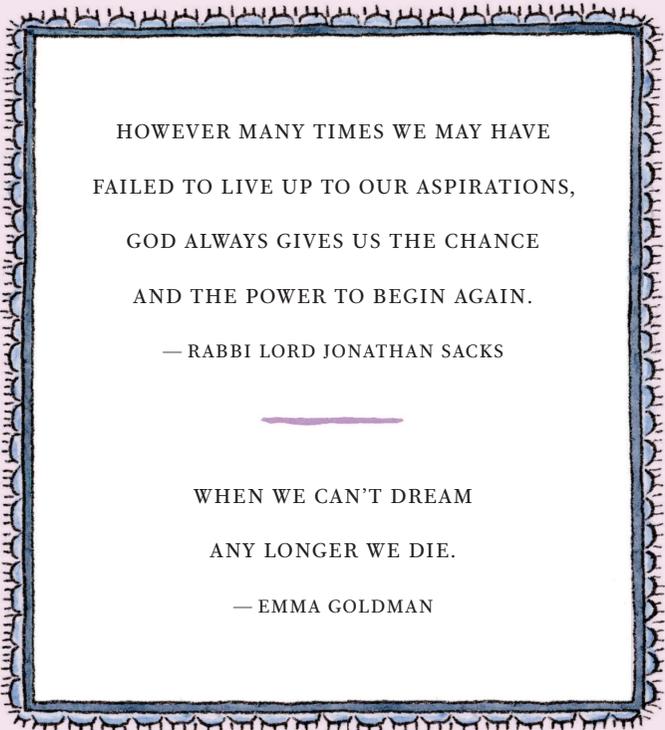
Departures

- 150 JEREMY DAUBER
Jewish Masterpiece: The Foundation Trilogy
- 156 *Letters*



Host your own SAPIR Salon!

Find out more at www.sapirjournal.org/salons.



HOWEVER MANY TIMES WE MAY HAVE
FAILED TO LIVE UP TO OUR ASPIRATIONS,
GOD ALWAYS GIVES US THE CHANCE
AND THE POWER TO BEGIN AGAIN.

— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

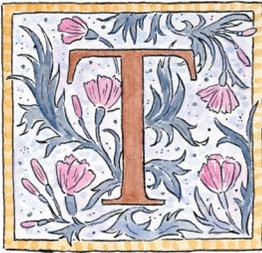
WHEN WE CAN'T DREAM
ANY LONGER WE DIE.

— EMMA GOLDMAN

BRET STEPHENS

Editor's Note

'Extreme ownership' for Jews



HIS is SAPIR'S 20th volume (or 21st, if you include our War in Israel special edition), marking five years of offering ideas for a thriving Jewish future. It's the first time we have returned to a previously covered theme. To write about Jewish aspiration, as we did in the early months of 2022, long before October 7, meant dreaming big: winning the war of ideas for Israel; making Zionism sexy again; fostering Muslim–Jewish and black–Jewish reconciliation; promoting universal Jewish literacy.

Jewish aspiration after October 7 is a different story. Paradoxically, it requires more realism and more ambition.

Jews in 2026 are a sobered people. Sobered by Hamas's savagery — and by the worldwide glee the savagery elicited. Sobered by the suffering of the hostages — and by the defacement of posters bearing their images in one American city after another. Sobered by the rape of Israeli women — and by the so-called feminists who downplayed it and the progressives who denied it. Sobered

by the campus Maoists — and by the moral collapse of university leaders in the face of their bullying and bad faith. Sobered by the speed with which Israel was accused of genocide — and by the readiness of supposedly serious people to endorse a preposterous charge. Sobered by “Jew hunts” in Amsterdam — and by the slap on the wrist that Dutch authorities meted out to the perpetrators. Sobered by Iranian ballistic missiles slamming into Israeli hospitals and apartment blocks — and by human rights organizations saying nothing about these undoubted war crimes. Sobered by the election of Zohran Mamdani — and by the knowledge that an estimated one-third of Jewish voters chose to install as New York’s mayor a man who would delete the Jewish state and arrest its leaders. Sobered by Tucker Carlson and Nick Fuentes and Candace Owens — and by the realization that the conservative movement in America no longer excommunicates the antisemites in its midst.

The point of sobriety isn’t despair. It’s clarity. And clarity is the best basis for progress.



What should we be clear about in 2026? Another paradox: Jews are more vulnerable than we’ve been since the 1940s. We’re also much stronger. Figuring out how to harness the first reality to the second ought to be our chief aspiration — the one from which other aspirations follow.

Consider a trio of stories out of Israel. In July, Slovenia announced an arms embargo on Israel. Yet, as *Haaretz* later reported, the Balkan state continued to purchase millions of dollars in arms from Israel through a “bypass route.” In November, the IDF hosted some 130 foreign military officers for a weeklong seminar about the lessons learned from two years of war. Among the participating nations, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, were Canada, Britain, and Germany — all countries that had pledged full or partial military embargoes on Israel.

Ingratiation is an ask. Respect is a demand. Ingratiation seeks acceptance. Respect insists on reciprocity. The aim of ingratiation is to be liked and loved. The aim of respect is to be admired, feared, or simply left alone.

Then, in December, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on an IDF-sponsored military-technology conference in Tel Aviv, which included Canada and the U.K. along with other supposed boycotters, such as Norway. “The turnout—much larger than the previous year, according to the organizers—reinforced how Israeli military technology retains its allure regardless of the country’s diplomatic isolation over Gaza,” the *Journal* noted, adding that in 2024, Israelis exported nearly \$15 billion worth of arms, mostly to Europe.

What do these stories show? On their face, they’re a tale of Israeli strength. They underscore the indispensability of Israeli know-how and can-do, particularly to countries suddenly confronted with real threats to their security. And they highlight the hypocrisy of foreign governments whose anti-Israel posturing masks their abiding need for what the Jewish state has to offer.

But they also illustrate the reluctance of Israeli diplomats and military leaders to take advantage of the hard power they have for the sake of the soft power they don’t. Would it really hurt Israel’s bottom line so much if every country that announced any kind of boycott of Israel got boycotted in return? Would it have been such a loss if the Canadian or Norwegian officials who attended the Tel Aviv conference had been told instead that they weren’t welcome as long as their governments’ anti-Israel policies remained in effect?

The problems we have, the challenges we face, are ultimately ours alone to solve. Taking possession of those problems and challenges, adopting a posture of complete personal and communal agency, is the only solid route to survival and success.

Now turn to the United States. Though events since October 7 have underscored the degree to which elite universities are hostile to the well-being of Jewish students, this was hardly a secret to anyone who had been paying attention in previous decades. The documentary film *Columbia Unbecoming*, with its focus on the university's Middle East studies department, was made in 2004. In December 2022, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that “more than 1,000 Jewish students from 550 colleges and universities mostly in the U.S. and Canada have shared 2,208 experiences with bias over the past 2½ years.”

Yet, year after year, wealthy Jewish donors lavished these campuses with new buildings, centers, programs, scholarships, and endowed chairs. They, too, had hard power in the form of financial leverage. But, with rare exceptions, they failed to use that power by demanding changes to the academic and social cultures of the universities they supported.

Then came October 7, and many of those same donors finally revolted. They canceled or withheld tens of millions of dollars' worth of planned gifts. Jewish trustees who previously had taken a different approach when it came to campus ideology started demanding action. University administrators rediscovered, if not their principles,

then their instincts for professional self-preservation in the face of alumni outrage, media scrutiny, and congressional hearings. The Trump administration may have gone too far in wielding antisemitism as a political cudgel. But it did, in fact, extract meaningful concessions from schools, including Columbia and Northwestern, to put a stop to their endless indulgence of antisemites.

It's probably too soon to call this a success story. But it's an example of what Jews can do when they abandon what I've elsewhere called an "ingratiation strategy" in favor of a respect strategy. What's the difference? Ingratiation is an ask. Respect is a demand. Ingratiation seeks acceptance. Respect insists on reciprocity. The aim of ingratiation is to be liked and loved. The aim of respect is to be admired, feared, or simply left alone.

Ingratiation may be a normal reflex of any diasporic community trying to get along with its host society. In many ways and for many decades, it served American Jews well. Surveys used to show that a broad majority of Americans liked and admired and sympathized with us. We were, in the words of our most famous convert, Sammy Davis Jr., a "swinging bunch of people," as John Podhoretz reminded us in a 2023 SAPIR essay.

But ingratiation is a strategy that works only once. Nobody recovers from no longer being liked by trying that much harder to be liked: not in middle school, not in the Middle East, and not in Middle America. At some point in the past few years, the long era of good feelings between Jews and the rest of America began to cool. Now America is learning that it can be just as cool to be against the Jews: because we are Zionists or Zionist-adjacent; because we are white or "white passing"; because we are privileged or haven't checked our privilege. There's always a pretext.



The answer to no longer being liked is to no longer want to be liked. It's to refuse to hanker for the approval of others; to be indifferent

to their hatred and their love; to refuse, above all, their pity. It's to demonstrate a willingness to use one's skills, assets, and power in the service of one's own interests. If that feels as though it runs counter to the more progressive versions of Jewish ethics, it's worth recalling the order of Rabbi Hillel's dictum: Self-respect ("If I am not for myself...") is the basis of respect ("who will be for me?"), which, in turn, is the precondition for kindness ("If I am only for myself, what am I?").

The point is: It doesn't work the other way around.

Hillel also asks: "If not now, when?" The foremost need in Jewish life today is not about achieving this or that political or material goal, desirable as any number of them might be. It is about a change of consciousness, a psychological and spiritual shift in the mindset of the Jewish people. We are not, nor must we ever again become, a nation of victims. We need to stop pleading for the world's sympathy, however much we might be entitled to it. We need to get out of the habit of feeling helplessly outraged and into the practice of purposeful self-preservation.

That means that it is on us to assure our safety, from Brooklyn to Be'eri to Bondi Beach. It is on us to change the media landscape if we don't like the way the stories important to us are being covered. It is on us to invest in the schools and universities that suit our needs—a commitment to genuine merit above all—and divest from the ones that don't, however illustrious their names might be. It is on us to put a stop to arms embargoes and other boycott efforts by making our adversaries pay a price for their posturing. It is on us to create a future generation of knowledgeable, committed, and proud Jews, primarily through new and creative investments in Jewish day schools and a talented rabbinate.

To adopt the title of a popular book written by two former Navy SEALs about what makes their military units effective, Jews in Israel and the Diaspora need a mindset of "Extreme Ownership." The problems we have, the challenges we face, are ultimately ours alone to solve. Taking possession of those problems and challenges,

adopting a posture of complete personal and communal agency, is the only solid route to survival and success. If that sounds exaggerated and implausible, consider what happens when we entrust our fate to the probity or kindness of strangers.

The essays in this issue offer a set of distinct and original proposals for some of what should and can be done. But they hardly exhaust the topic. If there is one thing to which every Jew has a birthright, it's the aspiration to remake our world. *

December 18, 2025

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.





What Makes a Moonshot?

*A conversation with Joshua Foer
and William Foster*



APIR INSTITUTE *Director Chanan Weissman sat down with author and entrepreneur Joshua Foer and philanthropic adviser William Foster for a conversation on moonshots in Jewish philanthropy. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

CHANAN WEISSMAN: Four years ago, SAPIR Publisher Mark Charendoff wrote an essay for SAPIR’s original issue on aspiration that referenced President Kennedy’s famous “We choose to go to the moon” speech and asked, “What is a Jewish moonshot?” How would you have answered that question?

JOSHUA FOER: Jewish moonshots are high-risk bets on building something that the Jewish world lacks but badly needs, in situations where there's a real chance of not just underperformance but total failure. They are large-scale, or at least have a path to scalability. They're non-incremental, and they have a long time horizon to effectuate change. And they can become infrastructure for Jewish life writ large. Birthright was a moonshot. Sefaria, the digital library of Jewish texts, was a moonshot. But we have too few in the Jewish world these days.

WILLIAM FOSTER: In the 1960s, more than 1 percent of America's entire GDP was put into space exploration by NASA — an enormous figure. So while I don't think that specific level of investment is the goal, philanthropy in general and also Jewish philanthropy haven't often moved with that spirit of audacity. We'd be well served to have half a dozen to a dozen really big and bold bets; Birthright and Sefaria are fantastic examples. The original collaborative behind Birthright raised tens of millions of dollars from a small group of donors — a huge sum of money. Today, there are a number of \$100 million bets to be made that would be bold and dramatic and really important to our cause. But let's not get ourselves too wound up on them being the equivalent of landing on the moon.

FOER: I agree with a lot of what William just said. One of the key points is the need for a portfolio-level sense of risk. In our funding ecosystem, risk is often evaluated on a grant-by-grant basis. And nobody wants to have a grant that fails. Actually, what our system needs is a whole lot of things that fail because that'll tell us that we've taken the kinds of bold bets we need in order to be innovative, keep up with the times, and change in the way that we need to change.

WEISSMAN: Fostering change, whether in the Jewish world or beyond, is incredibly challenging. It's costly, it's time-consuming. I

remember once talking to someone in venture capital who aspired to be more philanthropic but was turned off by the more nebulous and lengthy process of determining a return on investment. In his eyes, that made philanthropy appear like a riskier use of capital. How do you advise philanthropists on the value of making big bets despite these obvious hurdles?

FOER: It's true that there's no financial return in philanthropy. But if your takeaway from that is to ask, "Why take big risks?," I think the answer is that the alternative is far worse. The risk of doing too little is much greater than the risk of doing too much. And it's not like we're losing Jews to reckless innovation. I see us losing them to irrelevance and to Jewish infrastructure that's simply not meeting them where they are. The comfortable path of funding safe and incremental work might feel prudent, but it's actually just slow-motion abdication.

FOSTER: I think we are at the greatest period of innovation in Jewish civil society that I've seen in my lifetime. That's a product of how rapidly the context in which we're living is changing and the energy of leaders responding. Consider Josh creating Lehrhaus, a tavern and house of learning opened in Boston in 2023, or the growing pushback on anti-Zionist and antisemitic ideologies in higher education, or a set of leaders with new bridge-building ideas, or even, some others trying to address the Jewish day-school-affordability problem. There is a new tempo of innovative thinking going on, forced by external circumstances.

Yet every problem I just mentioned is generally more complicated than the problems in the commercial market. Philanthropists are correct in their diagnosis that social change takes a long time and that the results are less certain and less measurable. But you can increase the odds of success in two ways. The first is to put meaningful amounts of unrestricted, trust-based capital to work behind great leaders. The second is to help those leaders sharpen their

What our system needs is a whole lot of things that fail because that'll tell us that we've taken the kinds of bold bets we need in order to be innovative, keep up with the times, and change in the way that we need to change.

ideas. There are not a whole lot of \$100 million ideas waiting in the drawer, ready to be pulled out for donors. But there are ideas that could get there with a little bit of help, a little bit of structure, and a little bit of thinking.

WEISSMAN: I've heard from a lot of ambitious donors who want to see significant change on something like combating antisemitism, but feel hampered by the lack of compelling opportunities. Are there truly an insufficient number of grant-ready opportunities, or do funders not always know where to look?

FOER: I do think we have a systemic problem in deal flow. The reason we have so few ambitious new ventures is that the system is stacked against Jewish entrepreneurs in almost every way. Right now the big bets that William is describing are most likely to originate either inside foundations, with philanthropists themselves, or within large existing institutions that already have a funding base attached to them. But that's not necessarily where the transformational ideas and entrepreneurial talent are likely to reside.

Where I see a big gap is in connecting entrepreneurial talent to capital. When I say that the system is stacked against new ventures, this is what I mean: Founders have to spend half their

I'd like to see us giving founders some real runway: three-year grants, with milestones. Not annual renewals, not endless reporting. Just: 'Here's what we're betting on, here's how we'll know if it's working, and here's the capital to get there. If it's working: You continue. If not, you wind down with dignity.' That's how moonshots should work.

time fundraising, which is an incredible tax on execution. Most funders make one-year grants and are unwilling to take on more than 20 percent of a budget, which means that any new venture is always going to be staring down a six-month cliff. That's not conducive to big, system-level thinking and change. It means our funding ecosystem selects for small, self-contained projects, not ambitious ventures. We're also selecting for the wrong kind of founders: We end up with founders who are good at fundraising, rather than founders who are good at building. I'd like to see us giving founders some real runway: three-year grants, with milestones. Not annual renewals, not endless reporting. Just: "Here's what we're betting on, here's how we'll know if it's working, and here's the capital to get there. If it's working: You continue. If not, you wind down with dignity." That's how moonshots should work.

Funders tend to want quantitative metrics, which makes sense of mature organizations. But at that early stage, what you're actually looking for are the sorts of things that venture investors look for: Is there a new insight here that others have missed? Is

there exciting talent involved? Are we seeing traction? How big could this be if it works? What would have to be true for this to succeed? Those are qualitative judgments, and they require a different kind of analysis than evaluating measurable outcomes. They require pattern recognition. A program officer who has spent a career doing grant evaluation might not be the best equipped professional to do venture evaluation.

WEISSMAN: William, do you think what Josh is describing is unique to Jewish philanthropy, or is it a challenge that the entire philanthropic ecosystem has to contend with? And is the venture capital model actually replicable in philanthropy, or are those simply two very different ways of funding two very different types of things?

FOSTER: I don't think there's anything about these dynamics that is unique to the Jewish world, but the world of Jewish donors and nonprofit leaders can be a bit insular. As a result, it doesn't always bring in knowledge from the outside that could help with some of these challenges.

There are certain mindset changes that open the door to possibility on both the donor and doer sides of the equation. For doers—the nonprofit leaders who are innovating—there's often more focus on how bad the problem is than on the clarity and logic of the solution being proposed. We've done some quantitative analysis at Bridgespan, and typically about 80 percent of a nonprofit pitch is spent describing the problem rather than the solution. Sadly, problems are common, and most of them compelling. It's the solution side of the equation where leaders can really stand out.

And on the donor side, it's the willingness to lean into risk and the willingness to act now. Philanthropy ought to be the risk capital of society. There's nothing wrong with being focused on metrics and wanting numbers. But the question is, how much effort do the doers have to expend for the size of any given grant?

WEISSMAN: We started this conversation with references to successful Jewish moonshots and could name other successful ventures developed over the past 20 years...

FOSTER: ... Josh has a whole bunch himself.

WEISSMAN: He's like the Thomas Edison of Jewish entrepreneurship.

FOER: You have to keep that line in there for my mother.

WEISSMAN: Deal. But I want to dig a bit deeper into the implications of failure, because you referenced it earlier, Josh. What can we learn from big ideas that failed to gain traction, that weren't shovel-ready?

FOER: Oh, the biggest learning is that that's okay. We need to normalize failure, particularly in the Jewish world. A failed venture should not be anything shameful. It should not be a stain on the founder or on the funders. We're way too risk-averse in our corner of the universe, and we should aspire to have portfolios where there are failures. If we're not failing, we're not swinging hard enough.

Years ago, before SAPIR existed, Maimonides Fund organized a program at NYU that invited Jewish leaders to write essays proposing new ideas for Jewish life. I was circling around an idea about how we might try to center text and learning for less literate Jews, but I ended up dropping out of the program because I just couldn't figure out a solution that felt worth pursuing. Yet the thinking that happened in that program ultimately evolved into Lehrhaus.

I'm sure my contribution must have been regarded as a failure at the time. But sometimes the timing is just not right. Ideas need to incubate. I'd love to see the Jewish world create something like the "entrepreneur in residence" positions that are common in the universe of venture capital.

FOSTER: I would add that most ideas that are really ambitious

We need to normalize failure, particularly in the Jewish world. A failed venture should not be anything shameful.

don't achieve their goals. But in the Jewish and broader nonprofit world, most programs that fail to achieve their goals still accomplish something.

It's not like if you're a venture investor, where you can put money into a specific start-up and lose the entire sum, right? In the nonprofit world, if something doesn't meet some really ambitious goal, that doesn't make it a complete failure. In the process, you've likely created a real good that's benefitted a number of people. And so, it's not like your money went to zero.

FOER: If, just at the last minute, the Soviets had beaten us to the moon, we'd have deemed the space program a failure. But we still would have walked away with an awful lot of useful knowledge and experience from it.

FOSTER: We've seen that the greatest success stories that change American society, change American policy, and change American culture almost always have a philanthropist putting down big bets somewhere in the background. Think about gay marriage, the civil rights movement, the scale of our higher education institutions, our clean water, even the yellow lines in the middle of roads that keep traffic flowing in the correct directions! And I don't think there's anything different about the Jewish world.

If we want big changes in our civic infrastructure, in our culture, in our relationship to the rest of American society, we need some big-betting philanthropists.

When we look at the big bets from American philanthropy over time — including those that drove the biggest changes — it is more of a bottom-up, less coordinated dynamic. Small groups of donors and doers found one another and did something amazing, but it didn't all come out of one inspiring lunch. Bridgespan actually did a study of every \$10 million gift given by American philanthropists over a 14-year period to any cause outside of universities and medical research. What we found is that the gift of \$10 million or more was generally the fourth or fifth gift from that donor to that institution, and that it was 10 times larger than the most recent prior gift. That's not an incremental step up; it's an order-of-magnitude step up. And it happened only when donors and doers who trusted each other found ways to dream bigger on how to address problems. The problems didn't change, but the ideas of how to address them did.

Donors should ask: What are the ideas that are worthy of becoming a top-five idea in your portfolio with a 10x increase in your investment level? That's what donors and doers should be looking to create together.

WEISSMAN: It's often the case that moments of rupture serve as unanticipated invitations to imagine a radically different future. I think the pandemic was like that, as were the attacks of October 7 and their aftermath here in the United States. As you look over the horizon in American Jewish life, what major changes do you see as a result of these events? What should we be focusing on?

FOER: I see a shift toward more local and relational community building. You build community face-to-face in small groups in specific places, which is one of the big ideas behind Lehrhaus and the need for new kinds of gathering spaces. At a time when people are losing faith in existing institutions, we have incredible opportunities to create new institutions to win them over.

I think there is an opportunity for us as a community to say,

maybe what we need is a moonshot for moonshots—a systemic effort to build the infrastructure that would be needed to find and develop and fund the next generation of Jewish ventures. I believe we need a dedicated funding vehicle with a moonshot mandate: serious capital, a long time horizon, a high tolerance for failure, and a willingness to back ideas that don't fit into existing categories. Give it a decade, and accept that many bets will fail. That's how we're going to find a few transformational wins that can change the landscape. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



PART ONE

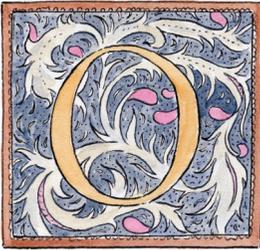
COMMUNITY



RACHEL KAY

Attracting Top Talent

*How Jewish organizations can compete
with America's leading employers*



VER the course of my long career in human resources, I have seen organizations amplify their impact by nurturing and investing in top-tier talent. Jewish communal organizations are already fueled by mission-driven professionals whose commitment strengthens our communities every day. The current environment—with rising unemployment among college graduates, extensive reductions in the public-sector workforce, and a growing interest in supporting Jewish institutions—offers a rare recruiting opportunity to expand that talent pool further.

What does the untapped reservoir of talent want? While the picture has been evolving in recent years, the factors are remarkably consistent throughout the labor force. It is perhaps a given that

employees (and, in particular, early-career employees) value competitive base salary and benefits. This factor has been increasing in importance in the past five years as greater economic uncertainty in the United States and highly visible layoffs have underlined the need for a personal safety net. The desire for flexible work and autonomy in working conditions has also been rising, as the pandemic reset expectations on what work looks like and technology shifts made distributed working models more feasible. Meaning and purpose continue to be an important driver for many employees.

But what truly exceptional early-career talent wants most of all is *option value*. What I mean is the sense that an individual, in choosing a role or organization, is *opening* doors rather than closing them. An organization can create option value in a number of ways, and the most attractive organizations do all of these things.

Every year, the employer branding firm Universum conducts a comprehensive study of college and graduate students to identify the top employers for current students. Most of the organizations that top Universum's list pay competitively. But pay is not how they differentiate themselves, and some of the most prestigious organizations and firms pride themselves on paying less than competitors while offering a stronger total value proposition. JPMorgan Chase's employer brand tagline focuses on career growth. Consulting firm McKinsey promises: "Whether you're with us for two years or 20, the skills you build will make you a leader ahead of your peers and change the trajectory of your career." These companies are banking on what Gallup has found resonates with Gen Z: "Gen Z employees, who are launching their careers, rate 'accelerates my professional development or career development' as particularly important."

In addition to a focus on building skills, companies create option value for employees by allowing opportunities for internal mobility and role change. "Career fluidity is a defining feature of the modern

workforce,” according to the Deloitte Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey. “Their job hopping isn’t driven by a lack of loyalty. Many Gen Zs and millennials see it as a strategy to...learn and acquire new skills.” By providing opportunities for internal mobility—and providing more of a career lattice than a career ladder—companies can more easily attract and retain high-performing talent.

Finally, and perhaps counterintuitively, some of the most prestigious organizations attract talent by talking about what happens after people *leave* their organization. More and more organizations are starting alumni networks and prominently featuring them in their employment communications. When I led undergraduate recruiting for an international consulting firm, one of the marketing investments I made was to film a video of alumni speaking about their time at the firm and how that experience positioned them for further success. The message that this was a place to *start* a career landed well with the campus audience. Speaking about alumni opportunities has two unexpected effects: It raises the caliber of the incoming team by widening the aperture of who might be interested, and many people who expect to leave after a couple of years find themselves drawn to the work and end up staying far longer than intended.



Some of our Jewish communal organizations may be well suited to serve as launchpads in the way that consulting, financial, or law firms are—identifying, recruiting, and developing early-career colleagues with the explicit understanding, or even aspiration, that many will depart and build careers at other organizations. So the question becomes: How can small Jewish nonprofits make option value a substantial part of their recruitment strategy to the point that they can compete with major corporate employers?

I believe that this is possible if Jewish communal organizations adopt an approach of radical collaboration. Rather than jockeying

By providing opportunities for internal mobility — and providing more of a career lattice than a career ladder — companies can more easily attract and retain high-performing talent.

for talent and resources, purposefully aligning in regional or national talent consortia will enable our communities to act like larger, better-funded organizations.

