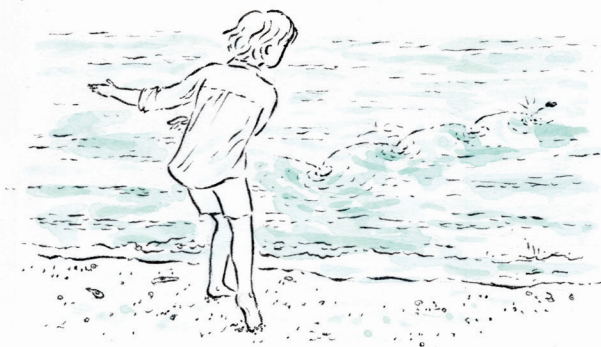


S A P I R

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

THE ISSUE ON

INFLUENCE



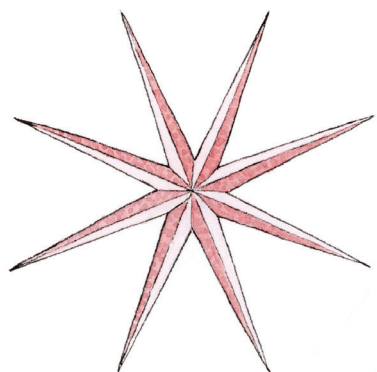
Vol. Twenty-Two



Summer 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



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Note on the cover: Since SAPIR's second issue on Power, we've come to learn that power has limits. Influence and the struggle for it is just as central to the human condition as much by the struggle. By simply skipping a rock, a seemingly powerless child learns how a tiny stone can influence the behavior of water, of life, and all that sustains it.

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BRET STEPHENS

The Anxiety of (Waning) Jewish Influence

A note on our present predicament



LAW-SCHOOL student at Harvard once asked me how I dealt with the power that comes with being an opinion columnist at the *New York Times*. I had to stifle a laugh. Contrary to what she seemed to think, products do not move, or troops deploy, or guilty verdicts get handed down, on account of anything I say or write. Indeed, with the qualified exceptions of my children, my finances, and my dog, I wield power over nothing and nobody.

What I have, at best, isn't power but *influence*. It's important to understand the difference. Power is the capacity to control resources or compel behavior. Influence is the ability to persuade people and shape public opinion. Power does not require assent. Influence does. Influence can be a means to power, and influence can flow from power. But it is not power itself and, as often as not, can be at odds with it.

For Jews, the paradox of our time is this: In many ways, we are as powerful as we've ever been. Yet we are also at one of the lowest ebbs of our influence.



Consider various indices of Jewish power. Despite the disappointments of the Iran war, Israel fields the Middle East's most capable military and probably the most capable air force in the world save for those of the United States and China. With a population smaller than that of the Czech Republic, it is the world's 18th-largest exporter of digital technology, the seventh-largest exporter of arms, and the fourth-largest per capita creator of "unicorn" companies with a valuation of more than \$1 billion. Its per capita GDP exceeds that of Germany, Canada, and Qatar. There are more billionaires in Israel (42) than in Japan (41) or Saudi Arabia (15). As for the United States, where Jews account for about 2.4 percent of the population, 10 senators and six governors are Jewish, as are five of the 10 richest Americans and six of the eight presidents of the Ivy League. Jews continue to be captains of industry in everything from sports to finance to high tech to agriculture.

Yet the trajectory of Jewish influence has moved in the opposite direction. JD Vance, the vice president, was crass but not far from the mark when he said in June that "Donald J. Trump is the only head of state in the entire world who is sympathetic to the nation of Israel at this moment in time." In New York—the city of Herb Lehman, Ed Koch, and Mike Bloomberg—Democrats just nominated a slate of Israel-hating congressional candidates, one of whom openly cheered the attacks of October 7. Chuck Schumer, the minority leader in the Senate, published a book about antisemitism in 2025; he had to cancel most of his speaking tour for fear of incessant heckling. Ten years ago, there were three Jewish members of the Supreme Court. Now there's one.

Things are no better in the cultural sphere. At America's bicentennial, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth all contended for the post of the great American novelist; Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Milton Friedman were the great public intellectuals of the Right; Michael Walzer, Susan Sontag, and Paul Samuelson

the great intellectuals of the Left. They have no real equivalents today. Hollywood, an industry created by Jews, had no room for Jews when its own museum, the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, created an exhibit in 2021 to celebrate diversity in the movies. Three years later, when it sought to correct the error amid an uproar, it opened a new exhibit on the industry's Jewish founders that openly demonized them, causing a fresh uproar. At elite universities, Eric Kaufmann has found that the share of Jewish undergraduates fell from around 20 percent at the turn of the century to around 7 percent in this decade, while the share of young Jewish academics has fallen to about 4 percent. In the art world, one Jewish museum director had her home vandalized with Hamas graffiti; another was forced out over spurious racism allegations; a third resigned her position for being insufficiently attuned to "the movement for change" around the time of the George Floyd protests.

"In 2014 there were 16-20 Jewish artists featured at the Whitney Biennial," noted the writer Jacob Savage in a seminal 2023 essay in *Tablet*, "The Vanishing." "After a very public campaign against a Jewish board member with ties to the Israeli defense establishment, the curators got the message. The 2022 biennial featured just 1-2 Jews."

And then there is our dwindling social capital, registered in our inability to defend some of our most basic communal interests. Fifty-one years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Catholic Democratic professor representing a Protestant Republican president as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, could denounce the "Zionism is racism" resolution in ringing language that, a year later, would help propel him to the Senate. Today, the mayor of New York can be denounced by 700 rabbis for using antisemitic tropes to denounce AIPAC as "monsters" who deploy "millions in dark money" to "preserve their power," and the reaction of liberal America amounts to a yawn and a shrug. On the Right, the so-called Groyperers who follow the Hitler-admiring media personality Nick Fuentes are an ascendant force among young conservatives. Yet

It's a mistake to suppose that our influence is waning in much the way the influence of the old WASP establishment waned: that is, gradually and gently. Our influence is under a sharp, deliberate, and intensifying assault.

when Ben Shapiro denounced Fuentes (along with Fuentes enabler Tucker Carlson) at a Turning Point USA conference in December, he was derided for it by Megyn Kelly, the former pro-Israel podcaster who has learned which way the wind is blowing.

And on it goes—not always a uniform push toward Jewish social, cultural, and political diminishment, but an unmistakable and unrelenting one. How did this happen? And what, if anything, can be done to reverse it?



Begin with the most benign interpretation possible: What many Jews see as a loss of influence may, in many respects, be a natural downsizing as other highly motivated minorities rise to some of the high places we once occupied. Should we, for instance, complain that talented Asian kids are the “new Jews” of elite academia? And are things really so dire when Noah Kahan, the folk-pop music sensation from Vermont, proudly describes himself as “the Jewish Ed Sheeran”?

Yet it's a mistake to suppose that our influence is waning in much the way the influence of the old WASP establishment waned: that is, gradually and gently. Our influence is under a sharp, deliberate, and intensifying assault.

Part of the assault comes from the historic enemies of the Jews: antisemites masquerading as anti-Zionists along with antisemites of a more straightforward variety. They have been greatly aided by the culture's gatekeepers (some of them Jewish), who have decreed, for instance, that the pro-Hamas influencer Hasan Piker is a legitimate voice of the progressive Left; or that the Nazi-themed tattoo once worn by former Maine Senate candidate Graham Platner isn't politically disqualifying; or that Tucker Carlson's chumminess with Fuentes does little to diminish his standing within the conservative movement; or that accusing Israel of genocide is an intellectually and empirically justified position; or who think that the newsworthy fact about a man who drove his truck into a Michigan synagogue is that he had a relative killed in an Israeli airstrike in Lebanon—never mind that the relative was a member of Hezbollah.

It's the thinking of those gatekeepers, rather than of the hardened Jew-haters themselves, that needs attention. What disposed them to begin siding with the enemies of the Jews?

A few hypotheses: They, or their institutions, take money from the Qataris. (More than \$1.1 billion in Qatari funds, more than from any other foreign country, went to U.S. colleges and universities in 2025 alone.) They were educated in Marxist-adjacent doctrines—postcolonialism, intersectionality, critical race theory—that aren't antisemitic on their face but have a way of indicting Jews as “settler colonialists,” excessively privileged, and “conditionally white.” They have been influenced by the growing political clout of younger American Muslims, exemplified by the rise of Zohran Mamdani, practicing an ideology that the Manhattan Institute's Reihan Salam calls “Third Worldism”—a “fusion of anti-Zionism, anti-Westernism, and anti-capitalism that places the sacralized victimhood of Palestinian Arabs at the center of a larger struggle against American imperialism.” They have been influenced, also, by a human rights cottage industry that, as Danielle Haas, a former senior editor with Human Rights Watch, explained in detail in our “Friends and Foes” issue, long ago became a factory of Israel-hatred.