How? A group of organizations with overlapping talent needs would align on a set of guiding principles, practices, and investments. They would begin to act as a single large organization in terms of talent recruitment, talent planning, and career mobility (meaning the formal ability to move between organizations after an agreed-upon period of time in a given role). For entry-level roles, this could even be formalized as a rotational structure, perhaps with employees devoting one day per week to work for a different member organization of the consortium, allowing them to broaden their network, develop their skills, and pursue their additional passions. Naturally, a sense of competition would exist among the organizations regarding where a given employee ultimately chooses to pursue a career. But if executed thoughtfully, what would emerge from this competition would be an effective ecosystem where the talented individual and the organizations could find the most appropriate fit. The overall philosophy would have to view a top-talent win for one organization as a win for the consortium, with organizations subordinating their specific interest in favor of the communal one.

In recruitment, there is much to be gained by sharing time and resources. Recruitment processes follow a typical marketing

funnel. Organizations have to build candidate awareness, consideration, application, and offer acceptance. Going to “market” as a consortium—representing a broad array of organizations and opportunities—would allow split responsibility for career fairs, campus Hillel visits, and outreach; with organizations agreeing to represent the entire consortium rather than just their niche. This may be most effective along functional lines (e.g., marketing, programming, finance). Bringing a list of open roles from across the consortium and talking about a wide set of opportunities increase the chance that a prospective candidate would find something attractive. Once applicants are being considered by organizations, runners-up for roles who are well qualified but perhaps not the perfect fit could be shared among the partner organizations, even for roles that the applicant had been unaware of.

The higher education community has already been harnessing the power of collective recruitment for some time. The Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC), founded in 2000 to improve recruitment practices and workplace culture, has expanded from a regional consortium in the Bay Area to having multiple consortia across the country. HERC facilitates a recruitment marketplace and talent platform for a wide range of independent colleges and universities, offering a shared job board, webinars for job seekers, virtual career fairs, and research reports. Regional HERC directors help job seekers and member institutions maximize the association by fostering collaboration in accordance with its collective mission.

Applying this to the Jewish communal marketplace, a Jewish talent consortium could hold joint talent reviews where they discuss their high-potential talent and the types of challenges those individuals seek. Leaders from each organization could contribute ideas for the next roles for those individuals, side projects that could be interesting (a version of Google’s “20% time” approach, by which Larry Page and Sergey Brin encouraged employees to spend a fifth of their time on creative but risky projects), or development programs that could build their skills. By treating high-potential

talent as a shared resource rather than a proprietary one, the consortium would increase the chance that the talent would stay within the community.

The next question for a Jewish talent consortium would be this: After attracting the right talent to Jewish communal work and mapping out enticing career paths, what additional benefits could we deploy to encourage them to stay?

There are various retention tools in the HR toolbox. Like other tools, they often work better when they are used collectively. If an employee at a member organization is looking to make a career move, bonuses and guaranteed pay raises could be standardized for those who stay within the consortium. Such benefits could encourage top talent to stay within the Jewish communal workforce rather than leave for the corporate or public sector.

In order to be even more attractive, a consortium could consider adding some of the tangible benefits of tenure in corporate and government work. For instance, with tenure comes increased retirement-fund contributions or no-interest home loans, among other features. Consortium organizations could also allow paid-time-off balances to transfer, align benefits packages, and add retention bonuses for years of service to the consortium. A very aggressive consortium could consider offering support for student-loan repayment or introducing pension plans where they do not already exist—something that has fallen out of favor in corporate America but still draws workers from Jewish nonprofits to the public sector every year.



Over the past decade, the Jewish community has seen notable innovations in collaboration and career development. The creation of Leading Edge in 2016, along with its recent merger with JPro, catalyzed a field-wide investment in leadership development and professional excellence. In the 2010s, Hillel, BBYO,

If the Jewish community wants to attract the best of the talent still out there, it needs to start thinking like America's top employers do and offer the same kind of value.

and Moishe House formed the Talent Alliance to promote internal mobility across organizations. While the initiative ultimately disbanded because of execution challenges, its successes demonstrated meaningful potential and helped establish foundational models for deeper collaboration.

At the same time, organizations have strengthened early-career talent pipelines, including through Hillel's Springboard Fellowship, which—with support from leading foundations—places recent college graduates into first professional roles across the Hillel network, and the Orthodox Union's Emerging Leaders Fellowship, which supports high-potential college-age volunteers through internships and leadership development. More recently, the launch of a Jewish Talent Platform initiative involving major foundations and national organizations such as BBYO, Hillel, the Foundation for Jewish Camp, JFNA, and Leading Edge signals a next phase of cooperation, as these partners plan to share insights and data to map pipelines of high-potential early-career leaders and recruit them into compelling entry-level roles. Efforts to improve retention have also emerged, including the Jewish Community Professional Tuition Grant program supported by the Atlanta Federation and the Zalik Foundation, which provides substantial tuition reimbursements to Jewish professionals seeking to send their children to Jewish day schools.

These initiatives are important and inspiring. Yet we can be even more ambitious in our collaboration in order to compete

with the most attractive employers. Employees who are passionate about the Jewish communal mission are already drawn to Jewish organizations. But if the Jewish community wants to attract the best of the talent still out there, it needs to start thinking like America's top employers do and offer the same kind of value. In the Jewish community, one way to do that is to deliver together the option value and opportunity that Jewish organizations struggle to deliver individually.

This work is not easy even in the private sector, as I know all too well. The best talent is eager, anxious, and driven, requiring constant challenge and growth. But I've seen that the results are worth the investment; the power of a strong team cannot be underestimated. If the Jewish community cooperates to mirror the advantages offered by the most prestigious employers in the world, then we will create not just workplaces but launching pads for the next generation of leaders devoted to strengthening Jewish life. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



SHUKI TAYLOR

A Judaism of Doing

*Religious practice is not supposed
to be convenient*



ITTING at my computer right now, I am only a couple of clicks away from every Jewish text I could ever need. Torah, Talmud, commentaries, modern scholarship—it's all there, free and instantly searchable. This technological innovation represents an extraordinary democratization of access to the Jewish canon, something that all Jews should celebrate. Yet the abundance prompts an unsettling question: When everything is immediately accessible, do we actually engage more deeply? Abundance and engagement are not the same thing; the proliferation of content does not necessarily produce the cultivation of connection.

The shift from physical to digital alters the very nature of encounter. Acquiring a book once involved the slow ritual of entering a store, browsing shelves, handling volumes, and choosing one to bring home. The transaction was embodied; the book became part of one's physical and intellectual landscape. A digital

download replicates content but not the tactile and spatial cues that embed it in memory.

That same transformation—from culling to convenience—has been reshaping *all* aspects of Jewish life for some time now. One can now join a Torah class taught on the other side of the world and even go there to spend the eight days of Passover in a lavish, all-inclusive resort, with no pesky Passover prep. Prefab sukkot, which take no more than a few minutes to erect, can be purchased. These kinds of conveniences make Jewish life easier and less cumbersome, but they also replace acts once performed with our own hands. Where Jewish life once demanded the hammering of sukkah boards, the turning over of a kitchen for Passover, or the hum of *hevruta* study in the same room, it now often offers passive, even private, participation: watching, receiving, attending without making.



Such convenience in Jewish ritual would have been anathema to our ancestors. Historically, Judaism has resisted the separation of idea from act. The Torah presents itself not as a theoretical treatise but as a corpus of narratives and laws in which memory and practice are interwoven. This interweaving teaches Judaism as an embodied practice. The prohibitions of the Sabbath, for example, are a set of 39 actions that were said to be necessary for the building of the *mishkan* in the desert. They are prohibited on the Sabbath as a reflection of how active and effortful Judaism was during the work week. On Passover, we are told to imagine that we've literally baked matzohs and taken them with us on our flight from Egypt. And we remember our desert wanderings by building temporary dwelling places to remind us of the fragility of shelter. These embodied performances are not supplementary to belief; they are commanded as mechanisms by which belief is sustained, experienced, and transmitted.

Anthropologists of ritual note that physical participation creates “muscle memory” of meaning. The act of kneading challah,

fastening a mezuzah, or chanting Torah aloud does more than symbolize an idea—it anchors that idea in sensory experience, making it retrievable in ways that words alone cannot achieve. When we outsource these acts, we risk turning a lived tradition into an observed one, exchanging participation for consumption.

This erosion reflects two converging trends in contemporary Western life that strike at Judaism’s foundational logic. The first is the systematic outsourcing of functions once performed directly by individuals and communities — preparing food, repairing homes, caring for children, even generating ideas. The second is digital imperialism: the pervasive migration of human activity, social interaction, and knowledge production into digital domains controlled by centralized platforms. This is not merely a shift in medium; it’s a reconfiguration of how reality is experienced, mediated, and valued.

Together, these dynamics produce a perfect storm for embodied traditions. For Judaism—whose formative practices are enacted through physical, communal, and time-bound ritual—the drift toward outsourced and digitized forms of life risks severing the link between knowing and doing that has always been central to Jewish continuity.

Consider what happens when embodied practices are displaced. Even the act of charity is described in Leviticus in labor terms:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am YHWH your God. (Leviticus 19:9–10)

Leaving part of a harvest for the poor engages the hands in gathering and in holding back, the feet in walking the edges of a field. Establishing an *eruv* calls neighbors to stretch wire, tie knots, and trace the boundary together. Study in a *beit midrash*

When we outsource these acts, we risk turning
a lived tradition into an observed one,
exchanging participation for consumption.

fills the air with voices, pages turning, questions traded across a table. Practices of restraint—fasting, avoiding certain foods, setting aside specific garments—mark the body and the calendar alike.

All of these practices and more define Jewish life as one lived in sensory service. When such sense-rich practices are displaced—purchased as services, simulated on screens, or reduced to information—their formative power weakens, as does the experience of Judaism itself. The skills they cultivate—building, coordinating, chanting, hosting, restraining—atrophy. The spatial and temporal literacy they confer—marking boundaries, reading the calendar with the body—fades. The social bonds they generate—reciprocity, shared labor, mutual obligation—thin.

In place of a culture that learns by doing, communities begin to outsource not only the acts themselves but the knowledge of how they are done, eroding the capacity to transmit tradition without mediation. Institutions drift toward content provision rather than communities of practice; participation is tallied as attendance rather than enactment.

The lived experience changes fundamentally. Jewish life becomes something received rather than made. Fewer people know how to lead a song without a screen, or read a text aloud in the company of others. Fewer kitchens smell of Shabbat bread that rose there, fewer neighborhoods gather to mark the limits of their space, fewer hands prepare the rituals they later “attend.” The result is a community more dependent on institutions and

vendors, less bound to its members, less agile in sustaining itself, and less confident in its ability to carry the tradition forward.

This is the risk: A Judaism that is less inhabitable will, in time, be less inhabited.



If the core threat is the slow displacement of embodied Jewish life, then the strategy to counter the threat is clear: Reclaim a Judaism of doing. This means restoring the tradition's core operating system—the coupling of idea and act—so that Jewish life is once again generated and sustained through things that people build, make, bake, wear, mark, give, and voice together.

Reclaiming a Judaism of doing is not nostalgia for a pre-digital world, or rejection of tools that expand access. It's recognition that without action, the tradition becomes a set of ideas without material anchors. It requires a cultural, educational, and institutional commitment to measure Jewish vitality not by attendance, streaming numbers, or memberships, but by the number of people actively engaged in six core domains of practice.

Building—Whether assembling a sukkah, raising a chuppah, repairing a section of a communal *eruv*, or setting posts for a shared garden, building leaves a tangible mark on the Jewish landscape and creates shared memory among those who lifted, measured, and fastened alongside you. It cultivates problem-solving, collaboration, and spatial literacy that carry into every corner of Jewish communal life.

Making—From baking challah and matzoh, to binding the four species, planting trees, weaving a tallit, or composing a nigun, the act of making ties intention to process. The maker knows: This came together because I brought it into being. That knowledge reinforces Jewish agency and continuity with those who made before and those who will use it after.

Wearing—Donning a tallit, wrapping tefillin, pinning a Magen

David to a jacket, wearing white on Yom Kippur, or dressing in Purim costumes places belonging directly on the body. Wearing makes identity visible and claimed; helping another to do the same binds her sense of self to the collective.

Marking—Lighting Shabbat candles, affixing a mezuzah, blowing shofar, immersing in the mikvah or turning over a kitchen for Passover transforms ordinary time and space into something charged with meaning. Disciplines of restraint—fasting, avoiding certain foods at set times—also mark the calendar and body. Marking teaches that the ordinary is not neutral; it can be shaped and sanctified through deliberate action.

Giving—Delivering *mishloach manot* on Purim, bringing food to a shiva house, hosting guests for a holiday meal, volunteering at a soup kitchen, or sharing produce with neighbors are tactile, relational forms of generosity. These acts weave reciprocity into community life and cultivate humility, empathy, and trust.

Voicing—Chanting Torah, reciting the Shema, leading blessings, studying aloud in *hevruta*, singing zemirot, or answering Kaddish turns words into shared sound. Voicing builds confidence, deepens learning, and binds individuals into a chorus larger than themselves. It makes each participant a co-creator of the community's soundscape.

When these domains guide Jewish life, transformation occurs at multiple levels. Individuals gain competence—knowing how to lead, prepare, and create without waiting for an intermediary. Communities develop interdependence, building shared life on reciprocal acts rather than purchased goods and services. Memory becomes embodied, anchored in muscle, voice, and space rather than confined to books or screens. Jewish identity becomes visible and portable, expressed in objects, spaces, and skills that can be carried anywhere. The tradition itself becomes harder to outsource, harder to digitize, and harder to forget—because it lives in actions that require presence, human touch, and connection that cannot be streamed.

When such sense-rich practices are displaced—purchased as services, simulated on screens, or reduced to information—their formative power weakens, as does the experience of Judaism itself.

If we fail to act, the erosion will be gradual but decisive. Skills that once tied people to the tradition will wither. The ability to lead a service, host a holiday meal, or build a ritual space will become rare rather than common. Jewish identity will be flattened into consumable symbols, stripped of the muscle and memory that give it depth. Communities will be bound more by shared content than by shared labor, and the tradition—though still accessible—will become less inhabitable.



If this vision is to become reality, it must be translated into the daily and seasonal rhythms of Jewish life—planned for, funded, and measured. This requires a shift in how institutions imagine their role: from being providers of programs to being catalysts for participation, from curating experiences to equipping people to create them.

The following measures should be implemented by synagogues, JCCs, day schools, Hebrew schools, and any Jewish programming entities between and beyond. Further, they should become norms of communal expectation. Not all will be relevant to all, but all will be relevant to some.

Program for the Six Domains—Chart the calendar for moments

of Building, Making, Wearing, Marking, Giving, and Voicing. Over the course of a year, every community member should have the chance to enter each domain through hands-on acts—raising a sukkah wall, shaping dough for Shabbat, marking time with candles or fasts, giving in ways that involve touch and presence, and adding his voice to prayer or song.

Measure Participation, Not Just Presence—Success is not how many people sat in a room or tuned in, but how many actually did the act. A challah bake is only as alive as the number of people whose hands were in the dough; a Torah study circle is only as strong as the number of voices that read aloud.

Teach the Skills, Not Just the Symbols—Equip people to enact Jewish life without waiting for a professional. This might mean woodworking for sukkot, sewing for tallitot, voice coaching to lead blessings, or learning to plan, construct, and maintain an *eruv*. Skills are portable—they can travel with people anywhere Jewish life is lived.

Reclaim Home and Neighborhood as Jewish Space—The center of gravity should not be only in institutional buildings. Provide tools, training, and encouragement for members to bring rituals into homes and shared spaces—front-yard sukkot, kitchens prepared for Passover, neighborhood zemirot circles.

Fund and Celebrate Doing—Allocate resources to materials, tools, and training that make participation possible. Honor those who build, make, wear, mark, give, and voice—so that the story of the community is told through the actions people take together, not just the events they attend.



The danger facing Judaism today is not that Jewish life will vanish from view—it will remain infinitely searchable, streamable, and purchasable. The danger is that it will pass before our eyes without passing through our hands. The measure of a living tradition

is not its digital footprint, but the imprint it leaves on bodies, rooms, and neighborhoods.

A Judaism of doing does not ask every person to master every practice. It asks each person to inhabit some of them deeply and to share with others that process of inhabiting. It asks communities to be places where skills are learned, acts are repeated, and memory is lodged in muscle and sound. And it insists that access alone is not the same as ownership—that the tradition belongs most fully to those who take part in building, making, wearing, marking, giving, and voicing it into being.

The future will not be secured by more content or more convenience. It will be secured by the stubborn, joyful work of participation—by acts that take time, space, and cooperation. For every ritual observed from a distance, there must be one enacted directly. For every experience consumed passively, there must be one brought into being by the people themselves.

If we can meet this moment with that resolve, the next generation will inherit not only the knowledge of what Judaism is, but the will—and the ability—to live it, together, in real time and shared space. Technology can extend the reach of Jewish life, but it cannot substitute for the doing. The charge is urgent: In an age when so much of life is outsourced to specialists or flattened onto screens, the antidote is to put the work—and the joy—back into our own hands.

Speaking of handiwork, in her beautiful short film *How to Make Challah*, filmmaker Sarah Rosen captures her aunt Jane baking challah for the first time, at the age of 81. The film is interspersed with cuts of a film Jane took 47 years prior, of her own grandmother Ida baking the same recipe, which she had learned from her mother, Sarah's great-great-grandmother. Ida laments, in 1975, "The women of today, they want everything readymade. They don't want to bother for nothing. They wouldn't bother with baking anything. They think you're crazy!" But Sarah, the great-granddaughter, bakes this recipe regularly, and we watch

as she and her aunt Jane bond, joyfully and effortlessly, growing closer through the collaboration than even they were before. The film is itself an act of transmission, exhibiting a practice that ties them to their foremothers and to each other. The message is so poignant that you can almost miss the part about the plant by the window that was once owned by Ida, and that's been watered by multiple members of the generations since. "It's been cut back many, many times," says Jane, "and many people have pieces of it." It's in their DNA. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



MIJAL BITTON

The Future Is Sephardic

Choosing continuity over social acceptance



AMERICAN JEWS have lately been sensing the end of what has been dubbed our “Golden Age” or “An American Jewish Century.” Looking back longingly at the past hundred years, we question whether the next century will be as kind to us and our children as the last one was.

It’s a reasonable question, but as I’ve noticed, it tends to be asked more often by American Ashkenazi Jews than by those whose families came from Muslim lands across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), widely referred to in America as Sephardim. There is a profound difference between how American Ashkenazim from the lands of the cross and American Sephardim from the lands of the crescent are experiencing this moment, and in that difference lie competing visions of the American dream, rooted in each community’s pre-American history.

When more than 2 million Ashkenazi Jews came to the United States from Europe and Russia between 1880 and 1924, they brought with them the unfulfilled dreams of the Old World — namely, emanci-

pation and enlightenment. These overlapping events—the granting of civic rights to Jews and the modernization of Jewish thought—had been fundamental ruptures in Jewish life. They introduced the possibility of social and political equality in the state on the one hand, and the weakening of religious communal authority on the other. The foundational value of both ruptures was freedom. Jews, as individuals, were now more free—from the religious strictures of the shtetl and to participate in the political, intellectual, and social life outside it—than they had ever been. And when that freedom failed to fulfill its liberatory promise in Poland, Lithuania, Germany, and the rest of the European countries, they and their descendants continued to pursue that dream in America.

The unprecedented achievements of the American Jewish century, such as the Jewish role in American drama and literature, the entry of Jews into America's prestigious academic and professional class, and the robust participation of Jews in the American political system, were therefore fueled by this conception of Jewish flourishing that had been forged in Europe and sharpened by its disappointments. The vision was to achieve social acceptance and integration. The architecture of the American Jewish establishment was set up in accordance with this vision. Wildly successful in its time, it produced one of the most creative, influential, and integrated Jewish Diaspora civilizations in history. This was the liberal Ashkenazi American dream, the one that defined the apex of the American Jewish "Golden Age."

But Jews from the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa came with a very different political, intellectual, and social heritage, and their aspirations in America were the product of that different history. Some came in the early 20th century from the declining Ottoman Empire. Many arrived after 1948, as Arab nationalist regimes began treating Jews as a fifth column. Having historically been relegated to second-class status as dhimmis, a tolerated religious minority along with Christians and others, they never experienced the possibility of emancipation or the dramatic weakening of religious communal authority; nor were they the singular

religious “other” as the Jews of Christendom had been. Although there had long been a degree of cultural and intellectual exchange and even tolerance, the prospect of revolutionary integration had never presented itself. So more stability than rupture. For them, the rupture was the migration itself and all that caused it. What made America golden was not that Jewish life could be transformed but that it could be preserved. What they craved above all wasn’t freedom or social acceptance. It was stability and continuity, the opportunity to continue the life that they had led for generations. As I see it, this impulse toward preservation rather than transformation became the foundation of their life in America, leading to their own version of the American dream.

I’ve spent much of my life translating between these different American Jewish worlds. Over time, this left me feeling both deeply at home in each of them and yet always slightly out of place. Moving between my Syrian-Moroccan-Spanish Sephardic home, the Persian and Syrian communities that shaped me, and the liberal Ashkenazi spaces I later inhabited as a student and professional, I began to realize that the differences making me dizzy were not merely cosmetic. It was not only about saying “Shabbat Shalom” versus “Good Shabbes,” or serving *cholent* instead of *khoresh*. Something deeper was at play. I often felt a witness to two competing American Jewish dreams, one that emphasized the need to be accepted and integrated into American culture, and the other that emphasized the preservation of distinct peoplehood.

This is not to say that peoplehood is not an inherent element of Ashkenazi Judaism. Ashkenazi Jews in the US maintained connections to their communities through *landsmanshaftn*, developed mutual aid societies, built global organizations such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to support Jews on the other side of the world, and supported the establishment, safety, and flourishing of the State of Israel. But the defining achievement of the past American Jewish century, constructed by the Ashkenazi forebears of the American Jewish present, was that it allowed space for both

dreams: social acceptance in America while maintaining strong communal ties with the global Jewish family. Increasingly today, there is room for only one. American Jews are now told they can be spared the boycotts and the vitriol, which is to say, accepted, as long as they divest themselves of Israel and Zionism. The segments of American society and culture that once had no problem with Jewish peoplehood—Hollywood, music, art, and intellectual culture—now jeer at it. They intimate to Jews that the cost of acceptance is the rejection of Judaism's essence: belonging to an extended Jewish family.

Judaism, in this new cultural regime, cannot be celebrated as a form of historical peoplehood. Instead, it's commended as a religion like Christianity or Islam that lays claim to all of humanity, a system of values more universal than particular—a system in which the traditional Jewish collective belonging plays no part.

What was once a good deal has now turned sour. And in this context, the lessons of the MENA Sephardic experience can come in handy. American Jews need a fundamental readjustment, from the Ashkenazi American dream to the MENA Sephardic one. If the past American Jewish century was Ashkenazi, the next must be Sephardic.

What does this mean? It means trading the integrationist ethos for a more preservationist one, no longer prioritizing approval from those who ask us to hollow out our Judaism, and instead finding strength in one another.



To preempt the inevitable accusations of reductionism, let me be clear: There is surely far more to both the Ashkenazi and MENA Sephardic traditions, sociology, and history than what I can possibly capture here, not to mention individual divergences from the broad communal strokes I draw. There are Ashkenazi Jews, and even full Ashkenazi communities, the Hasidim in Kiryas Joel, for example, that exhibit a lot of what I describe as MENA Sephardic

norms. The variations within the MENA Sephardic universe can be stubbornly granular, so much so that their commonalities and differences became the subject of much of my academic research. I've loved exploring the variety of more local identities—how Lebanese Jews preserve their own culinary traditions even when living alongside Syrians, how Persian Jews distinguish between Tehrani and Mashadi families, how Moroccan Jews maintain regional variations from Tetouan to Casablanca.

But while there are myriad variations within MENA Sephardic traditions, there exists a common gravitational pull toward certain values, the most central of which is family. This means both nurturing strong family units and understanding community itself as an extended family with bonds of mutual obligation that stretch across the entire Jewish people. In these communities, success means building thick communal networks: synagogues that feel as warm as their own living rooms, businesses that employ relatives, and neighborhoods where multiple generations live within blocks of one another. One telling example: For liberal Ashkenazi Jews, upward mobility has historically meant raising children who outearn their parents and move to better neighborhoods. For MENA Sephardic Jews, it means raising children who can afford to stay nearby, even as housing prices rise, because no one wants to leave.

What I mean to do with this admittedly provocative and exaggerated binary is to shift the mentality—to recognize that while one dream struggles under changing American circumstances, the other can show us how to flourish in the current landscape.

Since October 7, American and Israeli observers have noticed the resilience of many MENA Sephardic communities: the demographic vitality of Sephardic ethnic enclaves from Brooklyn to Los Angeles, the pan-Sephardic building of new communities in Florida and elsewhere and the cultural vibrancy of these communities, the unapologetic assertiveness of some Sephardic and Mizrahi students on hostile campuses, and the rise of social media influencers from MENA Sephardic and Mizrahi backgrounds speaking up proudly and confidently as Zionists.

Such examples indicate a growing energy in the MENA Sephardic experience. What they don't do, and what we need, is a framework to understand and replicate this energy, a framework rooted in family as the primary vessel of American Jewish identity.

Here I offer four initial reforms for a program of cultural appropriation that I believe can be adapted by all Jews and that directly addresses the crisis of acceptance those of us committed to a Jewish peoplehood that includes our extended family in Israel are facing in America.

The beauty of this approach is that it allows for discernment. I would not advocate, for example, that Ashkenazi American Jews wholesale adopt the insularity of some MENA Sephardic communities. Such an orientation is unnatural and incompatible with certain Ashkenazi norms and would also hurt our ability to wage battles that must be fought, such as minimizing polarization within American political discourse or making sure American public schools avoid spreading antisemitic ideas. There are also real tensions to navigate. For instance, intermarriage has been normalized in many liberal Ashkenazi environments—how does that square with learning from communities where in-marriage is treated as foundational to family and communal life? I do not pretend to have resolved these questions. What I'm proposing is cultural appropriation through selective adaptation, identifying the strongest and most valuable resources for the moment while leaving others aside.

The first reform is to reinvest in the Jewish family as the center of Jewish education and Jewish identity. For generations, American Jews built extraordinary institutions such as schools, synagogues, JCCs, and summer camps, and they remain indispensable. But those institutions have also made it possible to outsource Judaism: to assume that identity, practice, and knowledge are primarily the responsibility of experts rather than parents and grandparents. Judaism becomes episodic, something that happens *there*, in synagogue or camp, rather than *here*, at the Shabbat table.

A MENA Sephardic approach flips this hierarchy. It begins with

a simple but demanding mindset shift: Jewish institutions exist to support families, not the other way around. Jewish continuity does not begin with organizational strategy or professional programming. It begins with parents and grandparents who understand themselves as the primary transmitters of meaning, obligation, and memory.

This is not a novel idea. In the book of Exodus, while the Israelites are still enslaved, Moses tells them that a day will come when their children will ask questions and that they will have to answer. This is a radical moment. Before freedom, before land, before a centralized religious system, before priests and rabbis, Jewish parents must imagine themselves as responsible for the next generation. Moses is not the children's educator—he will transmit the covenant to parents and help families become the site where Judaism is actually taught. Jewish continuity is decentralized and family-based at its very inception.

That ancient move feels newly relevant. Since October 7, I have met many thoughtful, committed Jewish parents who do not send their children to Jewish day schools who now feel suddenly exposed. They mourned not having ready-made language or rituals to help their children process what was unfolding. But I've also watched something else happen: Some parents realized that this responsibility ultimately belonged to them.

These parents began educating themselves. They started learning the weekly Torah portion with their children, creating home rituals, organizing Jewish parent groups within their children's schools, and teaching holidays themselves rather than outsourcing them. They leaned on rabbis and educators but not as substitutes. What distinguishes these parents is not ideology but posture. They see themselves as ultimately responsible for their children's Jewish identity and see the institutions around them as resources to help them.

This is what a Sephardic-inspired model offers American Jews now. Institutions matter deeply, but they work best when they reinforce what happens at home and when they encourage and strengthen families rather than replace them. The most precious and revolutionary tool American Jews have is still the family Shab-

bat table, where Judaism is lived repeatedly, unevenly, imperfectly, and therefore enduringly.

The second reform is for Ashkenazi-led Jewish organizations, especially those serving diverse Jews in pluralistic commitments, to adopt communal boundaries that follow the logic of family rather than voluntary association.

For decades, many liberal Jewish institutions embraced the sovereign Jewish self—the idea that Judaism is something you choose based on personal conviction and that organizational pluralism means accommodating every choice equally. In practice, this meant avoiding firm communal boundaries altogether, or pretending they didn't exist. The unstated assumption was that setting boundaries would compromise freedom—or would commit the ultimate liberal sin of making people feel judged and therefore excluded.

October 7 and its aftermath exposed the cost of this approach. When organizations had no clear boundaries around Jewish peoplehood, they found themselves unable to respond coherently to antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Some staff and members felt entitled or even obligated to platform views that denied Jewish collective identity, that treated the safety of Jews in Israel with disregard or apathy, or that delegitimized Israel's existence entirely. Organizations paralyzed by their commitment to “all views welcome” could not hold the center.

I want to propose a different model: Commitment to Jewish peoplehood—understood as ethical kinship with our Jewish brothers and sisters everywhere from Tel Aviv to Sydney—should be a nonnegotiable communal norm, even as we maintain broad flexibility on most everything else. Nonalignment with Israeli government policies is one thing. Calling for the end of Jewish self-determination, directly endangering the lives of your family members, is quite another. That is not how family members look out for one another.

I know that many Jewish organizations are already gravitating to this by necessity but they might get more confidence from understanding this as a sociological model that has guided classical MENA Sephardic communities for a long time. Our communities have historically shown much flexibility on practice and theology in not trying to examine or litigate what individuals do at home. In our public spaces, there are clear—traditional—expectations, such as serving kosher food or observing Shabbat in some way or another. Another bedrock foundation is that Jewish peoplehood matters. Israel is family.

We may argue fiercely about Israeli policy, we may vary widely in religious observance, we may disagree about politics—but we do not platform those who deny our family ties or legitimacy. The boundary isn't ideological or political; it's familial. You don't get to be at the Shabbat table while denying your siblings' right to exist.

This is not a litmus test or ideological gatekeeping. It's a communal norm, the way families have norms. Not everyone has to be equally committed or observant. But everyone has to accept they're in a family bound by mutual responsibility and shared fate. You can be the cousin who barely shows up, who argues at every dinner, who everyone knows is texting on their phone under the Shabbat table, who doesn't agree with half the family's choices—but you cannot be the one who sides with those who seek to hurt it.

This requires confidence that liberal Jewish institutions have often lacked: the confidence to say “this is who we are” without apology, while remaining genuinely open on everything else. It's the difference between a family and customers. Businesses accommodate all preferences to keep customers coming back. Families have boundaries because they are building something together.



Beyond strengthening institutional structure, MENA Sephardic traditions offer to American Jews a third sort of beneficial reform: a

different approach to spiritual life, one less burdened by intellectual self-consciousness, more rooted in embodied reverence.

I'll admit I struggle to explain the mechanism, but I can describe the phenomenon. Go to a Sephardic selichot service on Manhattan's Upper East Side or in a Miami suburb or at the Kotel. You will be transformed. You will see Jews with different levels of observance and practice joining together to sing to God with intense joy and spiritual connection. It feels like a concert: ecstatic, unselfconscious, direct.

I remember an Ashkenazi Orthodox friend in college confessing her confusion. She knew MENA Sephardic young women who she would have thought were less observant. They wore skin-tight jeans, they went clubbing. But then she'd see them pray and sense something she couldn't access: an experience that was transcendent, that held reverence, and that, most important, treated God as a parent. She couldn't reconcile the categories. In many ways, the logic of family has allowed MENA Sephardic Jews to have a relationship with God that is less fraught. It is less caught up in intellectual questions about belief as is more organic in its expression.

There is less shame in displaying reverence, in kissing the hands of elders, in talking about miracles. There isn't the same self-consciousness that comes from being shaped by progressive cultural norms according to which spiritual sophistication requires maintaining distance from God or rejecting God entirely.

I know for me, whenever I have struggled with God and spirituality, I have had a simple tool to stabilize me: I will always have faith in my grandmother's God, in my *abuelita's* God. This faith is family-oriented in both senses: We approach God as a parent, and we approach God through our parents.

As Egyptian-Levantine author Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff wrote when describing her childhood: "When Grandfather Jacob's hand rested on my head, I felt that this blessing was something ancient and precious, a treasure, which the grandfathers of our grandfathers had received from God. Because of this blessing, I was in God's safekeeping and belonged to the people of the stories in the old prayer books."

Since October 7, we have seen this spiritual orientation grow exponentially in Israel. People who do not identify as observant have turned to prayer and challah bakes and Psalms not as ideology but as reflex, as what it means to be part of the Jewish people drawing strength from our spiritual core.

For Ashkenazi American Jews, learning from Sephardic Jews in this sphere means cultivating spiritual practices that are not afraid of God, that lean away from over-intellectualizing, and that allow wonder and reverence to feel as natural as family.



The fourth reform is to cultivate a thicker skin, an American Jewish confidence robust enough that we do not need to be cool or liked by the surrounding culture.

The cultural upheavals of the past two years have exposed the fragility of a Jewish identity dependent on external approval, measured by entry into elite spaces: universities, media, the cultural mainstream. When those spaces turned hostile, many American Jews experienced not just disappointment but identity crisis. If we are no longer welcome in the institutions that validated us, who are we?

Sephardic Jews from the Muslim world, those whose American identities were never tied to elite validation, embody a different orientation. Their confidence comes more from within: from family continuity, communal life, economic stability, and ancestral memory. When I've asked MENA Sephardic friends about the current wave of antisemitism, I've been struck by their relative steadiness. Rejection from the mainstream might be painful and worrying, but it's not identity-threatening. It doesn't signal a decline in Jewish self-worth.

This is structural resilience. When your primary source of affirmation is internal, external condemnation becomes more bearable. I know I have felt this. I have joked with friends that if I'm canceled on X for being a Zionist, my MENA Sephardic

community and family will hold me up as a hero. The difference is between, on one hand, pride that derives from being popular and beloved by others—à la Adam Sandler’s Hanukkah song—and, on the other, pride that derives from community and inheritance.

This direction also invites a different vision of American patriotism in which loving America means gratitude for a country where you can succeed and flourish even if you aren’t universally liked, where your rights are protected even if your neighbors don’t understand you. It is loving devotion to an America that doesn’t ask you to trade in your family for social acceptance.

Imagine an American Jewry with this posture: a rootedness that cannot be canceled, since it does not depend on external endorsement. When campus students jeer at you, when colleagues pressure you to distance yourself from Israel, when invitations dry up, it hurts, but it doesn’t destroy you. You have family. You have community. You have a civilization that has survived far worse and will outlast this too.

My aspirational message that American Jews become more Sephardic rests on a particular understanding of Jewish diversity. For us, diversity has never been a problem to solve; it has been the lifeblood of Jewish strength. Our diasporic wanderings, our divergent histories under crescent and cross, our many languages, cuisines, liturgical melodies, skin tones, and sensibilities are not a liability. They are a reservoir of cultural appropriation in the best sense: a shared Jewish capacity to borrow, adapt, imitate, and experiment across difference. This is both a commitment to Jewish peoplehood and one of its rewards.

We might as well reap it.

*

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



ADAM TEITELBAUM

Boyz II Menschesa

*The bar mitzvah needs a makeover,
and Jewish men a kick in the pants*



AMERICAN society has, for some time now, struggled with masculinity. The 1999 book *Real Boys*, by clinical psychologist William Pollack, named it. But even before that, we had long been trying, and failing, to fulfill the aim of the book's subtitle: *Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. The first quarter century of the new millennium has seen boys trail girls at nearly every level of academic achievement; 12.4 percent of prime-age men detach from the workforce; and, most tragically, suicide now ranks as the second-most-common cause of death for American men under the age of 35.

Writers such as Scott Galloway, Richard Reeves, and Robert Putnam have recently shown that the crisis has various origins: neurological, social, and cultural. But the overriding manifestation, as Putnam and Reeves put it in the *New York Times*, is "a crisis of connection, as men and boys are increasingly detached from civic,

familial, and social life.” This detachment has been thoroughly aided by the pathologizing of masculinity itself, the cultural acceptance of seeing its toxic forms as fundamental features of manhood, and social isolation exacerbating the loneliness epidemic. Absent a healthy, dignified, and respectable vision of masculinity, boys are, at best, left ambivalent about becoming men, at worst radicalized by violent and hateful social movements. The monumental achievement of gender egalitarianism, beginning with the suffragettes and continuing through the waves of feminism, has given way to the dark reality of male disengagement.

The Jewish community is not immune from this pattern of male retreat in correlation with female success. Over the past 100 years, the Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and even Orthodox movements have made major strides to correct the centuries-old gender imbalance in Jewish life. The unintended and unfortunate by-product of this shift has been the widespread disengagement of boys and men from Jewish life outside of Orthodoxy. Women now make up roughly 70 percent of the Jewish nonprofit workforce, and they dominate classrooms, camps, and cultural programs, even while men, as in American society writ large, continue to hold most top executive positions. Despite the richness of Jewish life in America, data reveal a widening gender gap in participation and leadership. As early as 2008, a Brandeis University study reported that “just as Jewish women were marginalized from the centers of Jewish life for much of history, American Jewish men now feel displaced from Judaism.” A more recent Brandeis study in 2025 confirmed that “the differences we see between men and women with respect to Jewish engagement mirror those between men and women with respect to religious, communal, and civic engagement in the larger society.”

The situation in both Jewish and broader American life has been described as either a great “feminization” or a “boy crisis,” depending on which side of the gender divide you’re down with. Regardless, what Jewish and American life both desperately

need is a renewed masculinity, one that engages boys in the work of civic, familial, and communal life and teaches them how to become good men.

Fortunately, Judaism has its own conception of masculinity, one rooted in the power of responsibility for one's family, community, and society.

The Hebrew word for masculinity, *gavrut*, derives from *gibur*, meaning “a strong man” or “hero,” a word that makes a marked appearance in the — aptly titled for our masculine purposes — *Ethics of the Fathers*. “Who is a strong man/hero [*gibur*]? He who conquers his evil inclination” (4:1).

How interesting. Jewish masculinity here is synonymous with the triumph over the evil inside oneself, or, in the parlance of our times, one's toxicity. The Jewish image of manhood is the force that opposes toxicity, and the adjacent lines of the text round out the picture. “Who is wise? He who learns from every man, as it is said: ‘From all who taught me have I gained understanding (Psalms 119:99)...’ He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that rules his spirit than he that takes a city’ (Proverbs 16:32).” And concluding: “Who is he that is honored? He who honors his fellow human beings.”

According to the Fathers, and in particular the sage Ben Zoma to whom this teaching is attributed, a man's character is defined by the disciplinary power he exerts over himself, his interest and engagement in others, and the respect he shows to them.

Could there be a more concise and prescient teaching for the masculinity crisis of our time?

The problem is that this teaching needs to be embodied, demonstrated, and modeled in order for it to take root. The lack of male role models in American and Jewish culture who can personify this teaching and then hold boys accountable to it is

The monumental achievement of gender egalitarianism, beginning with the suffragettes and continuing through the waves of feminism, has given way to the dark reality of male disengagement.

a problem with exponential outcomes. As both Reeves and Galloway explain in their recent books, the absence of a consistent male role model in boyhood is one of the strongest predictors of future disengagement. Although less dangerous in the Jewish-engagement context than in overall life outcomes, what it means is that the absence of a Jewish mentor in youth diminishes Judaism's relevance later in life. The expansion of women's roles and women's voices in rabbinic, communal, and political leadership is an incalculable benefit to the Jewish community, but the decreasing number of male leaders in those spaces is a recipe for the Jewish gender problem in reverse. A sans-male Judaism is as incomplete as a Judaism before feminism.

In their also prescient book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*, published 35 years ago, Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette critiqued the then fashionable impulse to solve the masculinity crisis by injecting more femininity into men's lives. That instinct, they wrote, is understandable but misguided—it treats masculine energy itself, rather than its distortion or misdirection, as the problem. The answer to toxic or adolescent masculinity is not less masculinity but mature masculinity: disciplined strength, creative purpose, and service to something beyond the self. Healthy masculinity requires an audacious vision of who and what men can become.

The rabbis understood what modern thinkers such as Galloway, Reeves, Moore, and Gillette have rediscovered: Responsibility rescues us from drift, mentorship averts us from mediocrity, and community saves us from despair.

Judaism is the perfect crucible for such a charge. For millennia, Judaism has offered the most sophisticated apprenticeship ever devised for the human soul. It does not teach or promise serenity; it promises struggle and teaches the tools to triumph over it—the daily grappling between impulse and conscience. Its rituals are not decorations of faith but instruments of discipline. Every mitzvah, from tefillin to Torah to tzedakah, is a small act of mastery. It's a system of personal and communal obligation, and its core premise is responsibility—the daily, disciplined effort to align behavior with purpose. After spending 15 years inside the Jewish communal world—working with young Jewish men at AEPi Fraternity, training leaders for AIPAC and the Jewish Federations of North America—I've come to the realization that the Jewish masculinity crisis is, at its core, a spiritual one. The timeless, sometimes gendered, practices of Judaism—its obligations, its rituals, its discipline—offer the most powerful framework for restoring masculine purpose, service, and responsibility. The rabbis understood what modern thinkers such as Galloway, Reeves, Moore, and Gillette have rediscovered: Responsibility rescues us from drift, mentorship averts us from mediocrity, and community saves us from despair.

What needs revamping is the customary Jewish initiation ritual into that framework: the bar mitzvah.

The word itself, *bar mitzvah*, is Hebrew for “owner of the commandment,” meant to convey the arrival of manly expectation and responsibility. In their book, Moore and Gillette explain that the demise of traditional cultures has left modern secular society bereft of “gender-specific initiations to help people reach maturity.” Without rites of passage, they warned, boys remain stuck in “boy psychology,” oscillating between grandiosity and passivity. The counterintuitive truth is that societies heal men not by feminizing them but by initiating them — teaching them how to wield power responsibly, love deeply, and serve the tribe rather than the ego. The bar mitzvah, properly understood, is the structured transformation that channels raw boyhood energy into generative manhood. It is the first formal step in shaping young men into exemplary partners, fathers, and community leaders.

But transitioning from childhood to adulthood takes time, years, in fact, and more of them for boys than it does for girls. In his groundbreaking book *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*, Reeves identifies “the very different speeds at which boys and girls mature, especially in adolescence” as the “main cause” of the gender gap in K–12 education, the effects of which cascade as boys transition to manhood. “Boys’ brains develop more slowly, especially during the most critical years of secondary education.” Those critical years when “the biggest sex differences occur” are those of “middle adolescence,” ages 14 to 17, immediately following the bar mitzvah at age 13. And it also happens to be the period of time when more than a third of Hebrew-school students drop out. By 12th grade, according to research by the Avichai Foundation, only 15 percent remain.

If the bar mitzvah is an initiation ritual into Jewish manhood, why is it widely treated as the finish line of Jewish childhood? The

American bar mitzvah tends to stand as a singular event, often in the form of a recital followed by a themed party along the lines of the young man's childhood passion: a sports team, a superhero, Rolex. We coach boys to perform, not to transform, and then we congratulate them for finishing the one curriculum that should have been the starting point for everything in their life. The transition to manhood is not a singular event meant to look backward. It is, as I say above, a structured transformation into the future. At this critical moment, the bar mitzvah needs to be reconceived not as a single initiation *ritual* but as an initiation *process* that continues throughout adolescence.

Here is the counter-proposal: Retire the pageant; rebuild the passage. Bar mitzvah becomes a six-year track that begins at 12.5 and culminates at 18. The certificate at 13 is not an exit but a *commission*: You are now responsible to, as the Hebrew instructs, *own* the mitzvot as they pertain to you, your community, and the future of both. The celebration moves to the end of this process, the completion of the transformation rather than its initial spurts.



How it works.

Each participant joins a 10-man cohort that meets monthly from ages 12.5 through 18. Cohorts are local, tied to a communal institution (a synagogue, school, or JCC); the framework is shared nationally so that comparative outcomes can be assessed. Every boy has two partners: a *hevruta* his own age and an adult mentor, preferably a father or grandfather fulfilling the directive found in the Shema prayer to impart the Torah's teachings to your children, otherwise an uncle, coach, or vetted community elder. Formation happens in a triangle: peer friction, adult example, public accountability.

The curriculum is three verbs:

Societies heal men not by feminizing them but by initiating them — teaching them how to wield power responsibly, love deeply, and serve the tribe rather than the ego.

Learn. *Hevruta* on the weekly portion, short sources on business ethics, speech, money, family, anything on their mind. Not philology for its own sake but moral cases from the Tanakh. What does *lashon hara* (evil speech) look like in a group chat? What is *ona'at devarim* (verbal fraud) when you are selling something online? What do *tzniut* (modesty) and *kavod* (respect) require of a boyfriend? When a boy argues these out loud, with a text in the middle and a friend across the table who pushes back, he learns how to engage in an argument for the sake of heaven.

Do. Habits stacked and tracked. Wrap tefillin on weekdays, or choose an equivalent daily ritual; lead kiddush on Friday nights; log Shabbat phone-off hours; volunteer monthly with your cohort; complete a service project you design and budget. Streaks matter. The goal is not piety; it is reliability, consistency, grit. Boys who keep promises become men others can trust.

Lead. Formation becomes real only when transmitted. Each participant must teach something he's learned at least twice a year. By 16, he must stand up in front of strangers and raise tzedakah for a cause he cares about. Fundraising is not crass; it is a mature form of speech.

In *Notes on Being a Man*, Galloway recounts not having had a bar mitzvah because his single, immigrant mother couldn't

afford Hebrew school, but that the Boy Scouts saved him “from utter obscurity” through confidence-building and the values of camaraderie and community. But why not merge the two? There would be merit pathways, borrowed from scouting, which foster habit formation through accountability. Finish a tractate of Mishnah; read Torah three times; attend 300 minyanim; design and execute a tzedakah project. Boys must earn enough merit badges to become eligible for the capstone: a *Nesher Mensch* (Eagle Man) project that addresses a real need—elder tech tutoring, food rescue, a new-member Shabbat pipeline—and then is presented to a community review board. The lesson is that excellence is crafted and earned.



Executed wisely, this bar mitzvah pathway will bring more good men into Jewish communal space and practice. If federations and foundations want male participation, they should fund mentors: seasoned adults who coach, model, and hold boundaries. The metrics and demographics will start to shift.

And it needn't stop at 18. Every stage culminates in a public act of accountability: At 16, each young man should have a midcourse check-in: a *Brit Ma'asim* (a covenant of deeds) marking his commitments to learning, service, and self-mastery. At 27, a *Tikkun Ha-Derech* (road repair), an evaluation of where he is in his journey and an affirmation of the values he will carry into adulthood. At 40, a *Hevruta HaDor* (generational partner)—a pledge to mentor others. At 60, a *Kabbalat Ahdut* (acceptance of unity)—a recommitment to community leadership.

This is not a youth program. It is a generational infrastructure project—a national network of *hevruta* circles, mentors, and initiation tracks that embed Jewish discipline and masculine virtue into the bloodstream of Jewish life. The bar mitzvah reformed is not a nostalgic recovery of the past; it's the reclamation of Judaism's

greatest educational insight: that responsibility, not comfort, is the path to meaning.

Its purpose is nothing less than to re-forged the Jewish man: strong *and* humble, ambitious *and* ethical, driven *and* devoted, compassionate *and* resolute. The goal is not simply to retain members but to form men who form families, serve communities, and carry the covenant with conviction: men who partner with women (or other men, as the case may be) to co-create the future they want their children and grandchildren to inherit.

If we fail, the pattern is predictable. Boys drift toward harsher models of masculinity, amplified by algorithms that monetize their confusion. Girls grow up to be women without sturdy, affectionate Jewish men to partner with. Jewish women have been carrying modern Judaism for all of us, and through all sorts of labor. It's about time we stepped up and started carrying our weight. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



PART TWO

EDUCATION



DARA HORN

How to Teach the Jewish Story

The opposite of hate isn't love, it's curiosity



AFTER MY BOOK about contemporary antisemitism, *People Love Dead Jews*, came out in 2021, I realized I had made a stupid mistake. When you write a nonfiction book about a problem, people expect you to solve the problem by the end of the book. It was my first nonfiction book after publishing five novels, and I soon had readers of every background asking me, “So what’s your solution to this problem?”—to which my rather tasteless reply was, “Do you want me to give you the final solution to the Jewish question? Because I’m really not prepared for that.”

But now, after four years of readers sharing their personal horror stories regarding antisemitism, and two years of a war that has also been waged against Diaspora Jews, I am prepared. I even have a plan.

It may sound glib to say it’s possible to defeat a centuries-old hatred, but fatalism about such supposed impossibilities is not something Martin Luther King Jr. or Theodor Herzl would have accepted. In any case, my suggestion is far more modest. My goal

isn't to defeat American antisemitism. It's to turn the tide on the ignorance that makes well-meaning people susceptible to it. My experiences speaking to non-Jewish audiences across the country for the past four years have shown me that there is far, far more ignorance than malice—and that presents an opportunity.



My hypothesis is that teaching the broader American public about the basic content of living Jewish civilization—and how dominant societies have reacted to that civilization—will provide our fellow Americans with the simple knowledge required to recognize and reject the consistent pattern of antisemitism's foundational lie.

The lie, simply stated, is that Jews are destroying whatever their societies value most. The goal, short of ending antisemitism but worthy and ambitious enough, is to make it *normal* and *expected* for educated people of all backgrounds to know the most basic facts about Jewish civilization, in the same way that we today expect educated people to know the basic facts about the Holocaust. This should matter to all because those basic facts function as an acid test for living in a pluralistic society.

This modest goal of mine emerged from two unpleasant projects I was roped into after *People Love Dead Jews*. One was Harvard's ill-fated Antisemitism Advisory Group set up under the university's now-former president, Claudine Gay, who did not take much of our advice. I learned something important from this: If one hopes to address antisemitism through education, college is far too late. The other project was a long investigative piece about American Holocaust education that *The Atlantic* commissioned me to write, titled "Is Holocaust Education Making Antisemitism Worse?" (Spoiler: Yes.) This article made many people hate me—or, as some say in publishing, "started a conversation." But I also heard from many more Holocaust educators eager to learn how they might do better.

In my public talks for non-Jewish audiences, I'd also noticed

that many people were intensely curious about Jewish life, but like the fourth son in the Haggadah, they didn't know how to ask. Educators sometimes speak of the "null curriculum"—what's *not* taught in schools, like sex education a few generations ago. The null curriculum is also part of the curriculum, because it signals to students that if they want to know anything about it, they'll need to seek information outside formal educational channels.

In my reporting on Holocaust education, I'd noticed that the only thing most American students learned about Jews, if they learned anything at all, was that we were people who died in Europe between 1933 and 1945. (One docent at a Holocaust museum told me that students often ask him, "Are there still Jews alive today?") When social media bots then inform these students that Jews are European colonizers who have no business in the Middle East, why wouldn't they believe it, when it doesn't contradict anything they know? By relegating Jewish civilization to the null curriculum, we have outsourced it to TikTok, a platform not known for its interest in civilizing anything. If the goal of Holocaust education is to protect our society from antisemitism, wouldn't it make more sense to teach the public about living Jews instead of dead ones?

After writing and speaking publicly about this idea, I began to meet people from various organizations who were doing the hard work of introducing a non-Jewish public to the positive story of Jewish life. They were presenting this material in public and private K–12 schools, in museums, in interfaith settings, and online. Some were educating non-Jews about Jewish traditions, holidays, and beliefs. Others were providing accurate and accessible information about Israel. Still others focused on American Jews, teaching how American Jews cured polio or fought for the civil rights of black Americans. Many of these initiatives deeply impressed me. But something about them also left me uneasy. These efforts were based on the premise that the opposite of hatred is love or empathy, so the goal was to make people love Jews, or at least relate to them. In their gallant effort to avoid focusing on antisemitism, these approaches often

My experiences speaking to non-Jewish audiences across the country have shown me that there is far, far more ignorance than malice — and that presents an opportunity.

unwittingly accepted antisemitism's deepest assumption, which was that Jews need to convince others of their worthiness.