They have lost their nerve in the face of once-fringe characters who, thanks to new forms of media, have found their voice—and the vast audiences that follow them.

All this has considerable explanatory power. But it evades the specific ways in which too many Jewish leaders—political, financial, intellectual, and communal—have contributed to the process of Jewish cultural diminishment. Three points in particular:

1) The dramatic postwar rise of Jewish influence in America corresponds with the rise of the American meritocracy, which took the place of older social-pecking orders centered on lineage, wealth, religion, race, and ethnicity. Jews became prominent in American society not through special favors from above but often in the teeth of bigoted resistance from elite universities, law firms, commercial banks, and so on. By the same token, the collapse of Jewish influence tracks the decline of the meritocracy, epitomized by the post-October 7 anti-Jewish disgraces at Harvard under the leadership of its plagiarizing former president.

Yet Jewish public intellectuals were often at the forefront of the attack on the idea of meritocracy, while Jewish academic leaders typically went along with (when they weren't themselves championing) the DEI drift at universities and among private-sector employers. Typically, they did so in the name of fairness, which is certainly a Jewish value. What it mostly achieved, however, was widespread mediocrity—followed, almost ineluctably, with a politics of envy and resentments that were bound to have a powerful anti-Jewish current.

2) Especially in recent years, most religious, ethnic, and racial communities in the United States have established visible, powerful guardrails against being defamed by the broader society. Not the Jews! For every effort to establish a widely accepted definition of antisemitism, there is a counter-effort, spearheaded by Jews, offering a much more permissive definition. For every attempt to express a baseline level of solidarity with Israel (if not its government), there will be culturally prominent Jews loudly denouncing Israel in incendiary terms. They do so in the “As a Jew” mode

The ‘As a Jew’ phenomenon needs to be turned on its head: from a license to scold to an instinct to defend; from contempt to warmth; from performative distancing to public embrace.

whose aim, as Eli Lake has noted in *Commentary*, is to “credential the libels of the enemies of the Jews.”

All this makes it remarkably easy for Jew-haters to locate a Jewish source to justify their bigotries. It also helps explain why cultural gatekeepers outside the Jewish world have no clear sense of their own about where to draw boundaries. If Ehud Olmert, the former Israeli prime minister, can publicly denounce Israeli military policy as “indiscriminate, limitless, cruel,” why shouldn’t anyone be allowed to say it?

3) Compared with influential members of other minority communities, influential Jews are often reluctant to become Jewish influencers. That is, they tend to do relatively little to convert their social, financial, political, or cultural clout as Americans into assets for the Jewish people. We know this, in part, because we notice the exceptions: when Gwyneth Paltrow, for instance, shrugged off charges of being a genocide supporter by appearing in an ad for a Tel Aviv condominium; or when Josh Shapiro called attention to antisemitism in Kamala Harris’s campaign; or when Jerry Seinfeld answered a protester asking him to say “Free Palestine” by replying, “It doesn’t exist.”

On the whole, however, there is a lopsided disparity between what powerful or influential Jews have the means to do to reshape the cultural landscape in a more Jewish-friendly direction and what they have so far chosen to do. That’s part of an older reflex that

encouraged Jews to understate and submerge, if not wholly erase, our Jewish identity beneath our American one—an approach that may have made sense before October 7 but is less wise, even dangerous, today.

The list is not exhaustive. But it's an important reminder that our loss of influence has come about, at least in part, on account of our own decisions and mistakes. If nothing else, it means we have agency when it comes to changing them.



So what do we do?

Some of what needs to be done is happening already thanks to the work of Jewish influencers (using the word in the broadest sense). One of them is Edward Blum, whose legal advocacy group, Students for Fair Admissions, led the long effort against anti-meritocratic, race-based admissions policies, culminating with their being ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2023. Another is Bill Ackman, who, largely through his lengthy posts on social media, led the post-October 7 donor revolt against Harvard and other universities that had failed their Jewish students. A third is Dan Loeb, who redirected his giving from Columbia (his alma mater) to Yeshiva University. Each of these efforts suggests the directions that the broader Jewish community needs to take to reclaim influence.

First: Join the intellectual battle against broad cultural trends that, even if they aren't overtly anti-Jewish, tend to marginalize Jewish interests.

It's no accident, for instance, that the Democratic Socialists of America, a swiftly rising force in national politics, are as eager to abolish billionaires as they are to abolish Israel—there is an intellectual connection (and a common ideological heritage) between the blunt socialist program of equalization and the hatred of Jewish achievement and distinctiveness. But who, particularly among mainstream Democrats, is making the moral and political argument that

“socialism” was a disastrous political experiment in the 20th century that no sane American should want to repeat in the 21st? And who is funding and organizing efforts to advance that argument at universities and high schools? Milton Friedman was not offering a parochial case for Jews when he explained to a mass audience, in his documentary TV series *Free to Choose*, why capitalism is superior to socialism. But that program helped the broad cause of freedom while creating broad avenues for Jewish thriving.

Second: As noted at the start of this essay, power is not the same as influence—and Jews need to once again learn how to convert the former into the latter.

Ackman, as a significant (but hardly the most significant) donor to Harvard, had a modicum of power over the university. But what really mattered was his willingness to convert power into influence in a way that swiftly gained national attention, inspired other Jewish Harvard donors to withhold funds, and achieved at least some of the changes they sought. Something similar happened when a few law firms rescinded job offers to student leaders of pro-Hamas campus groups: It sent a clear message that championing anti-Jewish causes would carry a professional price. Getting Jewish corporate and institutional leaders to adopt, as part of their organizational codes of conduct, the IHRA definition of antisemitism would be a significant step forward. After all, if a business like, say, Starbucks, won't tolerate racist activity or speech among any of its employees, why should it countenance antisemitism?

Third: The best way influential Jews can regenerate Jewish influence is to invest Jewishly.

This can take many forms. Investing in existing Jewish educational institutions, including summer camps. Or in new, high-quality, affordable Jewish day schools. Or in Israel studies programs (provided they don't become, as often happens in academia, anti-Israel studies programs). Or in a better rabbinate. Or in secular American yeshivas.

Or in the survival of smaller Jewish communities outside of Israel and the United States. Or in Jewish publishing imprints in the mold of Adam Bellow's *Wicked Son*. Or in think tanks devoted to Jewish safety and thriving. Or in a reimagined and reinvigorated ecosystem of Jewish media that become training grounds for a new generation of gifted podcasters and YouTubers. Or in expanded opportunities for Jewish college and graduate students to get a degree from an Israeli university. Or in outreach to potential friends and allies in the broader world. All these opportunities and more have been explored at length in this and previous issues of *SAPIR*.

But whatever the institution or the field, the point of investing Jewishly is to nurture, sustain, and inspire Jews for whom Jewishness is the centering fact of their lives. This can but needn't mean greater religious observance; it must mean greater curiosity, knowledge, self-assurance, and fellow feeling toward other Jews. The "As a Jew" phenomenon needs to be turned on its head: from a license to scold to an instinct to defend; from contempt to warmth; from performative distancing to public embrace. And American Jews must emerge from this depressing period not enfeebled and embattled but clear-eyed and proud.

It's those Jews who, in ways that can't easily be predicted now, will restore Jewish influence to its former place in American life—a place where it fears neither its enemies nor its own shadow. *

July 9, 2026

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PART ONE

POLITICS



They Might Not Be Giants

Are we overestimating the influence of the online Right?



O ANTISEMITIC online influencers pose a threat to American Jews? Are they conditioning their followers, including many young people, to be antisemitic, raising a generation to transform the hitherto positive climate for Jews in America? Based on my research and extensive survey data, I am pleased to say that while there may be some reason for concern, there is little cause for alarm.

To be sure, there *is* evidence of blatant antisemitism entering public discourse in more overt ways than many of us are used to.

From the political Right, Rod Dreher warns that his administration sources say that close to half of young Republican staffers are “groypers” — followers of young antisemitic media personality Nick Fuentes. Fuentes has appeared on Tucker Carlson’s popular, often anti-Israel podcast, where the two agreed on many matters. Carlson scrupulously avoided asking Fuentes tough questions

about his nakedly pro-Hitler and anti-Jewish pronouncements. And when criticized for his lack of journalistic probing, Tucker was defended by the Heritage Foundation, a pillar of the conservative Washington establishment. Reading these signs, one might reasonably conclude that America's political Right has slipped into the grips of Jew-hatred.