This unspoken assumption appeared in almost every detail. In school materials about other minorities, for instance, I'd never once seen anything highlighting a given minority's work on behalf of other groups — but material on American Jews often emphasized their role as “allies.” The emphasis on Jewish individuals' contributions also felt weirdly defensive; curing polio is a rather high bar for gaining public respect. The idea of Jews as a “religion” (even though the many millions of secular Jews are no less Jewish than religious ones) reflected an insistence that Jews were *just like everyone else*, behaving themselves by staying in their assigned identity lane. And why should the details of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict be any more relevant to American students than the details of how Turkey (a NATO ally to whom the United States has formal military obligations) has occupied northern Cyprus and fought the Kurds?

The answer, of course, is that the default and completely unacknowledged assumption in most non-Jewish societies is that Jews are evil unless proven otherwise. It's an assumption that too many Jews themselves have apparently internalized.

I had often championed the idea of focusing on living Jews and the positive aspects of Jewish life. But the more I thought about this divide between the “positive” approach (teaching people about Jewish life) and the “negative” approach (teaching people about antisemitism), the more I understood how artificial this divide really

is. Was it “positive” to avoid focusing on the oppression of Jews or “noncontroversial” to avoid teaching about Zionism and Jewish independence by instead teaching about ... Hanukkah? What on earth did people think Hanukkah was about? Did it make sense to teach people that Jews were *just like everyone else*, when Jews have spent 3,000 years not being like everyone else? More important, *why* had Jews spent 3,000 years not being like everyone else, instead of vanishing into dominant empires like almost every other ancient group has done? For most of Jewish history, Jews had the ability to opt out of persecution by assimilating into dominant societies, and many did. (The Holocaust was atypical in this regard.) But Jews today are the descendants of those who didn’t. Why didn’t they? What made people commit to that high-cost, countercultural choice?



As I weighed these questions after October 7, I came to understand that these supposedly distinct topics—Jewish life and culture (including Israel and Zionism) on the one hand, and the Holocaust and historical and contemporary antisemitism on the other—have never been separate stories. They are one story, which happens to be one of the greatest stories on earth. It is the story of Jewish nonconformity, a story that lies at the very foundation of freedom, and it is the only reason why anything about this 0.2 percent sliver of the world’s population should matter to a non-Jewish public at all.

This is the story of a tiny group of people whose groundbreaking ideas shaped world history. The first of those ideas was monotheism, which is actually a political idea. In the ancient world, societies had many gods, and one of the gods was often the dictator. When the Jews said they do not bow to other gods—stated most explicitly to the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:18, “Be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the statue of gold that you have set up”—the point is that they do not bow to tyrants. Jewish civilization is an anti-tyrannical movement, a

nonconformist movement, an anti-hierarchical movement, based on a story of liberation that taught the world that change is possible. It is a movement built on laws, debate, and civil discourse that taught the world that freedom requires responsibility.

These foundations of Jewish civilization are inseparable from the history of antisemitism for well over 2,000 years. The assumption that Jews are evil unless and until proven otherwise endures for the same reason that Jewish civilization itself does: its nonconformity. When you have an anti-tyrannical movement, it pisses off tyrants. When you have a nonconformist movement, it pisses off dominant cultures that need everyone to conform. When you have a movement based on the necessity of civil discourse, it pisses off people who cannot tolerate debate or dissent.

The story of antisemitism has been remarkably consistent for thousands of years, and entirely inseparable from Jewish civilization, because it all traces back to the Jewish people's radical proposition that people don't need to conform or agree, that people don't need to bow to tyrants. People who refuse to conform are a profound challenge to the authority of a dominant culture. An *entire people* refusing to conform is an almost intolerable challenge, tantamount to a threat. Antisemitism isn't just a social prejudice or a conspiracy theory. It is a lie that people use to gain or maintain power. The Big Lie of antisemitism is that Jews are destroying what you value most, even while that changes over the course of history. This lie is what turns antisemitism into a righteous—or at least self-righteous—cause.

This lie is directly related to the threat that the Jewish people have always posed to the idea of conformity and blind submission. It is a lie told by people who need to dominate, whether those people are middle schoolers, social influencers, or full-blown tyrants. It is a lie that benefits people who need to crush dissent. And the reason that it's so hard to defuse the Big Lie is that we are still living inside it and are supposed to pretend we aren't.

We're supposed to teach nice lessons about powerless dead European Jews from nearly a century ago while pretending that the richest

The Big Lie of antisemitism is that Jews are destroying what you value most. This lie is what turns antisemitism into a righteous cause.

people from the world's most tyrannical regimes aren't currently spending billions of dollars on spreading the Big Lie, or that the financial structure of the internet isn't premised on the inherently majority-favoring concept that popularity is the arbiter of truth. The massive institutional investment in the Big Lie is the reason why Jews today are concentrated in only two countries on earth. It's the reason Israeli Jews are tortured and starved in dungeons for years while so much of the world cheers on their kidnappers and murderers. It's the reason anyone who posts anything Jewish online can realistically expect to be inundated with abuse. It's the reason American Jewish children think it's normal to be subjected to daily marginalization in an age of supposed de-marginalizing. It's the reason why so many of those talented educators telling the positive story of Jewish life, unlike those teaching about dead, powerless European Jews from the 1940s, find themselves begging for crumbs from schools, asking whether schools could please, please, graciously provide them with a 40-minute period, or maybe a "heritage month" assembly, or even just a bulletin board display. In many American schools, it's not unusual for teachers to spend three weeks on ancient Egypt, two weeks on ancient Mesopotamia, and four weeks on the puberty of Anne Frank. Yet somehow these schools barely manage to find any time at all, out of 13 academic years, to spend on the civilization that is the source of the cultures of most people on the planet, the civilization that inspired America's Founders, the civilization that showed the world that freedom and civil discourse are possible—the civilization that is still proving it now.



Our responsibility, not only as Jews but as members of the liberal West descended from Jewish civilization, is to make people curious about that dramatic story to which we owe our world. Jews are among the first groups in history to stand up to tyranny, and to this day they continue to do so. No one can defuse the lie of antisemitism without understanding that story, because it explains how people who want to dominate need that lie as a tool to stop curiosity and crush dissent.

I founded the Tell Institute to tell that one story. I named it for the idea of an archaeological tell, a hill made of the layers of the past, and also for storytelling, telling it like it is, telling a friend, and the “tell” that reveals a lie.

Our crack team of talented and experienced educators (including full-time classroom teachers, district supervisors, and curriculum writers) has created a short set of accessible lesson plans and teacher trainings, which we have adapted for different courses and grade levels in middle and high schools, and also for Jewish community settings like b’nai mitzvah cohorts. These lesson plans are a crash course in the groundbreaking ideas of Jewish civilization that continue to shape Jewish communities as well as the broader world. Integrated within this introduction are the dynamics of the Big Lie of antisemitism, which we explore in a set of case studies from before and after the Holocaust that demonstrate the consistent pattern of the lie. These case studies unfold on four continents, the first from 40 C.E. and the last from 2001. The goal is to enable pattern recognition. Because the lie in every time period is activated by new media (scrolls, books, printing presses, telegraphs, radio, film, TV, internet), we’ve also had to introduce media-literacy elements that students apparently lack, such as the ability to recognize the illusory truth effect (in which repetition makes a falsehood seem true), the way new media environments invert the relationship between credibility and exposure, and the fact that popularity is not a measure of truth.

Far from an information dump, these materials are interactive

and iterative, modeling millennia-old Jewish learning practices to ignite curiosity. For instance, one “bell-ringer” (short opening activity) in our second lesson presents students with a hypothetical: “You live in a small, independent community that values its traditions. A powerful new ruler takes over your region. Today, a proclamation is issued: ‘From this day forward, all citizens must abandon their old customs and obey the ruler’s laws without question. Independent meetings and local decision-making are banned. Anyone who speaks against the new system will be punished.’”

Students are then asked to choose among four responses: Do they agree with this new rule, since anyone powerful enough to conquer them must be doing something right? Do they disagree but comply to avoid conflict? Do they resist, but only quietly? Or do they openly oppose it? (Historically, different groups of Jews have reacted in *all* of these ways.) The purpose of the exercise is to introduce curiosity about what it might take to preserve a counterculture under vast and often violent pressure from dominant societies. I initially thought that students might deem this activity patronizing. Wouldn’t every self-respecting teenage rebel sign up for the open-opposition choice? I was surprised when, in our first pilot classrooms, the teachers reported that everyone chose compliance—and that this opened a discussion about social pressure and dissent. I guess these kids needed more Jewish civilization than even we realized.

We are early in this process, but I have already been astonished by how little it takes to open people’s minds. In one training for public school educators, I began my presentation with the most basic foundations of Jewish civilization: monotheism, the liberation narrative, laws that don’t come from individual rulers, civil discourse, and also an ethos of non-expansion—Jews never had or desired an empire, never sought to rule over others, and while some Jews did proselytize in the ancient period, there was and is no mission to convert anyone. The teachers and principals in this school were overwhelmingly not Jewish. Few knew anything about Judaism or Jewish life. After the first 20 minutes, I paused for questions, and a young woman in the

back of the room raised her hand. “So what you’re saying,” she said hesitantly, “is that there’s this tiny group of people that just wants to be left alone, and no one is leaving them alone?” Bingo — and it took only 20 minutes.

In the few responses we have from students thus far, we’ve also seen how it’s possible to activate curiosity about both the “positive” and “negative” aspects of this story. One student of Brazilian heritage mentioned that learning the basics of Jewish civilization felt very relatable to him — it gave him a mirror to “the presumptions and dumb questions people ask me about Brazil.” It turns out that people really don’t know how much they don’t know about many things — and it’s not nearly as hard as it seems to start learning. Another student was intrigued by the Big Lie: “What really stood out to me was how simple yet effective lies and propaganda can be. This made me realize that most people will blindly accept false information, especially if this aligns with what they already believe in.” At the end of one teacher workshop, an African-American woman from a federally funded Title I public school approached me with tears in her eyes, talking about what it meant to her to learn for the first time about this enduring counterculture that set an acid test for a pluralistic society. In her words: “I want to take this story back to my black and brown students. They need this story.”

All of us do. The opposite of hatred isn’t love or empathy. It’s curiosity. And the purpose of education is to activate curiosity, to make people encounter the unfamiliar not with fear, but with eagerness to learn more. Fortunately, Jewish civilization has provided us with several thousand years of best practices in sparking that curiosity in the next generation. It’s time to open the conversation for those who don’t know how to ask. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.

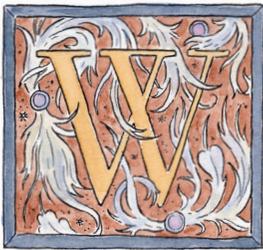


BRET STEPHENS

Israel Studies Can Redeem Academia

My address to Stanford's new program

What follows is the text of the inaugural keynote address for the launch of the Israel studies program at Stanford University, November 17, 2025.



OLFGANG PAULI, the great physicist, delivered what must be the most devastating academic put-down ever. Asked about an egregiously bad paper, Pauli replied, “That is not even wrong.” *Das is nicht einmal falsch.*

What does it mean to be “not even wrong”? If a parent asks a child to add 2 and 2, and the child answers 5, that’s wrong. If the child says “banana,” it’s not even wrong. It doesn’t rise to the level of mere error. It fails to engage the proper category of analysis or discussion. It’s nonresponsive to the problem that must be addressed or solved.

I'm sure we can think of other examples of being not even wrong. For this evening's purposes, I'd like to start by discussing the ways in which so much of what passes for commentary about Israel, in the media and the academy, is not even wrong.

It is not even wrong to describe Israel as a settler-colonial state.

The United States is a settler-colonial state. So is Argentina. And Australia. And Brazil. And Canada. Except for a small minority of indigenous people, those of us who live in these countries are descendants or beneficiaries of settler colonialism. We speak European languages. We practice religions imported, in the main, from Europe. We are heirs to philosophical, cultural, and technological traditions born in Europe. We live on land that was seized by force from others and declared sovereign by ourselves. Very few of us can trace our ancestry on this land more than a few generations back.

We can choose to be ashamed of this, or not; we can serve up performative land-acknowledgment statements, or not. But these are self-evident facts.

Israel suffers none of these embarrassments. Israelis speak and write a modern version of the same language spoken by King David. They live in the same general place and practice substantially the same religion. At no point ever over the last 3,000 years was the Land of Israel without Jews; at no point did Hebrew cease to be the sacred language of Jews; at no point was Jerusalem not the site of Jewish communal and spiritual longing. What is now called Zionism is, in fact, only the latest iteration of Jewish resistance, often militant, to colonial rule by Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Mamluks, Ottomans, and the British. This is not mythology. It's amply documented in the historical record.

For Americans to denounce Israel as a settler-colonialist state, therefore, amounts to a kind of triple idiocy. It's false. It's

hypocritical. And it's the opposite of a consistent position. In short: not even wrong.

It is not even wrong to accuse Israel of committing genocide in Gaza.

Last summer, an organization called the International Association of Genocide Scholars, or IAGS, endorsed a resolution claiming that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza. It made headlines worldwide. What did not make headlines was that only 128 of the association's 500 members voted, or that membership is open to anyone for a \$30 fee, or that there was no open debate on the resolution, or that at least 80 members of IAGS hailed from Iraq, not a country previously known for scrupulous genocide scholarship.

The farce of a resolution was emblematic of the farcicality of the charge. Genocide does not mean "too much death and destruction," such as what occurred during the Allied bombardments of Germany and Japan in World War II. It does not even mean the targeting of civilians, deliberate or inadvertent. It is, as the UN Genocide Convention puts it, the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such." Underscore the words *as such*: Genocide means killing a category of people for no other reason than that they belong to that category. Jews *as Jews* in the Shoah; Tutsis *as Tutsis* during the Rwandan genocide; Yazidis *as Yazidis* under the Islamic State.

Where is the evidence that Israel is doing this? Why, if Israel's intention was genocide, did it routinely warn Gazan civilians to evacuate places it intended to attack? Why did it put thousands of its own soldiers at risk in Gaza? Why did it facilitate the distribution of polio vaccines to Gazans? Why, given its immense combat power, did it not kill 10 times as many Gazans? Why has Israel not also killed tens of thousands of Palestinians in the West Bank? Why do genocide scholars, such as Brown University's Omer Bartov, rely on the supposed authority of UN

officials, including the antisemitic Francesca Albanese, to make their case against Israel? And why was Israel being accused of genocide only days after October 7, when the blood from that massacre wasn't yet even dry?

An argument from authority is a notorious logical fallacy; arguments from prejudiced authorities compound illogic with bigotry; arguments from prejudiced authorities who decree guilt first and look for evidence later turn illogic and bigotry into injustice. Again: not even wrong.

It is not even wrong to pretend that anti-Zionism has nothing to do with antisemitism.

It is true that, traced as a Venn diagram, antisemitism and anti-Zionism—that is, objection to the existence of a Jewish state rather than to its policies—do not perfectly overlap. Prior to 1948, there were arguments within the Jewish community about the wisdom of a Jewish state. There are some Jews today, including strictly observant Jews, who continue to oppose Jewish statehood on theological or ethical grounds. And there are sincere people, Jewish or not, who, whether out of idealism or naïveté, champion a binational state for Jews and Palestinians alike as a better alternative to the status quo or to a two-state solution.

But if the circles of antisemitism and anti-Zionism don't fully overlap, it shouldn't blind us to the fact that they often do. It is not anti-Zionism, but antisemitism, for pro-Palestinian protesters to lay siege to a Paris synagogue. It is not anti-Zionism, but antisemitism, when Sally Rooney refuses to have her novels translated into Hebrew, ostensibly on account of her objections to Israel. It is not anti-Zionism, but antisemitism, when Barnard students raid a class on the history of Israel and distribute flyers in which a jackboot stomps on a Star of David. It is not anti-Zionism, but antisemitism, when the Jewish director of the Brooklyn Museum of Art has her home spray-painted with pro-Hamas graffiti.

And it is antisemitism, not anti-Zionism, when the charges leveled at Israel invariably replicate classic antisemitic tropes of bloodlust and manipulation; and when the same humanitarians who are so conspicuous in their denunciations of Israel are utterly silent when it comes to Turkey's depredations against the Kurds or the genocide—the real genocide—currently unfolding at scale and speed in Sudan; and when Tucker Carlson decides to make his distaste for Israel known by inviting Nick Fuentes to discuss the subject on his podcast; and when university administrators shut down political conversations deemed offensive to some minorities but raise the banner of free speech when it comes to speech that appalls and frightens most Jews.

The list goes on. And it's no accident that there's so much overlap, in part because antisemites find anti-Zionism to be such a convenient cover for their bigotry, in part because hating Jews as a collective—whether as citizens of a state or members of a people or adherents of a faith—is the essential element of all Jew-hatred, even if the bigot is willing to offer exemptions or dispensations to selected individuals for good behavior. To doubt this point and willfully or ignorantly set aside millennia of Jewish experience with bigotry ranks, once again, as a case of not even wrong.



I have given you some examples of what is not even wrong. I have not talked about what I think is merely wrong: for instance, the accusation that Israel is becoming an apartheid state; or that Israel might have long ago made peace with its neighbors had it only had the will to do so; or that there was no justification for Israel fighting in Gaza in the way that it did for as long as it did. Wide latitude in the academy and media needs to be given to all sorts of views, including many with which I'd vehemently disagree. That's because I believe in Thomas Jefferson's dictum that "error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is free to combat it."

Think hard about Israel, and the deeper dimensions of our own conundrums in the West come more sharply into focus.

But I would like to suggest a corollary: Reason cannot win where reason does not rule.

If rigorous standards of logic and evidence and factual accuracy and intellectual integrity and scientific reproducibility and fair and open debate don't govern academic life; if the people in charge won't enforce those standards or if they enforce them only selectively; if views aren't subjected to serious scrutiny and virtually any opinion can become valid merely by virtue of it being commonly held or politically expedient—if these conditions don't hold, then reason doesn't stand a chance.

The enterprise of reason is demanding and unforgiving and often downright hurtful to those who don't measure up. Just ask your high school classmates who *didn't* get into Stanford.

That's what great universities are supposed to be about. Great newspapers, too, I might add. Argument within the walls of reason; ideas atop the floorboards of facts; experimentation under the roof of experience—in sum, the palace of thoughtful minds. Especially these days, many of us inside academia or the news media don't get enough credit for doing our work squarely and conscientiously within that palace.

But many of us also know that, if we aren't getting enough credit for the good work we do, there's a reason for it—and the fault does not lie in our stars.

I know there are various ideas about the reasons for the sharp decline in confidence in higher education, from the effect of new technologies to the crisis of affordability. My own view is

The answer to the problem of capture is to refuse to get captured. Perhaps that means recruiting people whose credentials don't include the letters P, H, and D.

that the source of the affliction is the ideological capture—by all too many faculty, staff, and students—of institutions that are supposed to be *truth-seeking* enterprises but instead have become *truth-asserting* enterprises.

They have done this, for the most part, by embracing Audre Lorde's famous insight that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." In place of robust debate, they want speech codes and cancellations. In place of engagement, they want encampments. In place of facts, they want narratives. In place of ideas, they want identity. In place of curiosity, they want certitude. In place of pedagogy, they want indoctrination. In place of process, they want results. In place of skepticism, they want slogans. In place of independence, they want reliability. In place of reason, they want unreason. In place of citizens, they want cadres.

I don't want to affect an expertise I don't have, and I know I'm painting with a very broad brush—perhaps too broad for some of you. But my impression is that these tendencies are especially pronounced in academic fields that have the word *studies* attached to them—ethnic studies, for instance, or Middle Eastern studies. When I told a friend the other day that I was coming to Stanford to give a speech for the launch of the Israel studies program, he said: "Just pray that it doesn't fast become the 'anti-Israel studies' program." I've read enough about the trajectory of other Israel studies programs to know that the fear isn't entirely unfounded.

My larger point is this: If we want to understand the proliferation of “not even wrong” views, particularly in university settings, and particularly about Israel, the places to look are the trends described above. These trends are not new: We have seen similar things happen before, to varying intensities, from Heidelberg in the 1930s to Peking in the 1960s. They are invariably symptoms, or perhaps harbingers, of something darker: an exit from the palace of reason, a bid for the raw exercise of power.

This is what we saw during the post-October 7 campus protests. It wasn't so much the views that I found appalling. It was the mindset and the tactics—the repetitive and thought-terminating clichés; the refusal to engage with critics; the refusal to abide by rules and the confidence that they could get away with their rule-breaking without consequence; the Manichaean demonization of *all* Israelis and Zionists and the beatification of *all* Palestinians. And what I found just as appalling was this: These kids were *admitted*. For every 10 or 50 campus Maoists, there was an admissions officer somewhere who thought they had the right stuff. And the thought applies equally to all the tenure or tenure-track faculty who egged on the junior totalitarians.

These are serious failures. And the question that remains to be answered is whether institutional leaders will draw the appropriate lessons, act, lead, take unpopular stands—or just wait for the storm to blow over and return to business as usual.



The question now is what role an Israel studies program can play in this kind of institutional moment. Broadly speaking, I suspect three things could happen to a program like this over the next five or 10 years.

You can be captured.

You can be tokenized.

Or you can become an example of scholarly seriousness, an engine

for academic renewal and transformation, and a relevant actor beyond the quads.

I hope you are aware of the risk of capture. My admittedly limited acquaintance with the world of academic Israel scholarship is that it tends to lean from the Left to the far-Left in its political orientation, just like the rest of academia. I would never suggest that there can be no value in those perspectives.

But there's always a problem when ideological homogeneity leads, as it usually does, to groupthink, politicization, and narrowness of vision. What I have in mind, for example, was the open letter signed in 2021 by 200 Israel and Jewish studies professors scoring Israel for its "settler-colonial paradigm," or the scholars who signed up the same year for the "Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism," whose purpose was to deny the connection between anti-Zionism and antisemitism. When scholars, Jewish or not, volunteer to provide their seal of approval for the demonization of their own subject matter, they do worse than turn themselves into versions of Lenin's "useful idiots." They make themselves irrelevant. As I've written in *SAPIR*, "There is no shortage of discomfiting and intelligent debates to be had in good faith regarding Israel and its future. Proposing that Israel should have no future isn't one of them."

The answer to the problem of capture is to refuse to get captured. Perhaps that means recruiting people whose credentials don't include the letters P, H, and D. Perhaps it means insisting that the purpose of an Israel studies program is scholarship, not advocacy. Perhaps something else.

But my advice to those of you who will help lead and shape this program is this: The fox is right outside the henhouse. Please have the good sense not to let him in.

Then there is tokenization, a subject I know something about, having served as the token conservative and the token pro-Israel voice on more panels and in more places than I care to think about. There is—I don't want to say at Stanford, but at lesser institutions—a

The intelligent study of the Jewish state — study that gets away from the typically cartoonish and invidious and not-even-wrong attention that Israel usually gets — should matter to everyone.

belief that the best way to address complaints that conservative or pro-Israel voices are underrepresented and under attack is...to invite Bret Stephens to give a speech. I hope that's not the case here! If not that, it's to set up a program or an institute on campus that is supposed to advance the cause of viewpoint diversity but also risks turning you into a kind of ghetto for a handful of students and faculty who operate in a state of permanent dissent from the rest of the institution and can do relatively little to influence it.

Tokenization does not mean you can't do exceptional work and help transform the lives of your students. But it limits your impact and your potential to help save the great universities, above all from themselves. I think you can do more, and better, than that. The question is how.

Let me close by offering an overarching thought.

The modern State of Israel is not a state like, say, Denmark — that is, sovereign and distinct but enmeshed in and secured by a broader cultural and political identity. Nor is it like Russia, grimly asserting its distinctiveness but with increasingly little to contribute beyond itself. Nor is it like Pakistan, defined largely by what it is not.

Nor is Israel just a political project. It's also an astounding civilizational and philosophical one.

Astounding civilizationally for what it represents in the long arc of Jewish history; for what it shows about the role of memory in the creation of the future; for what it teaches us about the frequently

tense but often fruitful synthesis of the two. A picture for you to ponder: An ultra-Orthodox Jew zipping through Tel Aviv on an electrified scooter reaches the intersection of Ahad Ha'am and Herzl Streets. If you can appreciate the incongruity of this image, its near absurdity, but also its beauty and its wonderful ordinariness, then you can understand what I mean.

And astonishing philosophically because of the ways it challenges so many of the assumptions, cherished or unexamined, of West and East alike. What is the place of personal autonomy and freedom in the constitution of human happiness? What does a good citizen owe his state and what does a good state owe its citizens? What are the prudent boundaries of pluralism and tribalization, religious or otherwise? How does a hyper-technological society reconcile itself with primordial attachments to God and traditional land and history? When do diversity, tolerance, live-and-let-live, and the other nostrums that define social decency in the West become self-endangering? When should a country observe a “decent respect for the opinions of mankind” (to borrow a phrase), and when must it ignore them? What does a state owe its neighbors, and can those obligations be honored if they aren't honored reciprocally?

These are genuinely significant, difficult, and transcendent questions—ones that Israelis grapple with daily, with varying degrees of success, under conditions of peril and stress. They are worth thinking about, and not just in the usual sociological, ethnographic, political, or geopolitical categories in which they are typically examined. Think hard about Israel, and the deeper dimensions of our own conundrums in the West come more sharply into focus.

What I'm saying here is that the intelligent study of the Jewish state—study that gets away from the typically cartoonish and invidious and not-even-wrong attention that Israel usually gets—should matter to everyone, at least everyone at a university like Stanford. The study of Israel, I'd go as far as to say, is not just a study of a piece of humanity, but a Humanity, capital-H, unto

itself. And an Israel studies program, done confidently and correctly, can do something, even a lot, to help rescue the humanities from their own depressing decline into politicization, solipsism, and irrelevance.

That, at any rate, is my hope for you. It's been an honor to deliver your inaugural keynote address.

Thank you.



To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



ADAM LOUIS-KLEIN

Defeating Antizionism

*The latest pseudoscience
to overtake academia*



STRANGE THING happened in the social sciences at the turn of the 20th century. In an effort to dignify Jewish origins in the minds of their academic peers, Jewish thinkers, including the anthropologist Maurice Fishberg, embraced the race science of the time.

The embrace went beyond simply approving of this pseudoscience to actually contributing to its scholarship. Based on a study of Jewish skulls, Fishberg co-authored scholarship supporting the view that the Jews constitute a distinct race: “When figures taken from such diverse elements of Judaism present such a homogeneity, it can safely be concluded that the cranial type of the modern Jews shows very little if any intermixture of foreign blood.”