Meanwhile, from the Left, the surge of pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel encampment protests on campuses and in metropolitan areas—many immediately in the wake of the October 7 attacks—led to a spike in reported antisemitic incidents. On Ivy League campuses, Jewish student self-censorship shot up. In progressive discourse, Israel came to be routinely accused of settler colonialism, apartheid, and, of course, genocide. Hasan Piker, the popular streamer on the Left, says he doesn't "have an issue with" Hezbollah, considers Hamas to be "a thousand times better than a fascist settler-colonial apartheid state," meaning Israel, and sees Zionism as sharing with Nazism "an ethno-religious supremacist ideology that is exterminationist." A number of left-wing politicians have campaigned with Piker or appeared on his show. Ezra Klein defends such engagement as a valid exercise of free speech, warning against a "no-platform" approach to Piker that he says is likely to backfire.

But on both the Left and the Right, the role that influencers actually play in shaping public opinion is overblown. I recently fielded the first survey of young Republicans' media diet in relation to their attitudes toward Jews, blacks, and white nationalism. Results were combined with data from numerous other surveys. I found, as expected, that hostility toward Israel is indeed on the rise, with disproportionate attention focused on the country and its military actions. In addition, many young Republicans believe in conspiracy theories involving Israeli and Jewish influence over American affairs. These are deeply offensive to most Jews and are experienced as antisemitic.

It sounds dire, but in order to declare an epidemic of influencer-fueled antisemitism, we should also be able to identify clear

indicators of Jew-hatred and map the causal patterns. We would expect those who regularly consume the output of anti-Israel, right-wing hosts such as Nick Fuentes, Candace Owens, or Tucker Carlson to express significantly more antisemitic attitudes than those who tune in to relatively pro-Israel outlets like Ben Shapiro or Fox News. Does the evidence support the alarmist hypothesis?

It does not.



New media are certainly becoming more important. Data from the Pew Research Center show that an increasing share of Americans “often or sometimes” get their news from podcasts or YouTube videos. This is true of 40 percent of Americans under 50 and 20 percent of Americans over age 65. Indeed, the proportion rose 10 points among all age groups between 2020 and 2025 alone. Republican voters are twice as likely as Democratic voters to trust the news they get from podcasts more than other news sources. This would indicate that podcasts are increasingly important in shaping the views of voters, especially on the Right.

Yet while leading right-wing influencers such as Tucker Carlson, Candace Owens, Megyn Kelly, and Marjorie Taylor Greene opposed the war in Iran, 79 percent of self-identifying Republicans supported it when polled in late March 2026. Moreover, Republicans who oppose the war are concentrated among leaners and moderates, while 85–90 percent of self-identified MAGA Republicans support military action. This exasperated Fuentes, who subsequently railed against Donald Trump and endorsed the Democrats.

When Tucker Carlson in December 2023 defended Muslims at Turning Point USA’s AmericaFest, where conservative activists gather, he was booed. An internal poll of 30,000 attendees showed that 87 percent viewed Israel as an ally, with only 13 percent saying it was not. The same poll revealed that TPUSA delegates viewed radical Islam as the top threat to the nation.

The idea that young right-wingers have a vastly different media diet from their older counterparts is wrong.

The popularity of the revisionist anti-Israel Right was put to the test when representative Thomas Massie of Kentucky was primaried by a Trump-endorsed challenger: a retired Navy SEAL and farmer, Ed Gallrein. Massie ran on an anti-war, anti-Israel message, while Gallrein supported Trump's stance on both. In the end, Massie was defeated 55–45 percent, prompting left-wing commentator Cenk Uygur to declare on X, "Israel won in Kentucky. They will 100% control the Republican Party now," while his fellow traveler Hasan Piker fumed that "Massie's defeat proves that the republican party is a pro epstein pro israel cult led by their cult leader, epstein affiliate, servant of israel - donald trump."

A similar disjuncture can be found in European public opinion: Britain's far-right Restore Britain party boasts a larger membership than the established Conservative Party. At the time of writing, Restore Britain's leader, Rupert Lowe, is closing in on 900,000 followers on X, easily doubling the number of people following Kemi Badenoch, the Conservative leader. Yet, despite these numbers and the boldness of its leader and young activists, Restore Britain polls at only 3–4 percent nationwide.

In order to make sense of these incongruencies, we should take a look at how fundamentally different the new media platforms are from their mainstream predecessors. As economics journalist Noah Smith points out, today's media environment is fragmented into smaller ponds than in the past. Even a wildly popular host such as Tucker Carlson, with his 1 million YouTube viewers, is a minnow compared with Rush Limbaugh in the 1990s, with his 15

to 30 million listeners. In addition, many listeners consume multiple podcasts, sometimes for entertainment rather than education, and do not see eye to eye with hosts and guests on all issues. This means that new media output can gain a spike of likes and listens while remaining relatively unimportant in shaping public opinion.

The distance between the online ecosystem and real life has caught observers off guard on several occasions, and in the two-part survey I conducted of nearly 400 Trump voters under age 35 and 400 from a nationally representative sample, much was revealed that cut through the noise. First, just 5–10 percent of American adults tune in to Tucker Carlson or Candace Owens. For Nick Fuentes, the figure is 2–3 percent — similar to the following of Alex Jones. Among Republicans under 35, however, 15–20 percent say they regularly follow Carlson or Owens, while 7 percent consume Fuentes’s content. These are more substantial numbers, though it is worth noting that 45 percent of young Trump voters in my sample regularly watch Fox, and 25–30 percent routinely read the *New York Times*. The idea that young right-wingers have a vastly different media diet from their older counterparts is wrong: Trump voters over 35 consume new media at only slightly lower rates than their younger peers.

While the audience for right-wing influencers is often stereotyped as young, white, and male, the truth is more complex. Around one-third of Fuentes’s and a quarter of Carlson’s young audience are nonwhite, and around one-third are women. Over half of Owens’s followers are female, perhaps not as surprisingly. Older listeners are only somewhat underrepresented. In addition, there is considerable consumer overlap between anti-Israel podcasters such as Carlson or Fuentes and pro-Israel sources such as Ben Shapiro. New-media listeners tune in to a variety of influencers, even as mainstream news and cable audiences are less likely to consume new media.

Pew surveys find that the share of Americans expressing negative views toward Israel has increased from 42 percent in 2022 to 60 percent in 2026. This number has increased from 53 to 80 percent

among Democrats and 27 to 41 percent among Republicans. The negative shift is more pronounced among young Republicans (from 35 to 57 percent) and older Democrats (from 43 to 76 percent).

This said, there are somewhat different dynamics on Left and Right. In the gold-standard American National Election Study (ANES) in 2024, both partisanship and age determine support for Israel or the Palestinians. Nearly half of Democrats under 35 favor Palestine over Israel in the conflict, with only 5 percent on Israel's side. By contrast, among Republicans over 35, nearly 6 in 10 back Israel, with just 2 percent on the Palestinian side.

Republicans under age 35 are less pro-Israel than older Republicans (35 percent versus nearly 60 percent), but just 8 percent of young Republicans support the Palestinians. Most opt for the "neither" category. This is a disengagement, not a switching of sides. Older Democrats in 2024 supported "both" sides in the conflict, a position held by only 7 percent of young Republicans. Older Democrats appear genuinely conflicted in their sympathies while many young Republicans adopt a detached isolationist approach.

ANES has asked respondents how they feel about Jews, blacks, and other groups since 1964. Focusing only on the under-35s by party shows that young Democrats have grown increasingly warm toward Jews, especially since 2008. While young Democrats' warmth dipped a few points between 2020 and 2024, their average warmth toward Jews remained at a very high 73 degrees in that year. Young Republicans evince lower but still positive feelings toward Jews, even as sentiment dropped slightly from 65 to 61 degrees between 2020 and 2024. Young independents score about the same as young Republicans. There is always volatility in polling, even in top-tier surveys like ANES. Yet, when we look back 60 years, what is striking is that young Americans' current sentiment toward Jews is solidly within its long-run range. Current youth sentiment toward Jews is well above the low point of 53 recorded for independents, in 1976.

Looking at the same thermometer rating in my survey, I find that Republicans assign Jews a 57 out of 100. The difference from

Right-wing influencers are either insufficiently radical, like Carlson, or too small, like Fuentes, to greatly move public attitudes on Jews or Israel. This helps to explain why the aggregate youth trend in feelings toward Jews in the ANES shows little change against its long-run average.

the analogous data for 2024 from ANES (a 61) is modest. Regular listeners to Nick Fuentes are cooler toward Jews, at around 42, though even there, they are more positive toward Jews than toward Palestinians. Regular consumers of Carlson and Owens rate Jews a 55, which is mildly positive for this kind of measure. This is only slightly below the Republican sample average of 57, and only modestly below the Jewish thermometer reading among regular viewers of Fox News (62) and Ben Shapiro (65). In statistical tests (controlling for demographic factors including age, sex, education, and race), regularly tuning in to Fuentes and, to a lesser degree, Owens does predict cooler attitudes toward Jews, but listening to Carlson has no effect.

Ultimately, the most antisemitic influencer, Fuentes, appears to boost antisemitism to some degree, but the larger anti-Israel outfits like Carlson's have no significant effect. Medium-size influencers such as Owens have a modest negative impact on attitudes toward Jews. Even for listeners of Fuentes and Owens, it could partly be the case that antisemites are opting to listen to these shows rather than the shows turning them into antisemites.

The influence of these influencers is similar when it comes to feelings toward Israel. Nick Fuentes's regular followers are 15

points cooler toward Israel than those who do not follow him. For Tucker Carlson, the equivalent figure is negative 6 points, and for Ben Shapiro, regular followers are 9 points more positive toward Israel than the overall sample.

The bottom line, therefore, is that right-wing influencers are either insufficiently radical, like Carlson, or too small, like Fuentes, to greatly move public attitudes on Jews or Israel. This helps to explain why the aggregate youth trend in feelings toward Jews in the ANES shows little change against its long-run average.

More concerning than such feelings is support for Jewish conspiracies. Sixty percent of Fuentes's regular followers agree that "Israel can get away with anything because its supporters control the media," as do 50 percent of Carlson's and Owens's regular audience. But nearly 40 percent of MSNBC viewers and 30 percent of New York Times readers in the sample also agree with that notion. A considerably greater share of people believe in conspiracy theories involving Jews than express negative attitudes toward Jews. Why?

A further set of questions from a Manhattan Institute survey reveals that among Republicans under 50, a quarter identify as antisemites, a third as racists, and nearly half say the Holocaust did not happen or is exaggerated. The sampling frame makes these figures unrepresentative nationally, but they do tell us interesting things about the relationship between different attitudes within people. Nonwhite young voters and those who switched from the Democrats in 2024 are more likely to hold these beliefs. Be that as it may, what my analysis of the data shows is that the strongest correlate of Holocaust denial is believing that the moon landings were faked. The idea that 9/11 was an inside job is as associated with Holocaust denial as identifying as an open antisemite. A large minority of voters believe in conspiracies, and those who believe in one are highly likely to believe in others.

The pattern that emerges is that nonspecific conspiracism is one orientation and dislike of Jews is another, but policy attitudes

occupy a largely separate sphere. Young Republicans who identify as antisemitic or racist are actually *more* supportive of affirmative action than those who oppose antisemitism and racism. Open antisemites are *more* likely to say that whites are advantaged in American society than that Jews are.

Putting this together with my survey results leads me to conclude that conspiracism is a transgressive, magical, recreational orientation that cuts across feelings toward groups. Belief in conspiracy theories largely bisects support for policies such as affirmative action. It's important not to interpret belief in Jewish conspiracies, as shocking to Jewish sensibilities and counterintuitive as it may be, as primarily motivated by Jew-hatred. In 2024, only 8 percent of Americans under 30 told the General Social Survey (GSS) that most people can be trusted, an all-time low since records began in 1972. Young voters' trust in the federal government is also at a historic trough, and confidence in institutions has tanked. Conspiracy thinking grows in this climate.

"Shock jock" new-media accounts titillate their audiences and compete to appear antiestablishment and transgressive. Audiences "prefer magical thinking" and "crave drama and plot twists," observes national-populist pro-Trump podcaster Scott Greer. "As long as influencers present their idiotic notions as something the 'elites' don't want you to know, their 'freethinking' listeners will gobble up without hesitation."

My read is that these japes have a limited overall impact on public attitudes toward Jews. Many on the Right have attacked Fuentes, Owens, and Carlson for being fantasists who are weak on Islam, and almost no MAGA conservatives support the Palestinians. On the young Left, there is no statistical correlation between feelings toward American Jews and feelings toward Israel. Young anti-Zionist Americans may be insensitive to the concerns of most Jews who are attached to Israel as a Jewish homeland, but they are not Jew-haters.

What the research shows is that social media influence vis-à-vis

antisemitism has much in common with social media more generally—exaggerated and relatively divorced from the off-screen reality. Whether that will remain the case is, of course, a matter of prophecy rather than an answerable question, but American Jews should resist the clickbait. *

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How AI Is Being Weaponized Against Jews

With Wikipedia as its muse



Y JANUARY 2025, a group of anti-Israel editors on Wikipedia had pulled off a feat that even Kremlin propagandists could only dream of. Operating with striking discipline, the “Gang of 40,” as I dubbed them, zeroed in on the most valuable targets in the information war of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, above all the Wikipedia entry on Zionism.

The Gang of 40 set out to equate Zionism with ethnic cleansing. They focused their energy on the article’s lead section, from which Google pulls information that populates its search results. Even more critically, it’s the section that AI models largely draw their reference data from.

To say the operation was a success would wildly understate it. Prior to October 7, Wikipedia defined Zionism as “a nationalist movement that emerged in the 19th century to espouse support for the establishment of a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine.”

But now, after the Gang of 40 spent hours warping the article, it reads, “Zionism is an ethnocultural nationalist movement that emerged in late 19th-century Europe to establish and support a Jewish homeland through colonization in the region of Palestine.” The second sentence, added by a single editor and cemented through weeks of endless browbeating and sheer doggedness, struck an even greater blow: “Zionists wanted to create a Jewish state in Palestine with as much land, as many Jews, and as few Palestinian Arabs as possible.”

This alone—reducing Zionism to the false claim that it was designed to cleanse the land of Arabs—would have constituted a triumph. But the coup de grâce came later. Commandeering Wikipedia’s conceptual machinery, the group instituted a “moratorium” on the lead, locking it in place. (In Wikipedia’s governance framework, a moratorium is an informal, ill-defined practice. In this case, the concept was applied to the entire lead of an article—something that veteran editors I spoke with do not recall ever seeing before.)

The effect was that, for a full year, no one would be able to touch even a single word of the *Zionism* entry lead. But the duration of the moratorium was just as important as its scope. In the winter of 2025, the top echelon of the Gang of 40 leadership would be banned by Wikipedia from editing in the Palestine-Israel articles topic space. The likely length of their ban? Twelve months—that is, only for as long as everyone else was locked out.

The episode was a dramatic escalation in the ongoing, ever-intensifying narrative war playing out online over Israel and the Jewish people. It is by no means unique. The Wikipedia entry entitled “Gaza genocide,” captured by the same group, now frames an alleged and highly contested notion of genocide as settled fact. They have deleted terror attacks committed by Hezbollah, scrubbed mentions of Hamas’s 1988 genocidal charter from dozens of articles, made anachronistic alterations—such as changing the title of Wikipedia’s “Hellenistic Judea” entry to “Hellenistic Palestine”—and removed photos of the Dead Sea Scrolls from the entry on Israel.

Dig into Gang of 40 activities, or activities of the new guard that has stepped in to continue their work of historical revisionism, and you will be astonished by the breadth of their activity. No issue, no topic, is too small or trivial to evade their ideological attention. Kibbutzim and moshavim you've never heard of, the entry on the "Jaffa orange" ("significant ethnic cleansing"), and "Jewish Insider"—all have been under the editorial scalpel of this surgical group.

By now, it's clear to most that a fierce information war is under way on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X. Yet it's at a deeper layer of what we call the "knowledge infrastructure" where quiet, slow efforts have lasting impact. Claims embedded in platforms whose data disproportionately feed AI—notably Wikipedia and Reddit—get crystallized into what AI systems treat as verified fact or knowledge.

These seed platforms are ripe for manipulation in ways that Facebook, Instagram, and X are not. While social media companies have either forced or strongly incentivized user identity verification, there is no such process on Wikipedia. Editors shaping information about some of the most contentious and sensitive topics remain anonymous. The identities of the site's most powerful administrators, including those with the ability to search and identify the IP address of any user, remain unknown. While X and Facebook spend vast sums employing content moderators, Wikipedia employs none. Its own users are tasked with the job of policing truth, and needless to say, they don't all agree on what it is. As for Reddit, there too the task of content moderation is largely left to users.



Anonymity is a key feature of digital life. Many people lurk and troll online behind fake accounts. It's one thing to do this while posting comments on Facebook and Instagram. But doing so on a platform that has the power to determine public perceptions of what's true

By now, it's clear to most that a fierce information war is under way on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X.

and false—and that feeds this data into the AI systems shaping our collective future—is a propagandist's dream.

Case in point: A Hamas-linked network operating on Reddit (which I exposed last year) launders messaging from Telegram channels run by Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and numerous other U.S.-designated foreign terror organizations onto every mainstream social media platform. Because of Reddit's agreements with companies such as OpenAI, the data end up in AI training corpuses. Reddit refuses to curb these activities, even though the company has taken an aggressive position on banning communities posting anti-trans or fat-shaming perspectives—and took the extraordinary step of banning the biggest pro-Trump community online only months before the 2020 election. Clearly they're not free-speech absolutists.

The core of the problem is that we, Jews and society as a whole, have not yet assimilated the idea that narrative threats have now become as dangerous as any cyber threat. The world of cybersecurity speaks about “zero-day” vulnerabilities—risks that are clear and present, with no time delay between a threat and its execution. But that is also the nature of the threats we're facing in the information pipeline feeding AI systems, with one big difference: The narrative threats are not merely potential but constantly executed. They are exploited every day, at scale, with stunning efficiency.