Today, the language of race science is enough to make us wince. At the time, however, it would have read as academically serious and even avant-garde. Race science was central to the social

sciences of the period and widely regarded as a legitimate framework for understanding human difference. It was this same body of thought that would later furnish intellectual legitimacy to National Socialism in Germany.

In his 1946 book *Hitler's Professors*, linguist Max Weinreich documented how the German university—then the pride of Western scholarship—fell with terrifying speed into the service of Nazi ideology. Within months of Hitler's rise to power, professors across disciplines had issued declarations of loyalty. They did so not only to secure their posts but to align themselves with a social and political movement that promised prestige, resources, and renewed relevance. Entire research institutes were founded, fields reorganized, and new disciplines invented around the “Jewish Question.”

Weinreich revealed a moral and epistemic collapse that converted scholarship into ideology. Anti-Jewish libels do not circulate on their own. They require institutional prestige to stabilize them. The university has long been an effective instrument for transmuting defamation into knowledge, serving not as a barrier to harmful ideology but as its most efficient vehicle.

At the moment of writing, the university has been lost to a new pseudoscience: antizionism. And there are Jewish faculty, like Fishberg before them, who lent it credibility. Our urgent and ambitious task is to make them see the scholarly error, as Fishberg eventually did, and get them to reverse course.



What the Nazi university did with the “Jewish Question” the contemporary university now does with the “Zionist Question.” Entire disciplines—anthropology, among them—have been reorganized around antizionist libel, based on a Manichean worldview in which “Zionist professors,” “Zionist ideologues,” and “Zionist administrators” are singled out as enemies of justice. In this imaginary, “Zionist” does not denote genuine persons or positions; it works as

an all-encompassing metaphor of corruption that must be purged.

Antizionism is the ideology that treats Jewish peoplehood and sovereignty as an intrinsic injustice. It is today's evolved form of anti-Jewish hate, less crude than classical antisemitism, but no less potent. Antizionism is more abstract, systematized, and rhetorically refined—ideally suited to academic environments that reward oppositional performance and repackage hostility as critical thought.

Antizionism didn't emerge *ex nihilo*. It adapted old libels into new, contextually plausible forms. Its core accusations—colonizer, apartheid, and genocide—can all be understood as mutations of earlier anti-Jewish tropes. The colonizer libel reframes the classical image of the Jew as a foreign usurper or parasitic outsider. The apartheid libel secularizes the older anti-Judaic trope that Jews, as a self-declared “chosen people,” despise others, an image transmuted into the claim that “Zionists” are “racist.” The genocide libel follows the same logic: The Nazis claimed that Jews were plotting to exterminate the German people—Goebbels declaring in 1941 that the Jews had “plans for annihilation” against Germany—while the mufti of Jerusalem broadcast on Nazi radio that Zionists intended to annihilate the Arabs. Classical antisemitism was animated by fantasies of Jewish takeover and national extinction, fantasies that antizionism retools into a vocabulary for describing “Zionism.” The “Zionist,” then, is the new figure of “the Jew”: colonialist, racist, and genocidal.

Yet antizionism could not have achieved its current institutional dominance through ideological content alone. Like most successful anti-Jewish projects before it, from medieval anti-Talmudism to the Soviet *Yevseksiya*—the Jewish section of the Communist Party tasked with suppressing Jewish life—it requires Jewish intermediaries to legitimize its claims. Antizionism depends on figures within the Jewish community who can naturalize its libels, giving the appearance of internal dissent while laundering an external ideology. It is at this junction, where an anti-Jewish ideology seeks Jewish validation, that the contemporary university's crisis deepens.

Jewish anti-Zionists today engage in a consequential conflation that demands conceptual precision to disentangle. Anti-Zionism (with the hyphen) refers to historical Jewish debates about Zionism; antizionism (without the hyphen) names a modern ideology built on libels about Israel. This distinction, standard in contemporary antisemitism studies led by scholars such as David Hirsh and David Seymour, is ignored by some Jewish studies professors—Shaul Magid, Daniel Boyarin, David Biale, and others—whose elision gives ideological cover to antizionism. Their intellectual projects to produce accounts of diasporist Judaism are legitimate, even worthy. But their failure to recognize and acknowledge the difference between their projects and that of antizionism is what grants antizionism its alibi.

Jewish anti-Zionist intellectuals must realize just how much work they're doing for the antizionist hate movement. The issue is not merely the difference between debating the creation of a state before it exists and questioning its legitimacy once it is a legal, historical, and civilizational fact. The real question is whether we can perceive antizionism at all as a concrete social movement and a coherent ideology, and whether we can name it with conceptual precision. It is exactly this linguistic and historical sleight of hand—collapsing pre-1948 Jewish debates about Zionism into today's antizionist hate movement—that furnishes the intellectual alibi for what is otherwise the blunt mechanism of tokenism: the strategic elevation of “some Jews” to legitimize an ideology aimed at Jewish peoplehood.

Anti-Zionist Jews play a key institutional role in the antizionist takeover of the academy, acting as “experts on the Jews” in ways strikingly similar to the Jewish anti-Talmudists of medieval anti-Judaism—figures such as Nicholas Donin, Pablo Christiani, and Johann Pfefferkorn, whose Jewish origins were strategically deployed to legitimize attacks on Judaism itself. These token converts ultimately became proactive preachers of the gospel and aggressive antagonists of European Jews. Hatred directed at Israel is reframed as a higher form of Jewish piety, championed by Jews

who present themselves as guardians of “true Judaism” precisely through their rejection of the Jewish state.



Let’s set the record straight.

There are three sources of pre-1948 Jewish anti-Zionism—liberal, ultra-Orthodox (Haredi), and Marxist—and all three are routinely invoked by antizionists today. The first two have no historical or genealogical connection to contemporary antizionism. Only the third does, and even then not because of anything specifically Jewish in it but because the Soviet Union forged the crystallized form of antizionism itself: the ideological complex that declares “Zionism is racism,” that “Zionists are Nazis,” and that Israel is a genocidal colonial state, as scholar Izabella Tabarovsky has shown. It is this Soviet lineage—not liberal or Haredi dissent—that has now entered the West with such force.

Liberal Jewish opposition to Zionism, exemplified by the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, overlaps with antizionism only superficially. Reform leaders such as Kaufmann Kohler and Isaac Mayer Wise rejected Jewish nationhood in order to secure full civil equality in the Diaspora, emphasizing Judaism as a universal ethical religion rather than a people with territorial ties and claims. Whatever one makes of this assimilationist wager, it sought the acquisition and consolidation of civic rights, rather than the denial or revocation of Jewish political rights that defines contemporary antizionism.

By contrast, antizionism’s rejection of Jewish peoplehood aligns far more with Islamic dhimmitude frameworks, in which Jews were historically defined as a tolerated but subordinated religious minority. The PLO’s 1964 and 1968 charters—which go to extraordinary lengths to deny the existence of the Jewish people altogether—draw on this older pattern. The ideological ancestry of those documents has nothing to do with Reform Judaism’s attempt to secure equal citizenship in Europe or America.

Ultra-Orthodox traditions, which forbade a return to the Land of Israel until the arrival of the Messiah, contain nothing that even remotely resembles the antizionist colonizer libel. The classic Haredi position, articulated in sources such as the Talmud (Ketubot 111a), insisted on divine, not political, redemption. But none of these traditions ever suggested that Jews lacked indigeneity in the Land of Israel. Quite the opposite: The entire halakhic tradition presumes that Eretz Yisrael is the indisputable origin and eternal home of the Jewish People, and that its restoration is the telos of history. Even the fiercest anti-Zionist Hasidic authorities, such as the Satmar Rebbe, also never claimed that Jewish chosenness (*am segula*) implied “racial supremacy.” That idea—the core of the contemporary apartheid libel—originates not in Jewish theology but in its antizionist distortion.

So where does antizionism come from?

The foundational text is arguably Fayeze Sayegh’s *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* (1965), published while he directed the Soviet-sponsored Palestine Research Center in Beirut. Sayegh coined the term *settler colonialism* specifically to describe Israel, redefining colonialism not as a system of economic exploitation, as in classical Marxist theory, but as the mere existence of Jews as an immigrant enclave. Drawing selectively on Marxism, Sayegh preserved the charge of anti-colonial struggle while stripping it of its content, redirecting it toward Jewish particularity itself. Jewish peoplehood was reframed as a colonial fabrication—a “racist ideology” rooted in “biblical chauvinism” and the idea of the “chosen people.” In this way, Sayegh succeeded in repurposing anti-Judaic polemic against Jewish “exclusivity” into a critique of “settler colonialism.”

Settler colonialism did not enter the academic mainstream until decades later. In 1999, Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe revived the framework in his book *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*. In 2006, his now-canonical essay “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” published in the *Journal of Genocide Research*, explicitly applied this eliminatory logic to Israel—casting Zionism as a project structurally driven to remove the “native”

population. This hostile reconstruction marked a critical nexus point: settler-colonial studies fused with the institutional machinery of genocide discourse. Under the editorial influence of Australian scholar Dirk Moses, now at CUNY, the journal became a platform for recasting “Zionism” through Wolfe’s framework.

The *Journal of Genocide Research* became the institutional hub of this ideological convergence, incubating a cohort of genocide-libel theorists—Martin Shaw, Omer Bartov, Raz Segal, Amos Goldberg, and others—who would rise to prominence after October 7, often citing or collaborating with UN official Francesca Albanese, whose work represents the full application of this logic within the UN’s institutionalized system of antizionism.

Jewish anti-Zionists today continue to ignore this history and genealogy, contending that the antizionist hate movement that stormed campuses and captured the international media, and that has long poisoned human rights organizations, is somehow the same as the rich Jewish political debate that preceded 1948. Simply telling this story should be enough to disabuse anyone of the conflation between the anti-Zionism of the past and the anti-Jewish ideology that is antizionism today. The genealogies are simply distinct. Pre-1948 Jewish debates over Zionism are not the source material for contemporary antizionism, with its three core libels of colonizer, apartheid, and genocide.



German Jewish anthropologist Franz Boas devoted his career to disproving pseudoscientific theories of race. Practically inventing the discipline of modern anthropology through his prolific research, most famously of the Inuit of North America’s Pacific Northwest, Boas led the charge against the scientific racism of his time, dismantling the racial typologies that had legitimized oppression. He demonstrated that many so-called racial traits were not fixed biological realities but shaped by environment and culture.

His intervention overturned the categories that had once classified Jews as inherently degenerate or inferior—a foundational move in the struggle for both scientific integrity and minority dignity.

By 1911, Maurice Fishberg had recanted his support for Jewish race science, having moved in the direction opened by Boas, emphasizing the variability of Jewish physical characteristics and the formative role of culture and environment. As he put it, “The differences between Jews and Christians are not everywhere racial, due to anatomical or physiological peculiarities, but are solely the result of the social and political environment.” Yet the race science that conferred scholarly legitimacy on classical antisemitism had not yet been dismantled.

Today we face a different, but no less insidious, pseudoscience—one that masquerades as global justice while recoding Jews as racialized oppressors through the language of indigeneity, whiteness, and decolonization. The Jew once again becomes the world-historical cause of suffering; only now it is “Zionism” that functions as the ontological stain.

Our charge is to reclaim the academy. The goal must be not simply to defend Jews but to repair a broken intellectual order. To expose how anti-Jewish hate has recoded the very disciplines meant to understand the human. To interrupt the ideological machinery that turns truth into sin. We need a Boasian intervention into antizionism today. That means showing today’s Jewish intellectuals what antizionism is and where it actually comes from.

In 1934 Boas, alongside Fishberg and other scholars, convened to explicitly condemn scientific racial essentialism and the authority it had been granted within academic life under Nazism. But by then, it was too late. The Nazis had already begun giving those cranial views some teeth.

*

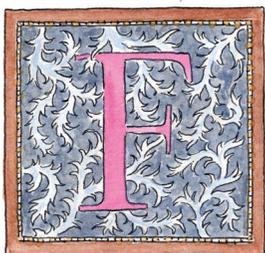
To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



MOSHE BEHAR &
AVITAL BEN SHLOMO

An Education System Worthy of the Jewish State

Decentralization is the answer



FEW IDEAS run deeper in Jewish life than the conviction that learning sustains us. Wherever Jews settled, they established places of study. Study was not merely a route to livelihood; it was the framework of community and continuity. That reverence for education shaped Jewish history and powered Israel's creation in biblical times and re-creation in modern times.

Because of that legacy, one might expect the Jewish state's schools to be strong—that a nation of scientists, entrepreneurs, and soldiers surely excels at teaching its children. Reality is different. Israel's education system, once a symbol of national confidence, is now one of its weakest institutions. And unless it is rebuilt, the country's economic, civic, and even security foundations will erode.

The evidence is stark. In the latest international assessments of 15-year-olds, done by the OECD in 2022, Israel ranked near the bottom in the developed world: 31st in mathematics, 30th in science, 25th in reading. In the most recent international assessment of fourth-graders, in 2021, Israel placed last in reading comprehension across the OECD, whose 38 member countries form much of the developed democratic world and collaborate to set international standards. In eighth-grade math and science, last assessed internationally in 2023, Israel recorded the sharpest decline of any developed country, placing second-to-last.

The picture isn't only about rankings. The number of high-achieving students in Israel has nearly halved since the previous international assessments were done, between 2016 and 2019, while weaker students fall further behind, producing the widest achievement gaps in the West. Surveys of adults show the ultimate effects. Israeli adults rank close to last among developed nations in literacy and numeracy, and national productivity per work hour has slipped from roughly 85 percent of the European average two decades ago to 74 percent today.

All this despite record spending: Israel now devotes almost 5 percent of its GDP to education—the highest share in the OECD. Over the past decade and a half, the budget has tripled and per-student spending has doubled. Student achievement however, has declined. The problem is not money. It is the way the system is built.

Israel's education system is one of the most centralized in the developed world. Roughly 70 percent of key decisions—budgets, staffing, curriculum—are made by the Ministry of Education in Jerusalem. No other OECD country, aside from Turkey and Mexico, concentrates as much educational authority in a single office.

That structure was created in the 1950s, when a young and poor state sought uniformity and control. The goals were understandable:

to integrate a massive immigrant population, forge a shared national identity, and prevent the reemergence of old divisions. But what served a new state well has become a liability for a mature one.

Today, centralization functions less as an equalizer and more as a ceiling. Every innovation—new teaching methods, flexible scheduling, creative budgeting—requires the Ministry’s approval. Teachers and principals spend their energy navigating bureaucracy instead of developing ideas. The logic that once aimed to guarantee fairness now blocks excellence.

The rules governing employment illustrate the point. School principals cannot hire or dismiss teachers directly; the Ministry is the formal employer. Even when a teacher consistently underperforms, removal requires multiple inspections, union consultation, and approval from Jerusalem—a process that can take years. In practice, almost no one is dismissed.

The pay scale reinforces the problem. Contrary to popular belief, average teacher salaries in Israel are not particularly low. OECD data show that teachers in Israel earn between 87 and 92 percent of what other academic professionals make—slightly above the OECD average of 81 to 88 percent. Countries with stronger school systems, such as Finland, Estonia, and Denmark, actually pay teachers significantly less relative to other professions. The problem is not the average compensation but the structure of it. Pay is tied almost entirely to seniority rather than merit. A gifted 30-year-old teacher earns less than half the salary of a mediocre 50-year-old. The message is unmistakable: Wait, don’t excel. As a result, veteran teachers, regardless of ability, remain in place, while talented young educators leave. Nearly 1 in 5 new teachers quits within five years.

These structural distortions shape who chooses to teach. Studies show that Israeli teachers score significantly lower on international measures of literacy and numeracy than teachers in other developed countries. University entrance-exam data reveal that students who plan to become teachers perform well below their peers entering other professions. In countries with a less centralized education

The problem is not the average compensation but the structure of it. Pay is tied almost entirely to seniority rather than merit. A gifted 30-year-old teacher earns less than half the salary of a mediocre 50-year-old. The message is unmistakable: Wait, don't excel.

authority, such as Finland, Estonia, and Denmark, the opposite is true: Teaching attracts strong candidates because it offers both status and independence.

Curriculum control creates the same pattern. Because programs are written centrally and monitored by inspectors, schools have little room to adapt. A school principal cannot shift hours from one subject to another or design an interdisciplinary track without ministerial approval. Teachers cannot pilot new methods unless a national committee first recognizes them. Even the number of weekly lessons in each subject is fixed. This rigidity explains why Israeli students spend more hours in classrooms than almost any of their peers abroad but learn less.

International comparisons show what happens when systems trust their educators. OECD research in 2019 found a clear link between local decision-making and student performance: Countries where schools control hiring, budgeting, and teaching methods achieve higher scores even after accounting for income levels. The explanation is intuitive. When professionals have authority, they take responsibility; when they have none, they simply comply.

The cultural consequences are as damaging as the administrative ones. A centralized system erodes the sense of ownership

that healthy institutions require. Teachers become functionaries, principals become clerks, and parents become bystanders. In the absence of trust, no one feels accountable for outcomes. The Ministry's inspectors can enforce compliance but not motivation. The result is a paradoxical mix of control and chaos — tight regulation at the top, indifference at the bottom.

Partial decentralization already exists within Israel's system, yet even where it works, it is tightly constrained. Many high schools operated by semi-independent networks such as ORT and AMIT generally outperform government-run schools, even though they serve similar populations. Their advantage stems from somewhat greater managerial flexibility, not larger budgets. But even these networks remain bound by the Ministry's regulations and by national labor agreements that govern hiring, pay, and work hours. They can innovate at the margins but only within a narrow corridor defined by the central bureaucracy. The evidence for reform, in other words, is visible inside Israel — it simply hasn't been allowed to mature.

At its core, the problem is not policy but trust. The Ministry of Education was built on the belief that only a central authority can guarantee fairness and prevent chaos. After 75 years of statehood, that belief no longer fits reality. The state's role should be to ensure standards and equity, not to script every classroom. Until Israel restores trust in the people closest to its students, it will continue to confuse management with leadership, and compliance with excellence.



Real reform requires shifting power from the Ministry to the schools while keeping education fully public. Schools should control their own budgets, staffing, and teaching methods. Principals must be free to assemble teams and reward excellence. Teachers must be treated as professionals who can innovate and be held accountable

for results. Parents should have meaningful choice among a diverse range of schools, all operating within a shared civic framework.

Funding should follow the student through a weighted per-pupil model: Each child brings a base allocation, with additional support for disadvantaged backgrounds. Any school that meets clear public standards—a defined core curriculum, civic and national values, transparency, and open admissions—would receive full state funding, whether run by government, a municipality, or a nonprofit network.

This is not privatization. The state continues to define goals and ensure equity; it simply stops trying to micromanage every classroom. The focus shifts from inputs to outcomes.

International experience shows this approach works. Across the OECD, countries that grant schools greater autonomy over budgets and staffing consistently record higher student achievement. Nations such as the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden, where schools operate independently within clear public rules, perform well above average. The United Kingdom’s “academies” system—publicly funded but self-governing—lifted England’s rankings in math, reading, and science from the middle to the top tier within a decade.

Israel’s own health-care system already follows the same principle. Four competing independent health funds deliver universal coverage under national regulation. Patients choose, quality rises, and the system remains entirely public. The Israeli health-care system is widely considered one of the finest in the world. Education can, and should, work the same way.

What prevents it are entrenched interests. The Ministry of Education is reluctant to relinquish control; its bureaucracy is built on it. The teachers’ unions fear flexibility, equating it with instability. Together they form a durable alliance of inertia—the Ministry writing the rules, the unions defending them, and the students straggling behind their international peers.

We witnessed this pattern from two vantage points within the government. Moshe, during his years at the Ministry of Finance,

was responsible for education policy and wage negotiations with the teachers' unions. There he saw how even modest proposals—such as allowing principals to offer small merit bonuses or introducing limited flexibility in teacher contracts—met resistance. The people across the table, from both the Ministry of Education and the unions, were sincere, but the system rewarded caution. Avital, serving as deputy director-general of the Ministry of Education, encountered the same dynamic from inside the ministry itself. When she tried to implement reforms such as individual employment contracts and limited parental choice, she faced not just reluctance but active resistance from senior officials whose formal duty was to advance improvement. From both perspectives, we reached the same conclusion: Israel's education system protects itself more effectively than it protects its students. The structure itself resists improvement.



Changing that structure is not only a matter of policy design. It is a question of political will. Every serious reform in the past two decades—differential budgeting, performance-based pay, local management—has failed not because the evidence was weak but because the incentives were wrong. No government has yet chosen to confront the partnership of bureaucracy and union power that keeps the system frozen.

That is why we helped establish Phoenix for Israel Education, a civil-society initiative devoted to creating the conditions that real reform demands. Our premise is simple: Technical solutions exist, but without a political and social coalition behind them, they will never be adopted.

Phoenix for Israel Education works on three fronts. It develops detailed, research-based policy roadmaps showing that decentralization is both practical and fiscally viable. It builds a broad professional and civic coalition—educators, researchers, parents,

and local leaders—around a shared vision of public education that is accountable and diverse. And it engages decision-makers directly, changing the cost-benefit calculation so that supporting reform becomes politically advantageous rather than risky.

The timing matters. Israel is approaching another election cycle, and after the national trauma of recent years, the appetite for structural change is growing. Civil-society movements are reimagining governance across sectors; education must be part of that conversation. Our task is to turn awareness into consensus, and consensus into political action. The political climate at the moment clouds the urgency of education reform. Every citizen probably agrees, at least in the abstract, that a healthy education system is crucial for any society to thrive. The more that parents and voters articulate a demand for a less centralized system, the more politically feasible meaningful change becomes.

Resistance from within the education system, from both the bureaucracy and the unions, will be strong, but the alternative is continued decline. The longer Israel delays, the more it will spend on remediation instead of excellence, and on social welfare instead of opportunity. Decentralization will not solve every problem overnight, but it will make improvement possible again. It will allow school principals to lead, teachers to teach, and parents to participate. It will replace control with trust and stagnation with responsibility.

Israel's future—economic, civic, and moral—depends on an education system that matches its ambitions. The country that calls itself the People of the Book should not settle for mediocrity in its classrooms. The path to renewal is clear. What's required is the will to take it. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



PART THREE

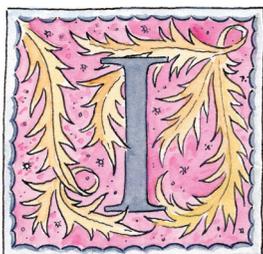
ISRAEL



EVE BARLOW

Queers for Zion

The hatred of Israel is a symptom of what plagues LGBTQ politics today



IS IT OKAY to have a crush on a hostage? The day Emily Damari was released from 471 days of Hamas captivity, she came triumphantly bounding out of the crowds of Gaza as though she was a dyke winning an arm-wrestling contest. It couldn't have been more evident that she was a lesbian had she marched out of Khan Yunis waving a three-dollar bill. She raised her injured hand, missing two fingers—they were shot off when she was kidnapped on October 7 from Kibbutz Kfar Aza—and the gesture of strength and Jewish endurance became an instant meme. When I heard Damari speak in Los Angeles 10 months after her liberation, she was magnificent. A whole person. Gay, Israeli, and—above all—free.

“The enemy is watching all the time,” she said. “We cannot give them any satisfaction that they have broken us.” As she retold some of what she had experienced in Gaza, it was her chutzpah that got

me most. “Every time they called me a prisoner, I would tell them, ‘No, I’m a hostage.’ Prisoners have three meals a day. Prisoners flush the toilet. Prisoners go outside. Prisoners see the sunlight. Prisoners call their families. I’m not a prisoner.” She refused to accept Hamas’s definition of who and what she was.

She even took the opportunity to check the pulse on homophobia in Gaza, asking the terrorist guard what he would do if he found out his brother was gay. He responded instantaneously: “I would kill him.” “But he’s your best friend, your brother, you love him.” Same automated response, except more resolute. “Kill him.” To further their psychological torture, the hostages were often made to watch Al Jazeera. One day, there was a report about the encampments at Columbia University. Damari saw the Queers for Palestine setting up base. “This was insane to me,” she said, still confused by their commitment to self-destruction. “You guys may be for Palestine. But I can tell you, Palestine is not for you.”

When you tell Western keffiyeh-wearing members of the alphabet tribe (I can say that, I’m a proud L of the LGBTQ) that Damari’s sexuality had to be hidden by the media and the Israeli and UK governments while she was in captivity to protect her from immediate execution, they will give you their stock response. They/they will tell you that it doesn’t matter how hateful Hamas is toward gay people and that in Gaza a gay person would be thrown from the tallest building. “Just because someone would kill me for my lifestyle doesn’t mean I won’t speak out for them against their own oppression.”

Surely it should mean *something* to the LGBTQ community that they’re defending their own would-be murderers; at the very least, they should know their proper place in Hamas’s worldview. (Hint: no place.) That this means *nothing* to them says a lot. It shows that they fail to acknowledge their real-life place in the world, and that is itself a very dangerous place to be. This is what the LGBTQ community needs to grapple with, and it’s an ambitious task. It needs to develop a greater self-consciousness and self-perception, an accurate and working sense of its place in society—socially, politically,

and historically. And once it does, it will see the rest of the world more clearly.

I'd like to propose a path toward that self-discovery, starting with a bit of gay political history. How did this happen? How did the LGBTQ community, after generations of fighting for its own sexual rights, end up, for the most part, in bed with homophobic purveyors of sexual (and many other kinds of) violence?

The answer to this question can be found, fittingly, in the annals of gay politics and feminist theory. In 1988, the trailblazing feminist theorist Donna Haraway gave us the concept of “situated knowledge” to explain the perceptual limits of what any individual person or movement can know. Anything that you or I or the groups we're members of know we know only subjectively, from the vantage point of where we stand—socially, politically, racially, economically—in the world. And for most of our decades-long fight for equal rights, the situated vantage point of the gay community was on the political margins. The margin, therefore, is what we know. In 1973, a University of Chicago poll showed that 73 percent of Americans believed that consensual same-sex relations between adults was “always wrong,” and another 7 percent said it was “almost always wrong”: cumulatively, 80 percent of the U.S. electorate. A Gallup poll from 1978, the year that gay activist Harvey Milk was murdered, showed that only 26 percent of Americans would be willing to vote for a gay presidential candidate.