State-aligned propagandists have not overlooked this generational opportunity to reshape the information battleground. For years a small group of editors has worked to scrub Wikipedia

The question many are asking is what should be done. But that question contains a prior failure. You can't answer 'What should be done?' when you don't yet know what's happening.

articles of mentions of human rights abuses committed by the Iranian regime and its top leaders. Several weeks after the regime in Tehran slaughtered thousands of Iranians in the 2025–2026 protests, Wikipedia's media repository, WikiCommons, was flooded with thousands of images and videos produced by Tasnim News Agency (a U.S.-sanctioned entity), Mehr News Agency (which is state-owned), and Khamenei.ir (the official website of the then-supreme leader). My research has revealed that Iranian state media have been cited more than 20,000 times on Wikipedia as reliable sources in hundreds of articles. Outlets linked to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are cited more than 8,000 times. In multiple cases, content had been copied and pasted directly into Wikipedia entries from Islamist terror groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad. There were no fewer than 100 citations using al-Qaeda-linked outlets as sources. In one particularly egregious case, a Wikipedia administrator publicly directed a jihad-curious user to a Muslim Brotherhood recruitment site.

If Wikimedia Foundation (WMF), the NGO that owns and operates Wikipedia, cared to know about the kind of content flowing through its site, it would. WMF operates on a \$200 million annual budget, more than enough to implement monitoring and moderation technologies and to employ hundreds of product and engineering team members. It prefers not to know because

knowing would make it accountable for this content. Like every other major social media platform, it has fought hard to resist that responsibility.

In the meantime, influence campaigns such as the Gang of 40 and Reddit's r/Palestine group are running rampant. We're starting to see the effects of this not just in retrieval data (the information that chatbots pull in response to a prompt or query) but, more worryingly, in what we might describe as the worldview of AI systems, which are being shaped by the training data in ways that are less visible but far more consequential.



The question many are asking is what should be done. But that question contains a prior failure. You can't answer "What should be done?" when you don't yet know what's happening.

Even after years of investigation, I suspect that I have, at best, 3 percent visibility into the scope of what's happening on knowledge infrastructure platforms. Three percent. That's not modesty—it's a measurement of how completely these operations have succeeded in making themselves invisible. The Gang of 40 operated for years before anyone named or noticed them. The Hamas-linked Reddit pipeline I exposed had been running, largely undetected, across every major platform since at least October 7. The Iranian state-media flood of Wikipedia happened in near-total silence. What I've documented is not the tip of the iceberg. It's a floating chip off that tip. Nearly three years after October 7, this is a terrifying and untenable state of affairs.

At a baseline, the Jewish world needs to internalize the fact that we are in the middle of a generational information war, in which the most established facts are turned into bald-faced lies. Joel Finkelstein, founder of the Network Contagion Research Institute and one of the most rigorous practitioners working on these issues, put the stakes plainly to me: "Every Jewish communal investment you

make is downstream of whether we win the narrative war. If we lose that, the leadership programs and yeshivas have no safe environment to operate in.”

He’s right. And the corollary is just as stark: You cannot prevail on a battlefield you haven’t even mapped. There is an urgent need for the basic investigative work of understanding what we’re actually facing, who is doing it, how it works, at what scale, through which networks, and—most critically—with whose money.

That last point is key. We have strong signals—and, in some cases, outright evidence—that the vast network of information operations working against Israel and the Jewish people is funded to a significant extent by state-level actors, including those affiliated with Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and Qatar. This funding carries nearly no risk of running afoul of legal, compliance, or regulatory issues and is all but impervious to exposure. It’s a weaponization of the very freedoms afforded by Western nations prohibited domestically by these same countries. They have captured the narrative not just about Jews and Israel but—far more worryingly—about the United States. They are using open knowledge platforms to poison AI systems, and they’re doing so with impunity.

The most significant state-backed narrative operations hide in plain sight: Al Jazeera, RT, *China Daily*, Anadolu Agency, Tasnim. These outlets freely seed anti-American propaganda in the United States while their own governments clamp down on good-faith domestic and international journalism within their own borders. The formula, stunningly effective, is also maddeningly simple: lies abroad, repression at home.

The most important step is to undertake investigative initiatives capable of exposing state-backed and state-linked narrative networks. We see the same root cause behind the phenomenon of obscure influencers who shoot to prominence after uttering the crudest anti-Israel or anti-Jewish propaganda, with PR agencies pitching them to podcasts, and law firms rushing to defend them when they meet legal trouble.

Free speech online must be preserved and protected, that much is evident; but one of the many great lessons we learn from the Founders of the American Republic is that freedom is possible only when we are first freed from the tyranny of anarchy.

The current strategy seems to be to react to every X post with a torrent of outrage (guilty as charged). But that's merely suicide by a thousand paper cuts. Each furious quote-tweet serves to amplify the poisonous messaging. What we need is robust journalistic, financial, and technical investigation capable of picking apart these networks to expose how Americans are being served tainted media every minute of every day. We need to inform audiences that, far from organic, the info they're seeing is the product of foreign interference. We need social media and knowledge platforms to call this out, as X did when it started showing the location of accounts last November. And we need Congress to act. When lawmakers approved Section 230—the provision of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 that created a legal carve-out for internet service providers that has shielded online platforms from accountability for what appears on them—the internet was in its infancy. There was a real possibility that a flurry of lawsuits seeking to hold online platforms liable for anonymous posts by third parties could strangle the nascent web. More important, online information warfare was not even a gleam in the eye of the most forward-thinking CCP or Kremlin propagandist.

Three decades later, our information environments more

closely resemble war zones than the digital idylls envisioned by the online pioneers. And far from a fragile, tenuous thing, the internet has become the primary setting of our commercial, social, legal, and educational lives. Free speech online must be preserved and protected, that much is evident; but one of the many great lessons we learn from the Founders of the American Republic is that freedom is possible only when we are first freed from the tyranny of anarchy.



Today, anti-American, anti-Western, anti-Israel, and anti-Jewish information networks operate with asymmetric advantages. They choose the targets, dictate the tempo, coordinate the narratives across platforms, and exploit institutional fragmentation on the other side. Over decades, they have constructed a narrative infrastructure capable of rallying millions by invoking single words—*genocide*, *apartheid*, *colonialism*—no matter how spurious or even ridiculous.

The Jewish world, on the other hand, faces all these risks and constraints—and many more. We are endlessly busy turning out our pockets to prove we're not thieves. We have no buzzword narratives. You can't explain in a tweet the deep and complex integration of Israeli Arabs into the country's broader society. You can't break down Hamas's decades-long strategy of ideological infiltration in an Instagram Reel.

Despite the moral inversion that social media seems to impel, real-world truth is still objective. Lies, which are endlessly abundant, create a kind of inflation that leads their purveyors to ruin. The demand for truth, which must be mined through hard persistence, is always there. We have to dig and dig.

The teaching of Jewish history and religion often converge on a single idea: Calamity may have been perpetrated by our enemies, but, ultimately, we bear responsibility. In this case,

that means taking responsibility in the present. Our enemies were building their case over decades while we were resting on our laurels. The best time to have addressed this was then. The second-best time is now. *

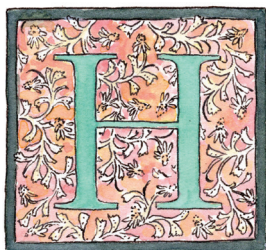
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‘People Who Are Involved Have Influence’

*A conversation with Malcolm Hoenlein
and Julie Platt*



OW HAS Jewish influence shifted over the last decades, and how can Jewish leadership exercise power effectively in a rapidly changing world? *SAPIR* Associate Publisher Ariella Saperstein sat down with longtime lay leader Julie Platt and Malcolm Hoenlein, a former executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (1986–2019), to explore these and other questions.



ARIELLA SAPERSTEIN: Something that we’ve been talking about as we’ve been putting this issue together is the difference between power and influence. Sometimes people with power actually don’t have much influence, and people who have great influence may lack what we think of as power. What do each of you think about the difference between Jewish power and Jewish influence?

JULIE PLATT: At the last AIPAC Summit, Tal Becker made the point that we ought to be leaning into our power, not being ashamed of or hiding it, understanding we are in a time when we have to use our voices, our resources, the positions we hold. But the terms *power* and *influence* aren't where I find myself. Living my values and trying to have an impact are what guide my work. I'm not afraid to use my voice; I'm not afraid to use the power that I may have in the positions I hold, but my intent is always focused on outcomes.

MALCOLM HOENLEIN: When I was very young, even a pre-teen, I realized that Jews cannot turn our fate over to others. I got involved in a U.S. Senate race when I was 11 and from then on was involved in political life in whatever way I could be. When I was 12, I traveled with Adlai Stevenson for two days, after sneaking into his hotel room, when he was campaigning for president.

It's often how others perceive us that determines our power. And also, how we perceive ourselves. But power is something that you have to treat with great care for it to be effective. I liken it to a muscle: The more you exercise it right, the stronger it becomes. If you abuse it, you destroy it. Too often, we have either abused the opportunities of Jewish power or not taken advantage of them.

Once the prime minister of Japan asked me, "Why are Jews so influential?" It was the first question he asked me. When I caught my breath, I said, "Because people who are involved have influence. People who don't get involved don't have influence." I explained that Jews get involved because we care, and not just about our own. Remember the tsunami? Who was the first community to stand up and help? What country flew in planes with aid?

PLATT: One of the misuses of influence or power is Jew against Jew. We're not all going to agree, but we're a small people, and to use our power effectively, we have to stop defaming one another. I was vice chairwoman of the board at the University of Pennsylvania during the height of the encampments and the leadership crisis

that followed, and I told my children that all the emails I received condemning what I was doing came from Jews, questioning my role as a Jew. I found that so disappointing when what I was doing was advocating in behalf of the Jewish people.

I disagree with one of the leaders of a major Jewish organization. I texted him directly. I told him what I objected to, and we got into a dialogue together. I did not post my disagreement with him so that a thousand other people could agree or disagree with me or him publicly. That's just wasted time that could be spent doing good things for the Jewish people.

And to Malcolm's last point, I have fashioned my whole life on Ann Richards's adage: If you don't have a seat at the table, you'll be on the menu for lunch. I think back to a time when my father was the president of the school board in Wichita, Kansas. There were so few Jews. But he believed that he had to be an advocate for the integration of the school system between the black and white communities. And so he ran for president of the school board and was elected, and he integrated the school system. But had he not raised his hand? That's a different story; change would have taken longer.

HOENLEIN: That's why I devoted my whole life to working in umbrella organizations, because I really believe in *klal Yisrael*. I believe in the unity of the Jewish people and that in that unity lies our strength. When we come together, we recognize that what we have in common far outweighs our differences. If you focus on what we have in common, you'll see that 95 percent of the time, we can arrive at some consensus position that the extremes may not be happy with but that fundamentally everybody can live with, and if you build on that, you build confidence with one another.

SAPERSTEIN: It sounds like you both are arguing that we've lost a lot of that unity. Are you both also making the argument that we've lost Jewish communal influence as a result? With the recent

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election of BDS-supporting Zohran Mamdani in the biggest Jewish city outside Israel, for example, and progressive candidates highly critical of Israel seemingly on the ascent, including in recent primaries, is it possible to not be worried about a loss of influence?

PLATT: I am not arguing that we have lost communal influence. We have not. I actually think our political activism has been energized in louder and more impactful ways than ever. I just think we would be even more influential if we weren't spending time publicly arguing with one another but instead fighting the challenges we face. Our energy is better spent doing the work—speaking loudly about our communal priorities, our security, our support of Israel. Let the haters hate. As my son Jonah says, everyone has to go full Jew.

HOENLEIN: It's true the rules have changed. Power does shift, and it does diminish at times because of demographic shifts. The great power centers like New York have changed. Today, we're dealing with virulent antisemitism, which is, to me, a life-and-death issue. But it doesn't change the fact that we live in America, where we have a vibrant Jewish community with an immense capacity for influence. Our institutions have to change the way we go about it, but we still have entrée with foreign governments. What other community is received by heads of state all over the world, as we are when we travel?

On Capitol Hill, the doors are still open to us. They want to

hear what we have to say, and we should want to hear what they have to say. One of the lessons is that we also have to hear what members of Congress who disagree with us have to say on issues vital to our concerns.

Clearly, recent events and primaries are a warning to us of the shifting political sands that pose serious challenges for us and our future. The fact that people so blatantly hostile to Israel and to the community can be elected requires us to reassess how we go about organizing our communities, mobilizing, and motivating them. It is too easy and wrong just to give up.

SAPERSTEIN: Malcolm, you spent so much time leading an organization that, as you mentioned, served as an umbrella for a lot of other organizations representing much of the organized Jewish community. In the last number of years, Jewish business people, philanthropists, and other political officials have pressed publicly on issues of Jewish concern, sometimes forcing significant societal change through media pressure, litigation, political leverage, or financial moves. These have, arguably, sometimes shown faster results than the work of Jewish institutions. Do you perceive this to be a shift in the locus of Jewish power? And what might this mean for Jewish institutions in the future?

HOENLEIN: The answer is yes and no. If we look through American history, there are always shifts in where the fulcrum of power rests. In the Gilded Age, it was powerful individuals. Then we saw collective leadership gain strength, led by organizations such as B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Committee, and the ADL. In recent times, we've seen more of a professionalization of organized Jewish life and professionals playing a bigger role as partners with lay leaders. We may be moving back toward focusing on leaders outside of official roles in our institutions to set the tone and agenda. The role of family offices, foundations, and communal funds is also increasing.

SAPERSTEIN: Julie, you've been a top lay leader for many years, do you see it the same way?

PLATT: Organizations and individuals have different roles, and we can't exist without both. Jewish Federations of North America led the entire North American Jewish community the last several years around the professionalization of security in every community. An individual cannot do that. The rally that happened right after October 7 was the coming together of every organization in North America, all working as partners.

I have done this for a long time and have chaired many boards. Success is much more likely when a very productive relationship exists between the lay leader and the professional. When there is transparency, respect, shared values, and a shared mission, there is nothing more satisfying than the work that lay and professional leadership can do together.

If there's anything negative I've encountered along the way, it's the continued sexism that still happens in our Jewish leadership. I push against that. I encourage women leaders to raise their hands and to never think of themselves as less qualified for any position than anybody else is, lay or professional. I try to empower women to be confident of their ability to lead and to push back on anyone who says or acts differently toward a woman in leadership.

SAPERSTEIN: How does Israel have an impact on the way Jewish power is seen in America?

HOENLEIN: What happens in Israel affects how we are seen here. We see it more and more, especially since October 7. But Israel has empowered our communities in ways that people never think about. Consider what might have happened if we didn't have a State of Israel. What would have become of Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews, Syrian Jews, Iraqi Jews, Iranian Jews, Yemeni Jews? They would have been written off to Jewish history. Instead, Israel has become

What has changed since the Shoah is not that the world has become a more caring place for Jews. The difference is the creation of the State of Israel, with all of its capacities.

the center of Jewish life. It's more than half the Jews of the world. That doesn't diminish the importance of the Diaspora, but as community life in many countries becomes less and less viable, Israel will loom larger. What has changed since the Shoah is not that the world has become a more caring place for Jews. The difference is the creation of the State of Israel, with all of its capacities.

PLATT: My reaction to that would be very different. There is no question that the lack of education, lack of understanding, and the deeply challenging imperative that we have as Zionists to help people develop a nuanced and complete understanding of what is happening in the Middle East have made it very complicated in ways it never has been before. It is up to us, Diaspora Jews, to use our voices, to be activists in small settings or large, or both, to educate and clarify and be unafraid.

SAPERSTEIN: It feels to me that we live in a culture where politics increasingly permeate everything. And we, as a Jewish community, are trying to maintain influence over issues that we care about, but we also, to some degree, have been constrained by a desire to remain apolitical and to retain friends across the political spectrum. Abraham Foxman, the legendary director of ADL who passed away recently, had credibility across the political spectrum, but his tenure feels already from another era. At the same time, the Jewish

community has done a lot of work around coalition-building, trying to build allies with other communities across issues of shared concern. But even that work has been politicized in many ways as coalitions are increasingly identity-based rather than issue-based. How do you think we should be adapting, as Jewish individuals and institutions, to be effective in this changing landscape?

PLATT: I don't think in 2026 it is any less important to maintain bipartisan support, particularly in the fight against antisemitism and in support of Israel, so I do not shy away from speaking frequently from that perspective.

My kids will call me Pollyanna, but I am more hopeful than most about partnership and allyship for the Jewish people. I'll give you some quick examples. I work very closely with Van Jones on the partnership between the black and Jewish communities. We are not without disagreements, but it has never overshadowed his leadership and desire for us all to remember that we're in this together. I belong to Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, and our rabbinic leadership recently welcomed the leadership of the six Hindu temples in Los Angeles. The allyship between those two communities is only growing. When protesters disrupted an interfaith event entitled "Innovating Safety, Empowering Communities" at Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Koreatown, the response and allyship of the Korean community was so hopeful and inspiring. And I just hosted a private fundraiser in my backyard for someone from the Latina community, and we both think we have not done enough to bring those two communities together, and we need to.