We, or more accurately those who came out before us, spent the next several decades fighting and resisting from the margins. The queers collect causes as if they're going extinct. Posters, plants, pets, you name it, LGBTQ people will adopt it. We seem never to have met a marginal movement we're not ready to jump into bed with. And that is not a coincidence. In the LGBTQ world, protests are the gateway to hook-ups. Romance blossoms from

At every march in every Western town square,
Ls, Gs, Bs, Ts, and Qs bow at the altar of P.

the inherent compulsion to fight for recognition of our love. Our placement on the margins for so long generated its own kind of sexualized energy, a romance of resistance, you might say. And while on the margins, we met a whole slew of other marginal political camps, none were as conversant in the language of resistance, or *muqāwama*, as they say in Arabic, as Free Palestine. By the time of LGBTQ's final offensive in the early 2000s—our battle of the bulge, as it were—the second intifada was in full swing. That was when the colors of Palestine started to become fully interspersed with the rainbow. Since then, the two have been as inseparable on the streets of New York, London, and Paris as they are mutually exclusive in Gaza City and Ramallah. At every march in every Western town square, Ls, Gs, Bs, Ts, and Qs bow at the altar of P.

That the LGBTQ community seems on the cusp of acquiring a new letter that has nothing to do with gender or sexuality is itself a curious absurdity that has little to do with the content of the P cause and far more to do with its placement on the margins of American politics, where we all met. Having come into its own on the sociopolitical margins, the LGBTQ community still sees that place as its home. This situated political “knowledge” has now become irreconcilable with a happy political fact: While the LGBTQ community stays on the margins, its cause now sits firmly at the political center. As of 2019, Gallup notes that 74 percent of Americans are willing to vote for a gay presidential candidate, an exact flip of the percentage from four decades ago. And yet the LGBTQ community has never been able to shed marginalization as a fundamental feature of its political identity. Suffering from

a case of arrested political development, it is perennially drawn toward other movements that will reaffirm that identity. How else can the community hold onto its psychological political home on the edge after it has already launched itself into the center? It insists on its continued marginalization by allying with other marginal movements, regardless of that movement's actual values: homophobia, misogyny, and so on. The blue-haired watermelons will say that their alignment with Hamas's "freedom fighters" is a matter of moral political conscience. It is in fact a matter of subconscious political pathology. The supposed alliance of values is actually a display of psychological and emotional stuntedness. Similar to a rageful extended adolescent who can't get out of his parents' house, it is a community-wide failure to launch.

The shift in the language of gay politics, from "gay and lesbian," denoting a basic sexual preference, to "queer," denoting strangeness, illustrates the community's subconscious preference for the marginal and non-mainstream. To quote the queer theorist David Halperin, "Queer theory proper is often abstracted from the quotidian realities of lesbian and gay male life." This is how queers find themselves marching with those who would destroy the West and the very ideals that made their sexual liberation possible—marching on the same streets where they gained their freedom, no less. (And it is why, if you must know, the first woman I fell in love with idolized terrorist collaborator Frantz Fanon as though he were Atticus Finch.)

Couple all of this with the "postcolonial" framework that has taken root in university humanities departments, where many budding gays end up after leaving home, and you can easily see how today's queers were psychologically and intellectually primed for Palestine.



So here is my provocatively and somewhat ironically phrased proposal: We in the LGBTQ community need to be less progressive and more regressive.

What do I mean by that? We need to regress to our original cause: the global expansion of gay rights. But this time, we need to fight from our well-earned place in the political center. Our psychological fixation on the political margins has become detrimental to our cause because it has resulted in our allyship with movements that don't share it.

In 2021, President Biden issued a presidential memorandum directing departments and agencies to take action “to advance the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons around the world.” Particular focus was devoted to five pillars:

- 1) Combat Criminalization of LGBTQI+ Status or Conduct Abroad
- 2) Protect Vulnerable LGBTQI+ Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- 3) Foreign Assistance to Protect Human Rights and Advance Non-Discrimination
- 4) Swift and Meaningful Responses to Human Rights Abuses of LGBTQI+ Persons Abroad
- 5) Build Coalitions of Like-Minded Nations and Engage International Organizations in the Fight Against LGBTQI+ Discrimination

The fifth and final pillar is a good reflection of the state of global gay affairs. After a half century of painstaking activism inside Western democracies, the gay community has made itself a foreign policy *priority* of those very democracies. The nations of the West today judge one another and others on the basis of how well they treat their LGBTQ citizens. This is a monumental political achievement and one we should recognize with pride. (Recent actions by the Trump administration have shaken this accomplishment; we will see how they play out.)

If I may be so bold, we, members of the global LGBTQ community, should judge and accept allies on the basis of these exact same pillars. If a national political movement wants our help, our bodies on the street, they need to demonstrate their own

The nations of the West today judge one another and others on the basis of how well they treat their LGBTQ citizens. This is a monumental political achievement and one we should recognize with pride.

nation's commitment to these principles. Our political constituency is the same as it's always been: the global gay family. You want us to walk for Palestine? Show us what Palestine is doing for our brothers and sisters on its own streets. Our political allyship isn't free. It requires a commitment to the safety of those whom we have always represented: the frightened, the imprisoned, the closeted whose love remains illegal all over the world. Asserting this is an act of political self-respect and responsibility to our cause. It's a demonstration of a social movement that has reached political maturity. The Free Palestine movement needs the gay movement more than we need them. They should know that, and so should we.

Applying this principle to Israel and the global Jewish community is also a source of pride. It's no coincidence that the boldest, foremost voices in combating antisemitism and anti-Zionism in the past decade have been Jewish gay and lesbian men and women. Many years before October 7, the visible voices for Jews and for Zionism included myself, Ben M. Freeman, Bari Weiss, Hen Mazzig, Shai DeLuca, Blake Flayton, and Matthew Nouriel, to name a few. We knew before many others what was coming on the Left because we had experienced the hostility and the expulsion from our microcosms first: The LGBTQ family discarded us

in favor of those who would imprison them. For the same reason that we built our gay communities, we built a space for Zionists in order to survive and thrive. We carved out that new space from the ground up. We channeled our pain into reconstruction.

Slowly but surely others joined us, including LGBTQ men and women who are not Jewish but were cast out of their puritanical circles. They include Yemeni Muslim advocate Luai Ahmed, and black American media personality Xaviaer DuRousseau. Were the LGBTQ community to take its political responsibility to these people seriously, they would see the Israel that we see: a flawed but durable liberal democracy on whose streets our gay kin fought and won the same way we did. They would see that even Israel's Orthodox have made space for us, as Orit Avishai chronicles with admirable nuance in her book *Queer Judaism: LGBT Activism and the Remaking of Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel*. They would see Israel as a locus of LGBTQ triumph, where the hard work of queer liberation has been done and continues to be done, a feather in the global LGBTQ cap. And perhaps they'd exhibit the same political clarity and situated knowledge as transgender model Madeleine Matar recently did on a podcast. "I am Palestinian as well as Israeli," she said. "The reality is that I have an Israeli passport. I live in the State of Israel. I have Israeli rights. The state gives me my rights as a female. Arab countries do not give you these rights." The time is long overdue for the LGBTQ community to remember that Matar is one of them, not despite her views on Israel, but in alignment with them. People ask me how we can make Zionism compatible with LGBTQs. What? It already is!

LGBTQ Jews are already at the forefront of Israel. The irony of global LGBTQ anti-Zionism is that they should be taking their cue from the LGBTQ community's success in Israel, a profoundly religious and traditional society that has learned to protect and value its queer community. This is the country that gave us Dana International (the stage name of singer Sharon Cohen), the first-ever transgender Eurovision contestant and champion. Viva la Diva! We

have every qualification to be the LGBTQ leaders of the free world. Let's remind them who they are by being louder, prouder, and so fabulous it would be politically ridiculous to exclude us. Let's be so successful at it that the LGBTQs will be begging for a float at the Israel Day parade.

This is not to say there isn't more work to be done within. The time is also long overdue for the State of Israel and Jews in the Diaspora to recognize the LGBTQ leaders who have guided the rest of our community through these dark years. Without such basic recognition, we are denied the authoritative stature that our loudest trolling enemies have when they accuse living and breathing LGBTQ citizens around the world of "pinkwashing" the nation we love and that loves us. They should be made to feel embarrassed by the factual incongruity of their verbal assaults, and the organizations that regularly platform and promote these enemies should hold them to account, including the trolls who claim credibility on account of being Jewish (looking at you, Matt Bernstein—the makeup artist and anti-Israel influencer). If we have any chance in hell of reversing the damage done to the LGBTQ world, the Jewish community must first and foremost make aspirational rock stars of its own LGBTQ leaders before proceeding to tell our stories. They should be investing in Israeli gay talent. There's no reason why Israel can't pioneer the future of the LGBTQ media landscape, lead the fight against discrimination, campaign for gay rights across the world, and produce trendsetting pop culture.

And the stories we tell must be full ones, for we are not just Jews. We are not just Zionists. If Israel is the haven for LGBTQ in the Middle East, and Tel Aviv is one of the best gay metropolises on the planet, with the biggest Pride festival in the Middle East and continental Asia, we must invest in our own lifeblood. Forget teaching the legendary accomplishments of Zionism to our LGBTQ family. They're not ready for that success story. Change the focus from how to undo the harm caused by the Free Palestine movement to fighting for our endangered LGBTQ brethren

throughout the world, including Palestine. We need to renew our focus on the rainbow.

The lesson of our movement rings true: The cure to hate-fueled political shame is everlasting political pride. *

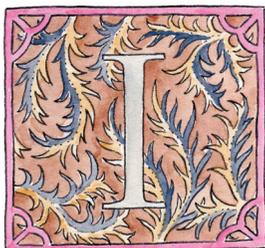
To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



YONATAN ADIRI &
SHACHAR LOTAN

The Silicon Dome

*Israel needs to make itself indispensable
to the technological future*



ISRAEL stands today at a consequential crossroads, situated in its third founding moment. History teaches us that countries are not formed once; they are formed cyclically upon the eventual decay and expiration of a once-powerful political idea.

We must look to examples such as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Deng Xiaoping, all of whom refounded their respective polities with a bold and assertive vision, while noting the failure of the Soviet Union to introduce such reinvention and its subsequent collapse. When we look at the magnitude of the challenges facing Israel today—domestically and geopolitically—the years 1948 and 1985 should come to mind. Those years, which served as dual founding moments for the Jewish state, saw Israel chart its political and economic course for the decades that followed.

Will 2026 be Israel's third founding?

To understand where we must go, we must first understand the distinct nature of these previous turning points.

In 1948, the core of the founding moment was physical sover-

eignty: the triumph of Jewish self-determination after millennia of Diaspora. The War of Independence was a struggle for sheer existence. Israel's second founding, in 1985, was noticeably different. Facing hyperinflation that reached around 450 percent, the Israeli government introduced a major economic-stabilization plan. The plan included severe budget cuts, wage and price controls, and a significant devaluation of the shekel, which helped curb inflation and transition the country to a more capitalist economy. The Israeli new shekel (NIS) was introduced in September and became the country's official currency in January 1986.

Now, in the aftermath of October 7, Israel is at the cusp of its third founding moment. The challenge this time is quite different from those of the past foundings. The political framework that has governed the Israeli polity since 1985—its geopolitical posture, its social contract, and the national narrative—has decayed. Without a thorough redefinition, the current framework will fail.

The task before us is more than the work of repair. We must ask not only how we may secure Israel's survival through continued incremental changes, but how we must position it to thrive and to renew its strategic, civic, and moral foundation for at least a generation ahead.

For the “Founding Grandchildren” who choose to carry this burden of reinvention in Israel, there is a dimension beyond the traditional arenas of geopolitics and economics. This dimension is the heart of our argument: In an era of geopolitical fragmentation and realignment, a nation's weight is no longer measured solely by army size, demography, or territory. What matters equally, if not more, is technological indispensability and the ability to generate globally significant innovation.



The example of Taiwan—a small, vulnerable island nation in a volatile region, with a contested past and a global role today—is perhaps the clearest illustration of this shift. Taiwan's dominance in

semiconductor fabrication has, at least for the time being, secured its geopolitical survival. The world's most powerful nations have a deep interest in Taiwan's stability and sovereignty; this helps to deter China from annexing the small island. Taiwan's innovation has provided its citizens a shield, not of steel but of silicon.

Israel needs a corresponding strategy. We call this strategy the Silicon Dome, a set of industrial technologies that will embed Israel as an indispensable partner for other nations. Taiwan also offers a cautionary tale that Israel must internalize. Its own silicon shield, once thought impenetrable, is showing cracks. Under sustained pressure from Washington, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), the cornerstone of Taiwan's status as an indispensable nation, has committed to a staggering \$165 billion investment in the United States—billed by the chipmaker as the single largest direct foreign investment in U.S. history. TSMC has also been expanding production to Japan and Germany. The implications are profound: What happens to Taiwan once that silicon shield is redistributed across the globe?

For Israel, the Taiwan case study proves that a small nation can punch far above its geopolitical weight through technological indispensability. But it also demonstrates that such indispensability must be constantly renewed and strategically defended. A shield that can be replicated elsewhere eventually loses its protective power. Therefore, Israel cannot build its Silicon Dome using technologies that can be easily transferred or outsourced. It must anchor its indispensability in domains where its unique ecosystem provides an irreplaceable advantage.



Israel's investment in R&D stands at approximately 5.6 percent of its gross domestic product, making it No. 1 in the world in this all-important measure. It boasts more unicorns— independent start-ups valued at \$1 billion or more— per capita than any other

The Silicon Dome is not a substitute
for the Iron Dome; it is its complement.
Where Iron Dome intercepts rockets,
Silicon Dome intercepts irrelevance.

country. It is among a handful of countries to have designed, built, and launched satellites into space. (Notably, it's the only one to have done so westward, against the direction of Earth's rotation, to prevent failed launches from falling into enemy hands.) It was among the first to deploy and operate unmanned aerial vehicles in both tactical and strategic operations as early as the 1970s, when such technology was top-secret.

This high performance in technological innovation was not an accident. It emerged from what can be called Israel's triple helix: the defense establishment, the academic system, and the entrepreneurial sector. The Israeli Defense Forces are not merely a national conscription mechanism; they are, functionally, a sovereign elite research university. Units such as 8200, Talpiot, and Unit 81 teach a cadre of university-age Israelis every year; the training provides them with advanced proficiency in machine learning, cryptography, systems architecture, and algorithmic reasoning, each student having led multidisciplinary teams under real-world pressure.

In academia, Israeli universities are not only intellectual reservoirs but also sovereign engines of commercialization. Strategic arms such as Yissum (Hebrew University), Ramot (Tel Aviv University), and YEDA (Weizmann Institute) have global reach. Collectively, these institutions have generated tens of thousands of patents ranging from pharma to quantum computing and have spawned hundreds of spin-off companies, which are effectively the

third strand, along with thousands of other private start-up firms.

This triple-helix architecture worked marvelously during the first quarter of the 21st century, making Israel one of the wealthiest nations on the globe in GDP per capita. But it was forged in an era when software could be built and replicated quickly, when geopolitical integration seemed steady, and when the frontier of technology was accessible through improvisation. That era is ending.

The next wave of technologies will be capital- and talent-intensive, and infrastructure-heavy. They will demand long horizons, deep interdisciplinary teams, and state-level orchestration. The ad hoc convergence of army, academy, and entrepreneurs might no longer be enough. Unlike Taiwan, Israel cannot afford to outsource its national security to alliances alone; our doctrine remains clear: We must be able to defend ourselves, by ourselves. The Silicon Dome is not a substitute for the Iron Dome; it is its complement. Where Iron Dome intercepts rockets, Silicon Dome intercepts irrelevance.

The urgency of this Silicon Dome was underscored by the release of the latest U.S. National Security Strategy document in December 2025. The White House explicitly identified three specific domains—AI, biotech, and quantum computing—as “core, vital national interests” that will “drive the world forward.” The strategy was given tangible expression in the Department of State’s Pax Silica initiative in global defense technology with the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Australia, all of whom “recognize that a reliable supply chain is indispensable to our mutual economic security.” The message from Washington is clear: These are new frontiers where the United States is not leading as decisively as it should. Therefore, it will prioritize partnerships with nations that can help it maintain dominance in those areas.



To address the growing challenges of our volatile reality—from

climate instability to fragile digital infrastructures—Israel must assert leadership in six revolutionary fields, coined MARQSS:

Materials science: This is the quiet foundation of every technological revolution. New alloys, advanced silicon and carbon compounds, and nanostructures unlock advances in energy storage, aerospace, computing, and defense. The Netherlands became indispensable through advanced semiconductor materials lithography (ASML), a company based there, and its mastery of the lithography machine; similarly, any country that holds key patents and manufacturing know-how in next-generation materials controls the starting block of future industries.

Artificial intelligence: AI is becoming a general-purpose technology like electricity, permeating every industry from health care to national security. While the United States and China build the dominant compute infrastructure, the real opportunity for Israel lies in control over models, data, and deployment at scale.

Robotics: This field merges intelligence with physical action, covering everything from warehouse automation to surgical systems and autonomous defense swarms. While other nations build hardware, Israel already excels in developing the cognitive and perceptual systems that provide the “minds” for robotics.

Quantum computing: Quantum promises breakthroughs in materials, finance, logistics, and cryptography. However, hardware remains fragile and capital-intensive, and the direct race is led by the United States and China. Israel has chosen a leverage point that fits its scale: companies that build the control planes, compilers, and orchestration frameworks that make quantum processors usable.

Synthetic biology: This field turns organisms into programmable platforms, with the potential to produce sustainable food, new therapeutics, clean energy, and climate-resilient agriculture. As supply chains are weaponized and food systems stressed, a nation that can design biology for global needs becomes a partner the world cannot ignore.

Space: Space enables strategic advantage and technological

leadership beyond Earth. Israel is one of a select few nations capable of independently designing, launching, and operating its satellites. The Ofek satellite program, including the recent Ofek 19 with advanced synthetic aperture radar, provides persistent, high-resolution intelligence that secures regional power.

While Israel does not start from scratch in these fields, it falls short in scale and ambition. The Israeli deep-tech ecosystem has attracted more than \$28 billion in investments since 2019. Yet the uncomfortable truth is that public investment in frontier technologies remains modest compared with the size of the challenge and the spending of rivals, most immediately the Gulf states.

The Israel Innovation Authority's annual budget (including grants) stands at approximately NIS 2 billion (roughly \$600 million), a figure that has not been substantially raised in the last decade; *Globes* magazine described it in 2024 as a "marginal organization on the overall investment landscape." The percentage of R&D funding in Israel that comes from the government is the lowest in the OECD. We're getting better, but not fast enough. Israel's new national AI program was recently set up with an R&D budget of more than \$130 million, a serious commitment that nonetheless pales in comparison to the tens of billions being deployed by the United States, China, and the Gulf states. The private sector cannot carry this burden alone; the shift to deep tech requires the state to act as a strategic orchestrator and risk-taker.

And as Israel debates public investment in emerging technologies, a new competitor is emerging. The Gulf Cooperation Council states, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are deploying sovereign wealth to position themselves as global innovation hubs. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has allocated more than \$100 billion to technology investments, while King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) was opened with a \$10 billion endowment. At a single conference in February 2025, Riyadh announced \$14.9 billion in AI and digital-infrastructure investments. The UAE is pursuing a parallel strategy with massive blockchain

projects and entities such as the AI development company G42.

These states possess resources Israel cannot replicate: virtually unlimited capital, abundant energy from oil for data centers, and a large landmass. However, they face structural limitations: a severe shortage of skilled technical talent and an educational system misaligned with industry needs. They lack the indigenous innovation ecosystem that emerges from decades of cultivating an entrepreneurial culture.

For Israel, the rise of the Gulf states presents a paradox. They are regional competitors, yet the Abraham Accords have opened up unprecedented opportunities for cooperation. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy document reinforces this path, since it views the Middle East as a “place of partnership, friendship, and investment.” With the United States seeking to expand the Abraham Accords, a tech-centric alliance between Israel and the Gulf would be a strategic asset to Washington. Israel might recognize the UAE and Saudi Arabia as potential infrastructure partners. A strategic approach could see Israeli innovation running on Gulf-funded compute infrastructure, accessing capital and markets while Gulf states gain access to technologies they cannot develop domestically. But Israel must ensure that collaboration does not become dependency, avoiding the technology transfer that has weakened Taiwan. The MARQSS strategy must focus on domains where Israel’s unique ecosystem provides an irreplaceable advantage: the cognitive layers, algorithms, and bio-designs that cannot simply be purchased.

To address this challenge, Israel has a secret weapon: Jewish people all around the world. In a world where talent trumps territory, Israel and the Jewish people enjoy a unique advantage. Jews are about 0.2 percent of the world’s population yet have accounted for more than 20 percent of Nobel laureates in the sciences. From the discovery of DNA’s double-helix structure to the development of algorithms powering Google, Jewish ingenuity has been a disproportionate driver of modernity.

This advantage is currently being recognized by the market. By

2026, Nvidia is on track to surpass Intel as the largest private high-tech employer in Israel, seeking to hire hundreds of new Israeli personnel, a recruitment effort equal to its search across the rest of the world combined, excluding the United States and Taiwan. This signal is echoed by the personal decision of individuals such as Ilya Sutskever, co-founder of OpenAI, to base his next transformative venture in Israel. This is not a return to a refuge but an arrival at the premier platform for global innovation.

Consequently, building the Silicon Dome should be not only an Israeli national project but also a mission for the entire Jewish world. For decades, the relationship between the Diaspora and Israel has been framed primarily through philanthropy, political advocacy, or trauma solidarity. Now, a new paradigm is urgently needed: a partnership of co-creation.

The resources to achieve this are staggering. The North American Jewish community holds a position of profound influence, steering firms that manage trillions of dollars and overseeing foundations with tens of billions in endowments. This financial capital is matched by intellectual capital in elite universities and venture firms. What is required is a new vehicle for this engagement: not just a Birthright trip, but a “Birthright Laboratory.” Not just fundraising galas for memory, but groundbreaking scientific fellowships for future-making.

Consider the following policy proposal: Israel dedicates an additional 1 percent of its GDP (roughly \$5 billion) to fund dozens of world-class research laboratories in each of the MARQSS domains. This amount — a fraction of the annual defense budget — could be partially funded or even matched by private equity, venture capital, or philanthropy, both in Israel and the Diaspora to double the impact. These labs would be designed to attract the world’s most brilliant minds to a mission rooted in scientific excellence.

The labs would not be ivory towers. They would be engines of policy, economy, and security. Their impact would radiate outward, cementing Israel’s role as a partner in global regeneration.

Imagine a materials lab in the Negev developing atmospheric water-harvesting technology to combat desertification in Africa; a robotics lab in Tel Aviv creating affordable remote surgical systems for rural Asia; and a synthetic biology lab in Jerusalem designing self-fertilizing crops to restore depleted soil in Europe. This is the vision: an Israel that is not only a start-up nation, but a level-up nation for the entire world.



Israel's first founding moment gave Jews a state. The second gave that state a modern economy. The third must give it leverage.

The Silicon Dome is a proposal for how Israel can serve the world while securing itself. It answers Washington's strategic call for allies to "stand on their own feet," and it shows how relations between Israel and the Diaspora can be reconstituted as a partnership of scientific co-creation, sending a clear signal to friends and rivals alike that the Jewish state is an indispensable part of civilization's future. But the window for action is narrowing. Taiwan's silicon shield is being redistributed; the Gulf states are deploying sovereign wealth at scales Israel cannot match; and China and the United States are engaged in a technological cold war that will reshape global power structures.

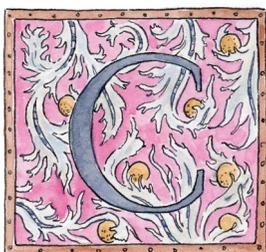
In this environment, incrementalism is not caution, it is a risk. The absence of a transformational strategy is itself a strategic choice, one that silently accepts gradual marginalization. The Silicon Dome offers a different path. It recognizes that Israel's greatest asset is not its territory or military hardware, but the minds of the people who love it. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



An Israeli Constitution

Necessary, doable, and overdue



ONSTITUTIONS are often created around the time a state is born. Israel missed that opportunity in 1948. Instead, another inspiring and foundational document was adopted—the Declaration of Independence—a secular sacred text in the eyes of most Israelis. Yet it doesn't carry the force of law and lacks the core components that characterize national constitutions. Today, Israel is an almost singular international exception: a democracy without a constitution.

The absence of a constitution carries significant implications. Just as the exodus from Egypt was a hurried flight from slavery to freedom, so too was the Jewish people's return from exile to statehood. Herzl's *Judenstaat* became Ben-Gurion's *medina yehudit* (Jewish state) in the blink of a historical eye—about 50 years. Political Zionism managed to build governing institutions, ensure security, stabilize the economy, make the desert bloom,

and ingather exiles. Yet it failed to lay all this on the solid foundation of broad social agreements regarding identity, values, and the institutions of governance—in effect, the “regime”—that are the core elements of any constitution.

In retrospect, this is understandable: Jews had no recent political experience in establishing and running a state. For nearly 2,000 years, Jews lived as a dispersed minority under the rule of others. Time was needed for the experiential maturation required to internalize what it means to have a Jewish state and to concretize that idea into a binding constitution.

In its early decades, even without a constitution, Israel functioned as a consensual democracy, operating through cooperation among its diverse sectors to achieve national goals. This came at a cost, such as the melting-pot policy that suppressed the distinctive voices of diverse cultural, geographic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. But success was recorded in the test of results—and the results, on the whole, were good.



In recent decades, however, Israel has shifted from consensual democracy to crisis democracy. Public discourse has become obsessively focused on identity disputes among Israelis, degenerating into constant power struggles. And unlike in other countries, Israel conducts these struggles without a constitutional compass—that is, without any principled or practical limits on conduct in the public sphere. How can a constitution help stabilize Israeli democracy?

The Governmental Level

In the absence of a constitution, the powers of the three branches of government and the checks and balances between them can be easily altered by a simple Knesset majority. Over the years, the Knesset has legislated some of these issues as “Basic Laws”

intended to serve as chapters of an eventual Israeli constitution. But these, too, can be amended, even overridden, by a simple parliamentary majority and, as a result, undergo frequent changes. In the past decade alone, the number of amendments to Israel's Basic Laws has exceeded the total number of amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The fragility of Israel's system of government tempted the current coalition to declare a sweeping judicial reform, which many Israelis perceived as a regime revolution that could undermine the democratic character of the state.