HOENLEIN: I am still hopeful, but not more hopeful than I have been in the past. The movement for Soviet Jewry built coalitions with every sector. We made this the No. 1 human rights cause in the world because we were there and reached out to others to join us. I know people who lost their jobs because they devoted so much time

to the Soviet Jewry movement, who literally lived day and night to give meaning to “never again,” to what I believe is a holy bond of *arevut*, that we are responsible for one another and for others as well. That is something that is often missing today.

Studies show parallels between discrimination against Jews, Hindus, Indian Americans, and Asian Americans. We should build coalitions to work together to counter such biases, but it can obviously have other ramifications, political ramifications, including regarding Israel and other issues of concern to us.

Some of the other communities in America are investing a great deal, including with large amounts of foreign money, to train young people to run for school boards, city councils, then Congress, and eventually the Senate and the White House. We need to provide financial support and guidance, as well as inspiration and motivation, to the next generation. We are not spending enough to train young people to get involved, to see a life of public service as a viable career, something that would be as valued as becoming a doctor.

PLATT: I don't think we're not. I just think we're behind.

HOENLEIN: When the Senate votes for aid to Israel and Jewish security, it's because of the support of non-Jewish members.

Antisemitism is not just against Jews, it's against American values that we all share. It is against Western civilization. While Jews traditionally may have been the first victims, they are never the last. That's true of every society that has allowed antisemitism to go unchecked. Those societies paid a heavy price.

SAPERSTEIN: Young people, as is often the case, perhaps, but increasingly these days, don't seem to trust our institutions, including many traditional Jewish institutions. How can Jewish organizations regain the trust of young American Jews and inspire them to get more involved? And who are the new Jewish leaders who will inspire that next generation?

HOENLEIN: Following October 7, I saw so many accomplished people seek to rediscover their Jewish identity and find meaningful engagement. A wave of talented young people brought their passion and energy to this work for the first time. They could be the future leaders, more attuned to the demands of the 21st and 22nd centuries.

PLATT: I come to this from the Jewish Federation world, and we have young-leadership programs, in the Los Angeles Jewish community and nationally at Jewish Federations of North America, that are overflowing. They are about all kinds of Jewish engagement. JFedLA's New Leaders Project produces an awful lot of Jewish elected officials and Jewish caucus members in the State Senate of California. The National Young Leadership Cabinet is the largest it's ever been at Jewish Federations of North America. It's just not true that we aren't engaging young people. There are young leaders all over the place. But it's the ones who don't like us much, or are disenfranchised right now, who are loud. And that's our work: to educate and activate and not shy away from those who disagree with us right now.

HOENLEIN: That program should be replicated in every state, in every community, training and raising money to enable young Jews to run for office or play other roles in political or civic life.

The question to me is how to get more people to see traditional Jewish organizational work as relevant to them. It's true that more are getting involved in fighting antisemitism, for instance, but they created scores of new organizations over the last two years to do it because they didn't find the answer in the existing frameworks. Creativity is a good thing, and you're absolutely right about the loud voices—we have to find a way to invite them in, to listen to them. They've said "Don't bring us legacy organizations, they failed us, they don't relate to us, and they haven't welcomed us." I see many young Jews who do care and want to do something—volunteering for security, volunteering for other things—but there is no magic formula.

PLATT: I tend to believe that we don't know what the answer is in the fight against antisemitism, so we have seeded a lot of different organizations and individuals to think and create and innovate. I'm not willing to say it can only happen within the organized Jewish community. If you've got some great idea, and you want to try it, *zey gazunt*, and we should help you do it.

HOENLEIN: I'm not sure that people creating new initiatives know about some of the most effective and large-scale efforts that are underway. They're not publicized, they're not meant to be grassroots operations. They are highly professional and may have limited public outreach. Be gadflies in the community, but do it in the framework of organizational life and in constructive ways such that they will be heard.

SAPERSTEIN: SAPIR's editor, Bret Stephens, got attention earlier this year for arguing that the fight against antisemitism is more or less a waste of time and money, and Jewish institutions should instead be focusing on strengthening Jewish connection, identity, and education. Do you agree?

PLATT: I don't think we have the luxury of doing one or the other. We've got to do both. My personal fight against antisemitism includes a focus on college campuses, in the faculty—that's where we have a continuing problem. But we have to fund Jewish education and get kids to summer camp and Israel, too.

HOENLEIN: I don't think Bret is right that you tear down the infrastructure completely, but I do believe it has to be reformed and rationalized. I have recently called for a DOGE of the Jewish community to get a group of key lay leaders, philanthropists, forensic accountants, and others, working together with representatives of organizations to sit down and evaluate each of the initiatives to see which deserve community funding. There are many programs

and organizations we don't fully understand. I would like to see an assessment that, for instance, identifies organizations doing the same thing. Evaluating how they can become one, or cooperate and foster a more responsible and effective use of the dollars we have.

There's an amazing person spending tens of millions of dollars of his own money creating schools for Jewish kids who can no longer stay in public schools because the situation has become intolerable, and he already has established numerous Zucker schools across the United States. There are so many wonderful initiatives by lay people concerned about the issues that we are talking about.

But the system itself is still remarkable. When I look at the chair-people of the Conference of Presidents, of JFNA, of others, what community produces leadership like that? Somebody like Julie, who has so many responsibilities and says, "I'm giving up literally everything because I'm on-demand for this work." We should be thanking them and saying, "Let's work together to make things better, even if we have to shake the cobwebs." *

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The Unspoken Language of Israeli Politics

Understanding the Mizrahi vote



WHY DO so many Mizrahim — Jews whose families came to Israel from the Middle East and North Africa — so fiercely reject Israel’s liberal Left? Why do voters who might seem to have the most to gain from its promises of equality and individual freedom remain among the most loyal supporters of Likud and Israel’s broader Right?

The question echoes what the political commentator Thomas Frank, author of the 2004 bestseller *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, famously called the “great paradox” of American politics: Why do working-class voters so often embrace political movements that liberals assume they should reject? In Israel, the question has perplexed academics, social activists, and politicians on the Left for decades. Whoever ends up in the prime minister’s chair after the upcoming election, the Mizrahi vote will have played a decisive role in putting him there.

Long portrayed as a marginalized population, Israel's Mizrahim became a driving force in Israeli politics after propelling Menachem Begin and the Likud to power in 1977, an astonishing contrast to Israel's first 29 years, when they stood largely in the shadow of its Ashkenazi-dominated politics. During those initial decades, Israel was governed by the socialist Mapai party and its Eurocentric narrative of the country's founding: a nation rebuilt after millennia of exile and attempted assimilation that culminated in the Holocaust.

What this narrative always ignored—even long before it backfired, casting Israel as a settler-colonial project—was the equally formative story of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who were forced to flee Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Today, Mizrahim constitute the majority of Israel's Jewish population. They are diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, lifestyle, educational attainment, political views, and degrees of religiosity and traditionalism; and rates of intermarriage between educated Mizrahim and Ashkenazim are particularly high. Yet it is specifically the most socioeconomically disadvantaged among them—those living in development towns and underserved urban neighborhoods—who have shown a stronger overall tendency than Ashkenazim to support nationalist and religious parties. This pattern has puzzled and troubled social scientists, many themselves on the liberal Left, for decades. After all, if equality and freedom are universal goods, why would people on Israel's social and economic periphery reject a political agenda that supposedly advances their interests in favor of one that has traded Israel's collectivist principles of wealth distribution for those of the free market?



Much of the academic scholarship has attempted to answer this question in a remarkably consistent and inadequate way. Mizrahi support for the Right is rarely treated as anything other than a

political pathology, and never as a worldview that might reflect a different understanding of tradition, nationhood, religion, or solidarity. Instead, it is explained as a reaction to something else.

Marxist accounts, for example, have spoken of “false consciousness” or “structural marginality.” Mizrahim and Arabs, both concentrated near the bottom of the labor market, were forced to compete over scarce resources; hostility toward Arabs could therefore be understood as the predictable consequence of material circumstances. Another familiar explanation points to the failures of the Ashkenazi Left itself: Mizrahim turned to the Right because a Left that preached equality never truly treated them as equals.

The assumption, then, is revealing: Had the Ashkenazi Left truly opened its ranks to Mizrahim—welcoming them, treating them fairly, and accepting them as equals—disadvantaged Mizrahim would naturally have become leftists. In this telling, left-wing politics is the destination they would have reached under the correct, dare I say, natural conditions; their persistent allegiance to the political Right can therefore be explained only by something having gone wrong along the way. The possibility that they encountered the Left, understood what it stood for, and rejected it on substantive grounds—that they might hold a different conception of the good society—is rarely taken seriously.

Postcolonial scholars have offered a slightly different version of the story, emphasizing identity rather than class. In this account, the cultural dominance of “Ashkenazi Israeliness” encouraged Mizrahim to distance themselves from their Arab past and assert their Jewishness more forcefully. Here too, Mizrahi political choices are characterized as fundamentally reactive, something produced by pressure, exclusion, or the desire to escape a stigmatized identity.