In a reality where an election winner can change the rules of the democratic game to suit his coalition's immediate political interests, Israeli governance stands on shifting sands. The result is instability in public life, severe clashes between the branches of government, erosion of public trust in institutions, and deepening social polarization that resembles a cold civil war. A constitution is needed to set the rules of the game. These rules must be entrenched so that changing them requires broad consensus. They would provide a safety net that enables ideological disputes to be managed within an agreed framework—a safe harbor for Israel's democracy.

The aspiration to stabilize democracy may be fulfilled by a “thin constitution” that will regulate only the particulars of governance and will not deal with fundamental values-based questions such as a bill of human rights, the interplay of religion and state, or relations between the country's national majority and minority populations. The thinness of the constitution is required to enable broad public consensus on the contents of its text. This is possible, despite the ongoing culture war, since all political actors operate, to borrow a phrase from John Rawls, “behind a veil of ignorance.” There is no telling which camp will be charged with forming the next governing coalition or the one after that. Fair and effective rules—under which the winner does not take all and the loser is not trampled—provide a necessary safety net for all.

According to a December 2025 poll by the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI), most Israelis believe that internal tensions pose

A thin constitution is an urgent, vital treatment. It's not a cure. It would stabilize the patient, as doctors do in an emergency room, allowing state and society to move toward a more ambitious therapeutic process: the establishment of a full constitution.

a greater danger to the country's future than do external security threats. A thin constitution is an ambitious attempt to reduce the hazards arising from internal conflict—not by settling it but by reaching an agreed-upon arrangement for managing civic conduct under conditions of deep disagreement. With this in mind, JPPI is currently working on a detailed proposal for a thin constitution to be submitted to whoever forms Israel's next government.

The Symbolic and Educational Level

A thin constitution is an urgent, vital treatment. It's not a cure. It would stabilize the patient, as doctors do in an emergency room, allowing state and society to move toward a more ambitious therapeutic process: the establishment of a full constitution.

A full constitution would articulate and codify a political imagination shared by the vast majority of Israelis—a vision that would enable them to feel always at home in Israel, now and in generations to come, despite cultural, religious, political, and ethnic diversity. A full constitution would forge, alongside the *covenant of fate* imposed on Israelis by enemies, a *covenant of destiny* chosen of their own volition. But is this within the realm of possibility?

Israeli society is still in its national adolescence: wrestling with identity, battling inner demons, and struggling to agree on its core values.

In a sense, Israel is like a 77-year-old behaving like a 17-year-old.

Today, the tension between the two components of Israel's self-definition as a Jewish and democratic state has become a tug-of-war among identity groups. At the extremes, some (parts of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish public) reject the democratic element, while others (some non-Jewish Israelis) reject the Jewish element. But even the broad Israeli mainstream, which supports the dual definition, tussles over how to balance its elements and is generally divided about the universal and particular aspects of national life. This reflects the fact that Israeli society is still in its national adolescence: wrestling with identity, battling inner demons, and struggling to agree on its core values. In a sense, Israel is like a 77-year-old behaving like a 17-year-old.

Against this backdrop, it's worth asking whether a full constitution can heal rifts and bridge cultural divides. Every constitution has inherent limitations stemming from its legal nature (which replaces open-ended discourse with binding decisions) and from its presumptuousness (as the founding generation seeks to impose its preferences on future generations). It may even turn out to be a double-edged sword, since it grants power to its interpreter — and who can guarantee what the motives and interests of future interpreters will be?

Nevertheless, despite such risks, Israel would do well to strive for a full constitution in the foreseeable future. A constitution has

tremendous educational and symbolic value, defining the collective credo of the society it regulates. It is the mine from which a nation extracts its meaning for generations down the line. It determines the boundaries of the possible and shapes the depths of the personal and collective consciousness of its citizens.

The Values Level

Which social agreements should shape the Israeli credo? Which values should be promoted, and which should be rejected?

As mentioned, Israelis are deeply divided over these questions. Given this division, the Israeli constitution should delineate an open normative and conceptual framework—“a sphere of constitutional legitimacy”—that provides sufficient space for future generations to choose the specific value preferences that seem right to them in Israel’s continuing journey toward maturity. But it must also rule out completely the possibility of choosing the extremist ideas that threaten Israel today.

If this is done, Israel will be able to regain its social balance. The menacing specter lurking in the Jewish collective memory—the destruction of the Temple brought about by internal strife—will be laid to rest.

Here are some precepts that could serve as a basis for a future constitutional framework:

On the *identity* level, the constitutional protection of democratic statehood would weaken existing antidemocratic tendencies in Israel rooted in religion, nationality, or vested interests. At the same time, the constitutional entrenchment of Jewish statehood would safeguard against both internal opposition (arising from extreme progressive ideologies, identity crises, or demographic anxieties) and external attacks (rooted in delegitimization of Zionism, the Palestinian “right of return” demands, or global homogenizing forces that seek to erase cultural and national uniqueness).

On the *national* level, the constitution should guarantee the

individual human rights of Israel's Arab minority while also instilling awareness that the state has a Jewish national identity and all that implies for the character of the public domain. Extremes — from Jewish Kahanism on one side to Arab autonomy movements on the other — should be rejected outright.

On the *religious* level, the constitution should clarify that there is no place for religious coercion, even if the political power of religious and ultra-Orthodox groups grows. At the same time, it should ensure that no “secular revolution” could infringe on freedom of religion and worship. The place of religion in the state would be both limited and defined.

Regarding *human rights*, Israel's current law permits a simple Knesset majority to easily constrain freedom of expression, equality, or the right to education. In this respect, Israel dramatically lags behind the world's other democracies. It is shameful that the nation-state of the Jewish people, whose thought and heritage helped inspire the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, remains nearly alone without such a charter. A full constitution must correct this.



Twenty years ago, I was among the youngest participants in the effort to draft a “Constitution by Consensus” under the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Meir Shamgar. At the time, I wrote a personal credo that began with these words:

Sovereign Jewish existence, a rarity in human history, is the fundamental experience of my life. For me, the State of Israel is not merely a socio-political framework that allows convenient organization — security, social, economic, or otherwise — of a national collective. It is a primary element of my identity, a vital expression of my Judaism, of my being, of who I am. . . . With a keen historical sense — aware of the exile of past generations, their deprivation, and the Holocaust of the last century — I

consider myself extraordinarily fortunate to have been born into this state. And as great as the privilege is, so too is the responsibility. Against this backdrop, participation in drafting Israel's constitution is, for me, a task of the utmost importance.

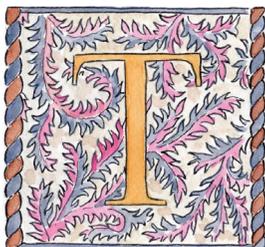
That effort, like many others over the years, failed. Yet events have proved that it remains as necessary as ever—indeed, even more. A covenantal people require a covenant with destiny to ensure their survival and prosperity in their own land. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



Israeli Brain Gain

*Keeping Israel's most gifted citizens
in their country*



TAKE A VISIT to Terminal 3 at Ben-Gurion Airport on any given day, and you'll see them. They're easy to spot among tourists and vacationers, corralling their families while schlepping far too many suitcases for a short holiday. Their facial expressions exhibit a mix of excitement and worry. Doctors worn down to the bone, software engineers anxious about the future of the industry, and researchers who find a more suitable outlet for their skills overseas. They are, collectively, Israel's "brain drain"—a term that sounds academic and distant but in practice represents the quietest and most dangerous hemorrhage taking place in the State of Israel.

Their decision to leave, or not to return after what was intended as a two- to three-year sojourn, does not happen overnight, and it's not accompanied by front-page headlines. It happens in quiet Friday-night living-room conversations, in parents' WhatsApp groups, and in hesitant LinkedIn posts announcing a "new beginning." If

emigration from Israel was once considered a taboo—or at least a step taken quietly and with a certain sense of shame—in recent decades, and especially since the judicial-reform protests in 2023 and the beginning of the war, it has become a legitimate and even desirable option among broad segments of Israeli society.

These segments are not random. A study published in 2007 showed that educated Israelis were two-and-a-half times more likely to emigrate than those without a bachelor's degree. And data from 2025 show that the higher one's education level, the higher the likelihood of emigration, with 11.9 percent of Israeli Ph.D. graduates living abroad for three years or more. These are precisely the segments of the population that contribute the most to the economy. Israel can't afford to lose them.

Why is Israel losing them, and how can it get them back?



To start with the good news, Israel's brain drain is a global vote of confidence in Israel's higher education system. The large cohort of Israeli college graduates working abroad (54,778 of them in 2024) is a testament to their desirability on the international labor market, which is today characterized by increasing flexibility, highly trained workers, and a technological orientation. The rapid growth of the information economy, the pace of technological change, and massive investments in research and development have generated global demand for workers with high-level technological and scientific training. The global nature and international connectivity of academia on the one hand, and the high-tech industry on the other, enable broad and easy movement of engineers, scientists, and researchers between countries. This reality underlies the international competition among developed countries for knowledge, skills, and human capital. And Israelis are highly competitive and prized in this market.

The problem is that their absence from Israel's economy means

that they are not contributing to it, and senior economists have long warned that this economy rests on an astonishingly narrow base of high-quality human capital. When a senior engineer, a brain surgeon, or an artificial intelligence researcher leaves Israel, she takes with her not only her purchasing power but also her talent and creativity, decades of state investment in education, and the potential to create additional jobs and attract foreign investment. Israel risks shifting from a growing and thriving economy to a stagnating one with low growth rates and declining standards of living.

The medical sector may be the field in which the danger is most tangible and immediate. Israel's health-care system suffers from a chronic shortage of physicians and has for many years largely relied on medical doctors educated or trained abroad. A significant portion of these physicians came from the former Soviet Union and are nearing or past the age of retirement. When hundreds of doctors—residents and specialists—submit applications for relocation fellowships with no intention of returning, or they simply emigrate to countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States, the shortage is exacerbated and the result immediate: longer waiting times, overcrowded emergency rooms, and declining quality of medical care for every Israeli citizen. Medical research is, of course, also harmed under these circumstances.

The Israeli economy is built on a “locomotive and railcars” model. The locomotive is the high-tech sector, advanced industries, and academic research. This sector constitutes a relatively small share of total employment (about 10 to 12 percent), yet it's responsible for the lion's share of economic growth, technological development and export, and state tax revenue. These sources of revenue are necessary to finance the state's welfare services, security, education, and health-care systems. According to the Shores Institute for Socioeconomic Research, “In a country of 10 million people, 287,000 persons (roughly 3% of the population) are key to Israel's primary economic engine, are key to the

Brain drain is not a one-time event;
it is a self-reinforcing process that creates
a negative vicious cycle.

society's healthcare, are key to maintaining Israel's cutting-edge research and innovation capabilities.”

Brain drain is not a one-time event; it is a self-reinforcing process that creates a negative vicious cycle. The initial damage to state revenues leads first to deficits and cuts to public services, education, and infrastructure, reducing quality of life and further encouraging emigration of talented individuals with options elsewhere. Those leaving are often liberal and secular. Their departure alters Israel's demographic and political balance, potentially accelerating extremist trends that further alienate the remaining population of innovators.

The “start-up nation” needs entrepreneurs. When founders register companies in Delaware and manage them from New York or London, intellectual property, knowledge, and all their rich cultural accoutrement leave as well. Once these citizens leave, it's very difficult to get them back. They set down roots in their new home.

If Israel loses its locomotive, the railcars will lie immobile and precipitate the loss of Israel's comparative advantage. Israel is something of an economic miracle: a young, small country that since its founding 77 years ago has faced immense security challenges and massive immigration absorption, a country largely devoid of significant natural resources (aside from natural gas in recent years), yet one that has developed a prosperous and growing economy with GDP per capita exceeding \$50,000 per year. Israel built the core of its economic and security strength on its investment in brain power. The more of that brain power it loses, the weaker, poorer, and less secure it will be.

So how bad is it?

In 2024, for the first time in many years, Israel recorded a clear negative migration balance of Israelis holding academic degrees from Israeli institutions. Forecasts for 2025–2026 anticipate a persistently high negative balance, contingent on Israel’s economic and security stability.

The proportion of degree holders among those leaving has risen significantly and exceeds their proportion among returnees. According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), about 60 percent of those who left in 2023 had a bachelor’s degree, many of them adults ages 25 to 45: the age range of peak productivity. As reported in *Ha’aretz*, CBS found that “25.4 percent of recipients of Israeli doctorates in mathematics were living abroad. The numbers were 21.7 percent for computer science, 19.4 percent for genetics, 17.3 percent for microbiology, 17 percent for physics and around 14 percent for chemistry, electrical engineering and biology.”

Reports from the Israel Innovation Authority point to the departure of thousands of senior high-tech employees and experts during 2023–2024, directly harming Israel’s innovation and growth capacity.

According to Shores data, no other country comes close to Israel in terms of the share of its population studying or working in U.S. academic institutions. Not only is net emigration of Israeli faculty and researchers increasing, but the higher the quality of the academic institution, the higher the emigration rate of its graduates. Emigration rates are highest among graduates of universities, followed by academic colleges, and then teacher-training colleges. The highest emigration rates are among university graduates in science and engineering.

It’s customary to divide migration drivers into “push factors” and “pull factors.” In the current Israeli case, push and pull

factors engage in a symbiotic dance, and lately the push factors have been leading.

1. *Cost of living and housing*: Until 2023, this was the major pull factor. Israel is among the most expensive countries in the world. Soaring housing prices have pushed the dream of home ownership out of reach for young couples, even when both work in high tech. Comparisons with other Western countries — where one can purchase a house with a garden for the price of a modest three-room apartment in Israel's periphery — constitute an enormous economic temptation. Israelis faced with attractive economic prospects abroad have often left Israel reluctantly, citing the inability to pass up the option of a more financially comfortable life.

2. *Political and social instability and polarization*: In 2023, the governmental attempt at judicial overhaul and the deep social rupture it created cracked the sense of belonging and personal security among many in the upper-middle class. The feeling that the unwritten social contract between citizen and state had been violated, and that Israel's core values as a liberal democracy were at risk, pushed many to seek societies where liberal democracy was perceived as more secure from internal threats.

3. *Security and prolonged war*: The Iron Swords War following the October 7 attacks has compounded the push. Beyond physical danger, the war created extreme uncertainty about the future. Young families fear raising children amid sirens and constant insecurity. Lengthy and exhausting reserve duty, which severely affected both the self-employed and salaried workers, became for many the straw that broke the camel's back.

4. *Academia and research*: Israeli researchers in particular face growing difficulties at home: shrinking research budgets, heavy teaching loads, and sometimes overt or covert academic boycotts by institutions abroad that complicate international collaboration while based in Israel. They are enticed abroad by the promise of greater academic freedom and generous budgets.

In 2024, for the first time in many years, Israel recorded a clear negative migration balance of Israelis holding academic degrees from Israeli institutions.

The central question is whether this process is irreversible. Israel has experienced emigration waves before—for instance, during the recession of the 1960s—and has always rebounded. This time, the challenge is more complex and not all of the factors are in Israel’s control alone.

For that reason, Israel must address, as thoroughly as it can, the factors within its control, beginning with an inconvenient truth: Israel’s brain drain poses as much of an existential threat to its future as any of its foreign enemies do. The crisis requires an emergency action plan, before it’s too late.

Building and Revitalizing University Infrastructure

The plan needs to focus, first and foremost, on the basic, fundamental element of Israel’s locomotive engine: the academy. If Israel’s academic research infrastructure is made robust enough to compete with that of other countries, the industrial base for commercial enterprises will stay close to it. The current moment, with Israelis experiencing a hostile political climate abroad, may offer a window of opportunity to attract Israeli researchers back home and incentivize those already in Israel to stay. But creating the most attractive incentives to achieve this goal requires

a keen understanding of the market for top research talent.

From a professional point of view, what every researcher values most is excellent research conditions — laboratories and equipment, access to research grants, and top-shelf research partners — that will facilitate their work at the highest level.

Israeli academic institutions face significant challenges when competing with the set of conditions that leading universities in the United States and Europe can offer:

- Large research budgets
- State-of-the-art laboratories
- High salaries
- Access to an international pool of gifted students and post-doctoral fellows
- Prestigious academic appointments

At the same time, Israel's universities have long punched above their weight. Before Israel was the economic powerhouse that it is today, it was already producing world-class research. Its universities were the toast of the Mediterranean despite their relatively modest budgets in an agricultural economy. Now that Israel has a modern economy, it must reinvest its substantial state resources into the production of advanced labs, ample funding for research initiatives, and, yes, salaries that can compete with those abroad.

And the funding for these initiatives needn't come entirely from the state. At a time when Jewish donors are rethinking their charitable relationships with America's most prestigious universities, Israeli universities, and the government ministries themselves, should identify these donors and actively pursue partnerships with them on the grounds of the potentially catalytic impact of their investment in Israel's future. The government has failed to see the urgency of this crisis, embroiled as it has been in the war and the many daily and weekly crises that characterize Israel's political scene. The brain drain simply has not found its way onto the policy agenda. This is why anyone with the means or connections to

get policymakers to devote attention to this crisis should use every possible lever to do so. If you are an investor or philanthropist who loves Israel, use whatever leverage you have to build momentum and get money behind this idea.

The influx of such resources would have the opposite effect of the brain-drain cycle; it would create a positive spiral rippling outward and upward to the entire society, not to mention the world.

Policy Change

These direct incentives in the academic sphere should be accompanied by additional macro policy priorities, particularly cost-of-living and housing issues. Since home ownership is a primary pull factor for many young educated people, they need to see it as an attainable goal if they are to stay or be drawn back to Israel. That means a policy of dramatic housing expansion and development.

Israel's 3 percent, its 287,000-strong core, also wants to know that they are committing to a state that is committed to itself as a secure liberal democracy. Restoring a sense of stability and calm to the political situation will disempower the push factors unleashed since the furor over judicial reform.

Combining the elements below will enhance Israeli universities' competitiveness, incentivize researchers abroad to return, and strengthen existing pull factors, which are already significant:

- An open and efficient academic system that is less hierarchical and less bureaucratic; more collaborative and open, and capable of doing more with less.
- A culture that fosters intellectual independence, with young researchers being given autonomy from Day One while enjoying relatively low teaching loads.
- A profound sense of mission, offering the intangible satisfaction of knowing that research not only advances science and knowledge but also contributes to Israel's well-being and resilience.

Israel's brain drain poses as much of an existential threat to its future as any of its foreign enemies do.

- “The Israeli pace,” entailing a work environment that is less formal and more dynamic.

Many Israeli researchers want to stay in Israel, and many abroad want to return. Or at least they want to want to. They're primed for persuasion. They want to raise their children in an Israeli framework, close to family and close friends. The push and pull factors have just, in recent years, become increasingly strong. Many want Israel to pull them back, and they want it to happen at the most opportune stage in their career and lifespan.

Two points in time are particularly effective. First, after the postdoctoral stage, when researchers are early in their career and have not yet formed deep institutional ties abroad. That's also when family units are younger and less established, making the decision to return easier. Second, during their children's adolescence, when they want their children to live in Israel and absorb Israeli culture, this sometimes coincides with a desire to care for aging parents in Israel.

The recently published brain drain data from the Central Bureau of Statistics should be as a wake-up call. The problem is real, and it's happening fast. Currently existing programs—such as the Beresheet program for returning outstanding postdoctoral fellows and the OR program for outstanding senior researchers, operated

by the Israel Science Foundation (ISF) through a combination of state and philanthropic funding—can be models for a joint government and philanthropic approach to the crisis. A philanthropic-government partnership sends a message of national importance and allows the ISF to expand the number of fellowships, increasing the chances of bringing Israel’s best minds home.

National Research Centers

Another proposal is the establishment of national research institutes, akin to national laboratories, in high-priority fields, capable of absorbing significant numbers of returning Israeli researchers. Each institute would be devoted to a small selection of the world’s major challenges—food insecurity, climate science, artificial intelligence processing, bioconvergence—and be granted the resources necessary to be a leading center in its field. Here, too, funding would combine public and philanthropic sources, along with commercialization of research outputs. Resource concentration would enable top-level research. Beyond their economic and social value, such institutes would attract the attention of outstanding Israeli researchers who now work abroad. The institutes would house laboratories, each of which would cost around \$15 million to build and \$20 million annually to operate. Allocation of funds for these labs must become a national priority, and we must all do whatever is in our power to get it on the legislative agenda. Surely this is one policy initiative that the governing coalition and the opposition should theoretically agree on: ensuring the future of Israel’s human capital.

Network Israeli Research Across the Globe

Finally, we must never give up on those researchers who choose to work abroad for now. It’s Israel’s job to ensure that their professional ties to Israel’s research community do not fray. This could be done by establishing a network called the Israeli Community

for Academic Excellence, that would be a platform for top Israeli researchers abroad to contribute academically to Israeli universities. There is genuine interest within Israel's scholarly expat population to maintain ties and contribute to the Israeli academy. This can be facilitated through, for example, periodic stays and teaching in Israel, summer semesters, doctoral supervision, online courses, hosting Israeli students in overseas labs, and expanding collaborative research between Israeli and overseas scholars.

Israel's brain drain is a flashing warning light for the "start-up nation" vehicle, indicating that its gas is running low. Those who are leaving are the best of Israel's sons and daughters, including IDF reserve commanders who are also technological entrepreneurs and who can lead Israel in the global economy.

An Israel without its best human capital would be a fundamentally different country: poorer, weaker, and more vulnerable. Confronting the brain drain is not only an economic imperative. It's the heart of struggle to define Israel's very character for the decades ahead. The time to act is now, before the drain trickle turns into a flood.

This is perhaps Zionism's greatest 21st-century challenge. Israel is itself the laboratory that Zionism built. Now let's use it. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.



DEPARTURES



JEREMY DAUBER

Jewish Masterpiece: The Foundation Trilogy

Isaac Asimov's prophets, from Moses to Freud



ON FIRST GLANCE — maybe even second or third — Isaac Asimov’s Foundation trilogy hardly seems to fit into the category of “Jewish masterpiece.” Masterpiece, sure: Ever since it was first published in short-story form in the 1940s and as novels a decade later, it’s been firmly lodged at or near the top of every list of the best science fiction of all time. But Jewish?

And in case you haven’t read it — or haven’t since you were 12, or know it only from the current Apple TV adaptation — a look back at the original material won’t provide an easy answer, either. The novels portray a galactic empire decaying from the periphery inward and heading toward a millennia-spanning dark age. It’s too late to stave off the darkness. But the depth of misery can be curtailed by a few individuals of goodwill who can save civilization by establishing the eponymous Foundation to ride out the

chaos that's soon to follow. They will be guided by the tenets of "psychohistory" — a mathematically precise prediction, at least in the aggregate, of future human affairs, presided over by the hologrammatic ghost of the projection's prime expositor, Hari Seldon.

If you look for overtly Jewish characters in the trilogy, you won't find them. Born Jewish, Asimov was an avowed atheist. So how to proceed, at least in an intellectually responsible fashion? Perhaps by taking a page from the tenets that Asimov articulates in the Foundation trilogy itself: suggesting, à la his psychohistory, that the Jewish currents that moved and shaped him operated in ways that were deeply, even subconsciously, formative.



Isaac Asimov's first short story was called "Ad Astra," or "To the Stars" — as classic an exposition of aspiration as ever there was. And Asimov's use of that Latin tag, from early on, indicated a very specific kind of aspiration: an immigrant's drive to acculturate and assimilate. That aspiration was at home in the hothouse Jewish-immigrant milieu of the man with a deeply Jewish first name and an obviously Eastern European surname. If the goal of many early- and mid-20th-century Jews was to make their way into mass culture, one can easily see Asimov's project, beginning with "Ad Astra," in that same vein of pop acculturation: a young man trying to show the goyim he could play on their field.

You can see this in so many American Jewish masterpieces of the day, from Superman to Tin Pan Alley to *Your Show of Shows*: Jewishness not only *was* effaced, it *had* to be. That was part of not just the bargain but the dream: to make other kinds of affiliations and connections, to move beyond the shtetl to the American social stratosphere. The aspiration was to be accepted in broader American culture, even if it meant leaving one's community behind. The scientists of Asimov's Foundation are stand-ins for the people he was trying to reach, modeled as they were on the

science-fiction enthusiasts of his day: a small, intellectually superior, highly evolved, and socially marginalized group. If you'd asked Asimov which writers he admired, he'd have given you Gentile names such as Robert Heinlein and A.E. van Vogt, not Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Babel. The historian on his mind as he composed the Foundation stories was Edward Gibbon, not Heinrich Graetz. He wanted to change history by writing about the future.

But the model for Hari Seldon, the prime mover of Asimov's three-part Foundation story, was certainly modeled on a Viennese Jew who had tried, and one could say succeeded more than anyone, to assimilate: Sigmund Freud. It's not too much to say that Freudian traces are everywhere in Asimov's work, but it requires a bit of processing to uncover them all.

First, Asimov's narrative conceit in the Foundation trilogy has more than a little to do with Jewishness, in that it involves a fetishization of intellectual activity intended to secure the future. This isn't to say that the famously secular Asimov was a fan of Jewish text study. His father, though Orthodox, made no effort to teach his son Jewish prayers, as Asimov later recalled in his memoir, and there's no sign that Asimov was ever interested in picking up that thread. In the trilogy, the scientists of the Foundation publicly clothe their scientific achievements in "priestly" (as Asimov puts it) mumbo jumbo, conjuring a ruse of religious ritual in order to conceal the real scientific work of psychohistory.

And yet in private these Foundation scientists continue to hold Seldon in a worshipful light, which seems not quite suitable for a man merely of science. Could he be something more? When, as an old man's ghost, Seldon appears in the holoscreen during moments of crisis, he sure looks like an old-time prophet, and even the Foundation's own members — expostulating with phrases such as "By Seldon!" — tend to treat him as one. Modeled on Freud, Seldon also has a note of the psychohistorical prophet in him.

Moreover, Asimov repeatedly insists that it's impossible to understand the math that psychohistory relies on, making it an

It's not too much to say that Freudian traces are everywhere in Asimov's work, but it requires a bit of processing to uncover them all.

esoteric text reminiscent of Kabbalah. It is literally kept hidden away and appears as a kind of glowing almost-tablet-type object called the Prime Radiant. This is the kind of thing that would have us paging Dr. Freud—except, of course, that he already appears (figuratively) over and over again, throughout the work. It's as though Asimov simply could not get away from the Jewish subconscious.

And we can go further: Seldon's (and Asimov's) dream of predicting history—the essence of the Foundation—is a staple of many religious faiths, and Jewish history is no exception to the rule. Science fiction, it is often argued, is a literature of ideas. It's less frequently referred to as a literature of theories of history, though it can be. And Asimov's theory of history—psychohistory, that is, the one that guides the trilogy's creation—is reminiscent of the one that the great Jewish historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi would posit decades later. Yerushalmi famously referred to history as “the faith of fallen Jews,” and there is a way in which Asimov, that atheistic Jew who canonizes Freud in his fiction, takes that dictum to the next level.

How so? Yerushalmi explains that, in real life, humans have a complex and complementary relationship between history and memory, and Jews more so than most. Memory, one can say, is a story that we tell, and the way Asimov balances history and memory in the Foundation trilogy is entirely in line with Yerushalmi's Jewish story of that balance. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells a story to the Children of Israel about their destitute past and divine redemption,

and he tells them to tell that story to their own children after them. Check: This is precisely what Seldon, who knows he cannot get to the Promised Land, does, and the story is repeated over and over again, in tones of myth and memory, by Foundation descendants.

Then came Freud—a central figure in Yerushalmi’s story as well as Asimov’s—who wrote a book about Moses and developed a “talking cure” that requires telling, listening, and interpretation. Check again. The Foundation trilogy doesn’t really focus on whether or not the galaxy will be saved. What it does, like Freudian psychoanalysis and Jewish textual practice did before it, is focus on how the past can best be mined to solve the problems that spring up in the present. Both methods prize talk and debate. Tellingly, most of Asimov’s heroes are not men of action, in contrast to, say, those heroes of Asimov’s non-Jewish peer Heinlein, whose heroes (like Heinlein himself) have more than a whiff of the military about them. Asimov’s priests are men of intellect who talk and puzzle and debate over questions and explanations and theories and counter theories and false leads and red herrings much the same way students in a yeshiva talk and puzzle and debate.

And more than even *that*. Yerushalmi, the historian, cast Freud’s writing (particularly his writing about Moses) as a history of the Jewish psyche after a lifetime of attempted Austro-German assimilation. Yerushalmi could have written history the way he did only after digesting the events Asimov was living through as he wrote the bulk of the Foundation stories: World War II and the Shoah. For many iconic American Jewish cultural creators, including Jack Kirby, co-creator of Captain America, fighting Hitler was an aspiration they embraced in every aspect of their American and Jewish identity. And the Foundation trilogy’s most, and indeed only, memorable villain, the Mule—a mutant with an uncanny, mind-controlling charisma—isn’t *exactly* Adolf Hitler, but there are more than a few correspondences. Asimov certainly understood, and made clear in the Foundation trilogy, that he was chronicling nothing less than a civilizational battle and that

his chosen people, whether they were Jews, Americans, or galactic priests, stood for civilization. And their victory—recounted to us in Asimov’s final, postwar version of the trilogy, which inserts excerpts from *Encyclopedia Galactica*, written long after the Foundation’s triumph—means nothing less than realizing the dream of a promised land.

Asimov’s Foundation trilogy is, indeed, about reaching for the stars. But what matters more than that is the way the stars, the fallen worlds of the past, come back, constantly, to us. *

To read and share
this article online,
scan the QR code.





Letters

Readers respond

The letters below respond to our Money issue of Fall 2025. Additional letters can be found on our website at sapirjournal.org/letters. We welcome your responses to the current issue at letters@sapirjournal.org.

To the Editor:



N “The Need for a Jewish Sovereign Wealth Fund,” Jordan Chandler Hirsch offers a serious and stimulating account of the pressures facing American Jewish institutions in an age of technological disruption, political volatility, and cultural fragmentation. His diagnosis is thoughtful. His proposed cure—a communal vehicle modeled on a Persian Gulf–style sovereign wealth fund—is not. The model misunderstands what has made American Jewish life uniquely successful, obscures the centrality of the State of Israel in Jewish political identity, and implicitly concedes ground to those who mischaracterize the U.S.-Israel relationship.

I respond not to dismiss Hirsch but to build on a conversation that he has helpfully begun. As an American Jewish conservative committed to renewing the institutions that have long sustained

Jewish flourishing in this country, I share much of his concern. But we part ways on the remedy. The American Jewish community already possesses tools that are more effective, more legitimate, and far more aligned with Jewish and American political traditions than the model Hirsch proposes.

I. The Uniqueness of the American Jewish Experience

To understand why Hirsch's solution falls short, we must begin with the most important fact about Jews in the United States: American Jewry is not simply another diaspora community. It is the beneficiary of a political order unlike any other in Jewish history.

America is not a place where Jews merely found refuge; it is a place where Jews became full partners in the nation's civic project. The United States is a covenantal republic, not an ethnic or tribal nation-state. As Jonathan Sacks argued, its political philosophy rests on consent, moral responsibility, and the dignity of the individual. As Meir Soloveichik has shown, the American constitutional order—its structures, its jurisprudence, and its underlying moral vision—created an environment singularly hospitable to a minority faith animated by ethical monotheism.

This is why American *shtadlanut*—the communal advocacy tradition inherited from Europe and elsewhere—was always different from its Old World counterparts. In Europe, the *shtadlan* petitioned princes for protection. In America, Jews became law-makers, judges, advocates, and public servants shaping the nation's moral and political trajectory. That Louis Brandeis served as a justice of the Supreme Court and as a leading figure in American Jewish civic affairs says more about America—and about the confidence and civic integration of its Jews—than about anything resembling traditional emissary politics.

By the mid-20th century, American *shtadlanut* was already declining because the American system rendered it unnecessary. Jews did not need intermediaries. They were citizens.

This is why the American Jewish experience has been the most successful diaspora experience in Jewish history. To suggest that this civic architecture is too fragile to sustain Jewish engagement today is to underestimate American exceptionalism itself.

II. The Missing State: Israel and Jewish Political Life

Hirsch's argument also overlooks the central role of the modern State of Israel in shaping Jewish political identity. *Shtadlanut* was already waning in the United States for the reasons outlined above, but 1948 completed its demise. With the founding of Israel, Jewish security ceased to depend on the goodwill of foreign rulers or communal emissaries. It rested on Jewish sovereignty—on the decisions of an elected government responsible for defense, diplomacy, and statecraft.

Any framework for American Jewish strategy that sidelines the State of Israel therefore misunderstands the past 75-plus years of Jewish political life.

But Hirsch's proposal raises a more troubling issue. It risks reinforcing the antisemitic trope—pushed by both the far Left and the far Right—that U.S. security assistance to Israel results from a sinister, ethnically driven lobby acting against American interests. This is not only false; it is profoundly dangerous.

As scholars such as Daniel Samet and Walter Russell Mead have documented, U.S. support for Israel is grounded firmly in American national interests and has been sustained on a bipartisan basis for decades. Israel enhances U.S. deterrence, provides intelligence advantages, stabilizes a volatile region, and reduces the burden on American servicemembers.

My own view—shaped most recently by the events of 2024 and 2025—is that the United States has enjoyed an extraordinary return on investment from its security partnership with Israel. Far from undermining U.S. interests, the relationship has strengthened them.

Against this backdrop, the notion that Israel should—or would—trade its U.S. security-assistance program for reliance on a communal investment vehicle managed by private investors unaccountable to the government of Israel is not merely impractical. It’s unrealistic and conceptually incoherent, and it undermines Israel’s sovereignty.

If Israel chooses to restructure its security relationship with the United States in the future, that decision belongs to the government of Israel, negotiated with the government of the United States.

A sovereign Israel makes sovereign decisions. American Jews should support that sovereignty; we should not substitute for it.

III. Tocqueville, Lincoln, and the American Civic Inheritance

The most serious flaw in Hirsch’s proposal is its departure from the Tocquevillian understanding of American civic life. Alexis de Tocqueville recognized that America’s vitality rested on not only its institutions but also its “habits of the heart”—the moral and religious commitments that animated civic association, self-government, and shared responsibility.

A young Abraham Lincoln echoed this insight in his Lyceum Address in 1838. America, he warned, would not be destroyed by foreign foes: “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher.” The Republic’s future hinged on Americans’ fidelity to the principles of liberty, law, and civic virtue.

Ronald Reagan drew from the same civic well in 1983 when he declared that “for America to be great, it must also be good.”

American Jews have long contributed to this moral ecosystem. Through our synagogues, schools, charities, legal advocacy, and civic activism, we helped strengthen the Judeo-Christian framework on which the American project rests. This civic-moral investment—not a pooled financial instrument—has been the true source of American Jewish resilience.

IV. A Recent Test of Jewish Civic Strength

The durability of this civic inheritance was evident in the response to recent controversies. After Tucker Carlson’s interview with Nick Fuentes—and amid the turmoil surrounding the Heritage Foundation—what mattered most was not the presence of a communal fund. It was the responsiveness of American Jews acting as full participants in American civic life.

The Republican Jewish Coalition led the national pushback, rallying major conservative leaders to repudiate Fuentes and those who flirted with his antisemitic rhetoric. In the conservative podcast sphere, Ben Shapiro and Josh Hammer mounted a forceful defense of Jewish dignity. In the tech and entrepreneurial community, leaders such as Joe Lonsdale and Sean Maguire responded decisively and unapologetically.

This was a coalition rooted in civic virtue, not capital allocation. It succeeded not because of a communal fund, but because American Jews acted confidently as American citizens.

V. The Real Work Ahead

The challenges that Hirsch identifies—technological disruption, polarization, antisemitism—are serious. But his solution misdiagnoses the problem.

What American Jewry requires is not a sovereign wealth fund but a renewal of the civic, moral, and institutional commitments that have sustained us since the Founding:

- Strengthening American civic institutions—schools, synagogues, associations, local communities
- Rebuilding moral excellence and public virtue
- Recommitting to America’s founding principles, as Lincoln urged
- Affirming Israel’s sovereign prerogatives in all matters of national security

- Equipping American Jews to act confidently as citizens, not intermediaries
- Building cross-sector alliances to defend liberal democracy and reject hatred in all its forms

These tasks require leadership, courage, and civic imagination — not a new financial structure.

VI. Conclusion: The Covenant We Inherited

Hirsch deserves credit for raising urgent questions. But the path forward for American Jewry does not lie in adopting a Gulf-state financial model. It lies in renewing the American covenant — a covenant grounded in moral purpose, civic responsibility, and the dignity of every human being.

America has been the most successful Diaspora home in Jewish history because its political philosophy aligns deeply with Jewish ethical commitments. We honor that legacy not by mimicking Bahrain but by deepening our engagement with America's founding principles, by heeding Lincoln's warnings, by recalling Reagan's conviction that goodness is the foundation of greatness, and by recognizing Israel as a sovereign partner in Jewish destiny.

American Jews have long embodied what Hirsch seeks: resilience, civic responsibility, and moral courage. Our task is to continue that work — not replace it.

ROGER ZAKHEIM

Director, Ronald Reagan Institute

Simi Valley, Calif.

Roger Zakheim and Jordan Chandler Hirsch joined Bret Stephens for a SAPIR event to discuss Hirsch's article and Zakheim's response. Watch it on YouTube or stream it as a podcast by visiting sapijournal.org/conversations.

To the Editor:



THE PROPOSAL that American Jews establish a sovereign wealth fund rests on a flawed premise of parallel sovereignty. Unintentionally, it implies the troubling trope of Jewish dual loyalty. While Jews are unquestionably a people, a definition that transcends modern categories, our national identity is unambiguously American.

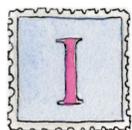
That semantic error should not distract from a real need that Hirsch emphasizes: for a more intentional and values-driven Jewish approach to communal investing. The question, however, is not whether Jewish capital should be mobilized with purpose, but where it can be deployed most effectively.

Unlike the author, I believe that the public market—not private equity—is the proper arena. Investor advocacy for Jewish values is most visible, transparent, and accountable in the public markets. It is also where the long-term contest over corporate governance and the normalization of BDS will be decided.

Encouragingly, 2025 saw the launch of the first actively Jewish exchange-traded fund that places Jewish values at the center of investment selection and shareholder engagement. It is early innings, but it reflects a communal imperative grounded in the institutions we share as Americans.

GREG BOROFSKY
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Jordan Chandler Hirsch responds:



I AM GRATEFUL to Roger Zakheim and Greg Borofsky for their engagement. Their counterarguments help refine my argument for a Jewish sovereign wealth fund—and underscore its need.

Zakheim's portrayal of the American constitutional order, and of the Jewish community's role in it, is stirring. He rightly

celebrates Jewish contributions to American civic life, but the successes he cites as evidence of transcending *shtadlanut* (American Jews serving as lawmakers, judges, and public servants) were, in fact, the ultimate proof of it: a highly effective, elite-level version of communal advocacy. We can no longer rely on Tocquevillian “habits of the heart” alone in a low-trust society where those very institutions are in decline. We must speak and act in a new language: the language of power. My proposal isn’t a retreat from the American promise; it’s doubling down on America, and an investment in a future where we act as a self-assured people pursuing our interests openly.

Borofsky argues that doing so would raise the specter of “dual loyalty” because any discussion of “sovereignty” would call into question our “unambiguously American” national identity. We are, indeed, American through and through — which is precisely why we should stop appealing to decaying institutions like a protected class and instead start acting like confident citizens. In today’s anti-institutional climate, a model of influence mediated through a fading establishment only feeds suspicion. By making Jewish interests sovereign, we trade “shadowy” tropes for an authentic, unapologetic presence.

Finally, while public-market advocacy has its place, it is institutionalism par excellence. Attempting to influence corporate governance via ETFs is an incremental response to a revolutionary moment. It does not carve out power and respect in the anti-institutional world, nor does it provide a new model for the Jewish self-assertion that Borofsky agrees we need.

The greatest risk to Jewish flourishing today isn’t that we wield our power too boldly, but that we will fail to adapt while the world shifts beneath us. We must act as sovereign partners in the American project, not just its nervous beneficiaries.

To the Editor:



S I READ Ilana M. Horwitz’s excellent article “Poverty and Jewish Community; Dispatches from the Margins,” the menorah previously owned by my friend Susan Silverman, of blessed memory, was on a table next to me. I had left it there to remind me to clean off the wax before putting it away until next Hanukkah.

Thinking about Susan, I was disappointed that the article left out one of the groups that lack access to Jewish communal support: LGBTQ+ Jews, who have often fled the synagogues of their youth (and sometimes have cut ties with their birth families) for many reasons including the Jewish community’s intense focus on, and pressure to participate in, heterosexual marriages in which the spouses have children; anti-gay teachings in our tradition; discrimination against our intimate relationships; and lack of welcome.

I would like to suggest an additional “key intervention.” But first, a story: In the years after the 1969 Stonewall Riots, Susan and I were both lesbian leaders in New York City’s emerging movement for gay and lesbian liberation. In 2014, when she retired after a long career as a social worker, Susan moved from Brooklyn to Philadelphia’s “gayborhood,” into the newly built John C. Anderson Apartments, the first federally funded LGBTQ+ affordable senior-living community in the nation. Susan died in August 2022, at age 73, after a short, acute illness and decades of chronic health problems. We spoke weekly during the last few years of Susan’s life, and I visited her in Philadelphia several times from my home in Washington State.

The myth that all gays are rich is as false as the myth that all Jews are rich. Compared with the general population, seniors in the LGBTQ+ community are less likely to have grown children or other family support.

Susan had never had a high-paying job, and she didn’t have children. In retirement, she relied on Social Security, food stamps, a

small pension, the mutual-aid practices she was a leader in creating at Anderson Apartments, and well-honed skills in the frugal use of her limited resources. A primary reason she was able to consistently prepare herself nutritious meals was that she received food deliveries from several social-service agencies.

The food boxes that she told me about most often—because they made her so happy—included kosher food and Jewish holiday items. (From my research, I’m guessing that these boxes came from the Jewish Relief Agency.) Though Susan did not belong to a synagogue as an adult or attend services, she always had a strong Jewish identity. She certainly didn’t keep kosher, but those boxes of kosher food and items for the Jewish holidays made her feel cared for in a way no other support did. When she talked about them, her accent from growing up in Queens became more pronounced, and she used more Yiddish words.

The intervention I would add to the list in the article is: Reach out to LGBTQ+ organizations and individuals in your community.

Perhaps the way to spread information about the availability of support for vulnerable Jews who need services might be marching in Pride parades and having a table during Pride fairs.

Perhaps synagogues that welcome LGBTQ+ people could communicate to the LGBTQ+ community that lots has changed in the past few decades, with many rabbis now performing gay weddings. Other changes that might make a positive difference include substituting “parents” for “fathers and mothers” in prayers; offering “B-Mitzvah” ceremonies; and starting to explore how to use the newly developed grammar of non-gendered Hebrew. Those who fled Jewish community organizations might be empowered to consider new choices if they have this information.

The best people to ask for advice on how to accomplish this intervention are the LGBTQ+ people who are already participating in Jewish organizations, despite the challenges. Such conversations would surely lead to creative ideas for building

connections with other LGBTQ+ Jews, whether things are going well for them or they are in need of support.

EMILY WEINER
Bellingham, Washington

To the Editor:



LANA Horwitz’s insightful article “Poverty and Jewish Community” correctly highlights the challenge of reaching Jewish individuals who exist on the margins of communal life. She notes that the infrastructure of mutual aid, while powerful, can inadvertently exclude those lacking strong social connections.

We at the Jewish Relief Agency (JRA) of Philadelphia were saddened to read that Kari, a mother in our service area, felt that there hadn’t been “any outreach from the JRA or any of the resources around here.”

This experience reflects the painful reality of isolation for some in our community, and as an organization dedicated to helping those caught in the crisis of food insecurity, JRA does not wait for the vulnerable to come to us; we actively seek them out.

To reach Jews who might not be connected to traditional food programs, we recently partnered with Chesed Philly to provide 118 food boxes as gifts to their clients. This effort was a tangible gesture to remind individuals—who may feel isolated or too ashamed to ask—that JRA is here to help and that they are not forgotten. As a result of this outreach, 13 new families have signed up to receive food packages from JRA. We all need various kinds of help throughout our lives, and as so many of us have experienced, asking for it can sometimes be the greatest barrier to receiving.

This is where the collective responsibility of our community meets the necessity of individual action. Hillel the Elder taught in *Pirkei Avot* (2:4), “Do not separate yourself from the community.” The maxim is applicable to all members of the community, as we are all givers and receivers in different ways. By demonstrating consistent, visible, and dignified outreach, we hope to build the

trust necessary to close the gap between those we serve and those who, sadly, remain isolated from the communal help they deserve. Our commitment is to make sure that geography, class, and family structure never prevent anyone in the Jewish community from accessing aid.

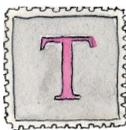
This is why Horowitz’s focus on the social-bonding potential of horizontal and vertical relationships is so on point. It is tremendously difficult for any nonprofit organization, no matter how dedicated, to reach and sustain assistance for individuals who have fundamentally removed themselves from all communal touchpoints. Our safety net is built on relationships, but it requires a connection point—a rabbi, a school, a friend, or even a single phone call—to activate. Our constant work is to widen the net, remove the stigma, and lower the barriers to entry, and we call on anyone who could use our help to take the first, brave step of contact.

We noted with appreciation that, in their streamed SAPIR Conversation on December 18, Horwitz and Phil Getz acknowledged JRA’s invaluable work. We feel likewise about SAPIR and thank you for devoting attention to this important issue facing our community.

RACHEL SCHWARTZ
Chair, Jewish Relief Agency

STEVE SCHAUDER
Executive Director, Jewish Relief Agency
Bala Cynwyd, Pa.

Ilana Horwitz responds:



THE LETTER from the Jewish Relief Agency (JRA) leadership is a welcome reminder that the gap between need and access is one that dedicated organizations are actively working to close. As I noted in my earlier research on Jewish communal responses during Covid-19 (“Ties in Tough Times: How Social Capital Helps Lower-Income Jewish Parents Weather the Economic Hardship of COVID-19,”

published five years ago in *Contemporary Jewry*) JRA was able to continue food distribution to more than 6,000 clients monthly during the pandemic and began delivering food directly to clients who could no longer visit food banks. JRA's work is exemplary, and their new partnership with Chesed Philly is exactly the kind of proactive outreach needed.

That said, Kari's experience as described in my article is not a criticism of JRA; it is a data point about what isolation feels like from the inside. It is also worth noting, in connection with Emily Weiner's letter, that this interviewee is an LGBTQ+ Jew—someone whose economic vulnerability is compounded by the particular barriers that LGBTQ+ Jews face in accessing communal support. One of the central findings of one of my studies quoted in the article—"On the Edge: Voices of Economic Vulnerability in U.S. Jewish Communities"—is that economically vulnerable Jews often have weaker communal connections and that LGBTQ+ individuals are overrepresented among those facing economic distress. JRA's own insight that their safety net "requires a connection point (e.g., a rabbi, a school, a friend, or even a single phone call) to activate" underscores the structural challenge. For someone like Kari, who is navigating both economic vulnerability and the alienation that LGBTQ+ Jews often experience from Jewish institutions, those connection points may simply not exist.

This is not a failure of any single organization, but rather a structural reality that demands a communal response. This is precisely why I am grateful that organizations such as JRA are committed to widening the net.

Emily Weiner's letter and the story of her friend Susan powerfully illustrate the structural reality. Our research documents specific challenges that LGBTQ+ Jews experiencing economic vulnerability face: lack of family support when families have rejected them based on their sexual or gender identities, painful experiences of institutional rejection, particular medical and mental health needs, and—since October 7—increased difficulty

finding comfort in progressive spaces that are not specifically Jewish.

Our recommendations call for reimagining Jewish communal life to reflect diverse family structures and economic realities, including creating programs that serve LGBTQ+ Jews and supporting initiatives that resonate with Jews whose lives don't align with traditional communal norms.

Susan's story captures how Jewish identity doesn't disappear when people leave institutional Jewish life. A box of kosher food delivered to an affordable senior apartment in Philadelphia's gayborhood kept that connection alive. Weiner is right that Jewish communities must proactively build bridges to LGBTQ+ organizations and individuals—not wait for people to come back on their own. *

To read and share these
and other letters online,
scan the QR code.



CONTRIBUTORS

YONATAN ADIRI is the founder and former president of Healthy.io, where he pioneered the transformation of the smartphone camera into a clinical-grade medical device, and the co-founder of Alenu, a civic movement advancing a practical, coalition-building vision for Israel's social and economic renewal.

YAROM ARIAV is a senior economist and strategic consultant with extensive experience in macroeconomic policy and public administration. He served as the director general of the Israeli Ministry of Finance from 2007 to 2009.

EVE BARLOW is the owner of the Substack *Blacklisted*. Formerly a music and film journalist, she is a leading pro-Israel voice in today's media landscape.

MOSHE BEHAR serves as the director of planning, budgeting, and monitoring at the Israeli Ministry of National Security. He spent 14 years at Israel's Ministry of Finance, where he focused on education policy and institutional reform.

AVITAL BEN SHLOMO is a former deputy director general of Israel's Ministry of Education and former director of the education-policy department at the Kohelet Policy Forum, where she worked for a decade as a research fellow.

MIJAL BITTON is a scholar-in-residence at Maimonides Fund and the *rosh kehilla* at the Downtown Minyan in New York City.

JEREMY DAUBER is the Mendelson Family Professor of American Studies at Columbia University and the director of its Center for American Studies. His most recent book is *American Scary*.

JOSHUA FOER is the co-founder of several Jewish enterprises, including Lehrhaus, Leviathan Productions, Sefaria, Sukkah

City, and Atlas Obscura. He is also the author of *Moonwalking with Einstein* and a director of the Jim Joseph Foundation.

WILLIAM FOSTER is the managing partner of the Bridgespan Group, a 501(c)(3) strategy consulting firm that serves philanthropists, impact investors, and nonprofit organizations.

DARA HORN is the author of seven books, including *People Love Dead Jews*, and the founder and president of The Tell Institute.

RACHEL KAY has more than two decades of private-sector human resources leadership experience and is a board member of Leading Edge and Harvard Hillel.

SHACHAR LOTAN serves as the vice president of R&D at Alenu, where he directs data and research initiatives.

ADAM LOUIS-KLEIN is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at McGill University.

BRET STEPHENS is the editor-in-chief of SAPIR.

YEDIDIA STERN is the president of the Jewish People Policy Institute and a full professor in the Faculty of Law at Bar-Ilan University.

SHUKI TAYLOR is the founder and CEO of M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education. He previously served as the director of service learning and experiential education at Yeshiva University.

ADAM TEITELBAUM founded Level III Industries to uplift Torah wisdom and Jewish ritual as the foundation for fatherhood after directing programs at Alpha Epsilon Pi, AIPAC, and the Jewish Federations of North America. He is a proud husband and the father of two boys.



MAIMONIDES FUND

Maimonides Fund is a private grantmaking organization inspired by our namesake's commitment to Jewish faith, Jewish peoplehood, citizenship, and science.

וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת
רַגְלָיו כָּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבַנְת הַסִּפִּיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטֹהַר:

— שמות כד:י

What our system needs is a whole lot of things that fail because that'll tell us that we've taken the kinds of bold bets we need in order to be innovative, keep up with the times, and change in the way that we need to change.

JOSHUA FOER · 14

Societies heal men not by feminizing them but by initiating them.

ADAM TEITELBAUM · 56

My goal isn't to defeat American antisemitism. It's to turn the tide on the ignorance that makes well-meaning people susceptible to it.

DARA HORN · 68

The irony of global LGBTQ anti-Zionism is that they should be taking their cue from the LGBTQ community's success in Israel, a profoundly religious and traditional society that has learned to protect and value its queer community.

EVE BARLOW · 108

Israel's first founding moment gave Jews a state. The second gave that state a modern economy. The third must give it leverage.

YONATAN ADIRI & SHACHAR LOTAN · 118

A constitution is needed to set the rules of the game. These rules must be entrenched so that changing them requires broad consensus. They would provide a safety net that enables ideological disputes to be managed within an agreed framework — a safe harbor for Israel's democracy.

YEDIDIA STERN · 128