The explanations differ, but they share an important premise: When disadvantaged Mizrahim reject the liberal-left agenda, their choice is rarely allowed to stand on its own terms. It becomes a symptom—evidence of some deeper social injury, structural constraint, or failure of recognition. Their “real” interests lie

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somewhere else, visible to the scholar and invisible to Mizrahim themselves.

I was once asked by a journalist at a major newspaper: “Why do Mizrahim in the periphery vote against their own interests?”

“What are their interests?” I asked.

“Their economic interests,” he replied without hesitation.

But Mizrahim are hardly the only people who vote—or live—against their immediate economic interests. Many Jewish settlers, for example, embrace a pioneering ethos that explicitly places national commitments above material comfort. In doing so, they invoke a story Israelis know well: the Zionist pioneers who left comfortable homes in Europe to build communities, work the land, and drain swamps. We may agree or disagree with the values involved, but we generally understand that human beings sometimes place ideals above income.

The same is true, in a different way, of my friends on the Left, disproportionately privileged Ashkenazim who support redistributive policies that could work against their own economic interests. Yet nobody asks what social pathology has caused them to behave in an apparently irrational manner. Their politics are treated as the quintessential expression of an autonomous and unconstrained moral choice. They are seen as the very model of autonomous

individuals who have examined the world, formed convictions, and chosen to act on them — and their choice is understood to be the “right” one. Indeed, their willingness to sacrifice some of their own material advantage is often taken as evidence of the nobility of their politics.

Disadvantaged Mizrahi voters are rarely granted the same moral credit. The possibility that they, too, might hold a coherent set of values — and that these values might genuinely differ from those of the secular liberal Left — is too often silenced.



This is more than a disagreement over how to explain voting behavior. It is a long-running chronicle of misrepresentation. One group is granted the dignity of political agency: Its members have convictions, make choices, and sometimes sacrifice their interests for their values. Another group is endlessly pathologized.

And that asymmetry matters. It shapes not only how Mizrahi politics is described but also the boundaries of what can be imagined as legitimate politics in the first place — within Israeli academia, in public debate, and well beyond Israel.

The persistence of this misrepresentation — exhibiting, as it does, the very same infantilizing logic from which it purports to liberate Mizrahim — in the face of decades of electoral consistency suggests that the paradox lies less in the Mizrahi political outlook itself than in the interpretive lenses through which it is viewed. Rather than reconsider their own assumptions about Mizrahim, much of the academic class has decided that the reason Mizrahim vote as they do is to be found in Mizrahim’s supposedly skewed perception of themselves, of their core identity and place in Israeli society, of their own interests, and of the values they believe.

This is quite a distance from the truth. Mizrahim know quite well the country in which they live and the space they occupy within it. When presented with data and claims about how they

have been marginalized by the very state they hold in such high esteem and to which they demonstrate fidelity, their fidelity does not waiver. Even when they clearly acknowledge past instances of blatant discrimination against Mizrahim, they do not harbor resentment toward the state. Instead, they perceive the injustices they have faced as part of the nation-building narrative of the Jewish people to whom they belong.

The liberal grammar of progressive politics and scholarship—which regards individual autonomy, equality, and universal reason as the sole authentic human values—cannot account for this alternative narrative so engrained in the psyche of Israel’s most populous constituency. And the fact that it cannot do so reflects a fundamental limitation at the heart of progressivism: its failure to acknowledge the political power of belonging.

The sense of belonging and rootedness that Mizrahim feel in the Land and the State of Israel is so strong that it overpowers the experience of marginalization some Israeli Mizrahim readily recall. It serves as both the foundation of the Mizrahi collective self and a prism through which to understand the core question animating the Israeli body politic as a whole: Who are we, and what makes Israel ours?

Motti Ohana, one of the most influential members of the Likud Central Committee, the party’s internal apparatus, explained it succinctly to *Ha’aretz* in 2024:

My choice of Likud, and my being in Likud, is a whole identity system. Netanyahu never harmed the most important thing, the essence that makes us go with him. If he harms my Jewish identity, which is the most important thing for me, then, thanks very much and goodbye.... Netanyahu is preserving the state’s Jewish features.

This is what the three political camps (Likud, the National Religious, and the Haredim) of Netanyahu’s governing coalition

When disadvantaged Mizrahim reject the liberal-left agenda, their choice is rarely allowed to stand on its own terms.

have in common: their preservation of Israel's Jewish character. Each of these camps contains its fair share of Mizrahim, including, of course, Itamar Ben-Gvir, but what they share more fundamentally is a Jewish language, an unshakeable ethos and belief that Israel belongs to the West but also to the Jews, to the long span of Jewish history and tradition. It is this fundamental commitment to Jewishness, more than to any political platform or policy, that draws Mizrahi political allegiance across socioeconomic lines. To quote Ohana again: "I am not a liberal and I'm not a conservative, but a Jew."

Ohana's sentiment is characteristic of Mizrahi Likudniks, most of whom are democrats without qualification, including when it comes to the civil rights of Israel's Arab minority. They lead largely secular lives while attaching considerable importance to preserving the authority and status of religious Orthodoxy. Even the religiously less observant venerate rabbinic figures such as Ovadia Yosef, a veneration that extends to other Ashkenazi Orthodox rabbis as well, and that reflects a commitment to safeguarding an older, sanctified form of Judaism they don't strictly practice. They value the existence of a community that maintains religious tradition and Orthodox authority on their behalf, without feeling compelled to adopt an Orthodox way of life themselves. This vicarious religiosity has no true analogue in Ashkenazi secularity and permits great flexibility and openness to changing social realities and liberal ways of life. Consider, for example, Knesset Speaker Amir Ohana,

one of Likud's most popular figures and a powerful force in the party's Central Committee. Ohana is openly gay and lives with his partner, a Mizrahi high-tech professional. The two appear publicly with their children at official state ceremonies, sometimes broadcast live on national television—to the evident discomfort of Likud's Haredi partners, who have learned to swallow the “bitter pill.”

Coexisting with this liberality is a profound allegiance to the Jewish people; to an ancient Jewish tradition understood as the historical and conceptual root of Zionism, linking the present to an unbroken chain of Jewish history; and to the State of Israel, seen as the embodiment of the Jewish people's liberation and return to sovereignty in the land of their ancestors. Their attachment to the Israel Defense Forces, regarded by many with an almost sacred reverence, belongs to the same moral world.

This deeper disposition has largely escaped the notice of liberal scholars, progressive and socialist alike, who have continued to view Mizrahim primarily as a marginalized “minority group,” a category analogous to Arabs or migrant workers, or to Hispanics, Asians, and blacks in the United States: universal citizens competing for equal opportunity within a neutral state. But this framework misses something fundamental about the way in which many Mizrahim understand their place in Israel. They do not see themselves simply as one group among others seeking its fair share from the state; they understand themselves as deeply rooted in the Jewish collective of which the state itself is an expression. The failure to grasp this distinction has produced a long history of misrepresentation, with far-reaching consequences for Israel's public and political discourse.



Likud-supporting Mizrahim are not the only group within Israel's Jewish population whose identity can be described in terms of rootedness. Ashkenazi Haredim, for example, also understand

themselves as belonging to a sacred Jewish whole. But their rootedness is enclosed within, and bounded by, the religious-Jewish world, with the sacred Torah of Israel and Judaism as the ultimate source of authority. The Jewish whole to which they belong was born in ancient, mythic time; the Zionist moment of national rebirth, by contrast, is regarded as something of an accident along the way.

Religious Zionists, like Likud-supporting Mizrahim, connect mythic Jewish time with Zionist time. Unlike the Haredim, however, they seek to fuse the two—to absorb mythic time into the Zionist present and, in doing so, redefine the political center for everyone.

For many months before October 7, thousands of protesters marched on Kaplan Street in Tel Aviv in response to the government's judicial overhaul. These protesters, too, in seeking to reclaim the state as their own, speak in the name of an imagined collective. But theirs is a collective born in Zionist time. Zionism, it is worth remembering, was not only a modern national movement; it was also a project of identity formation. Its dominant secular current sought to create a new Jew in the spirit of the Enlightenment: secular, rational, educated, Western, liberated from the constraints of religion and tradition. He would be the ideal citizen of a Western liberal democracy and free-market society. The secularism characteristic of this group does not necessarily entail a rejection of Jewish identity or a detachment from Judaism. Many of these protesters retain a strong connection to Judaism; after all, Zionism itself emerged from such an attachment. What they have always opposed is the institutionalization of any religious Orthodox authority over matters of state and the public sphere. Theirs is a form of open, republican rootedness, grounded in a civic code of membership in the political community, a social contract, and an understanding of "Israeliness" shaped by secular reason. Its political language is a civic one that finds its clearest expression in an abiding faith in the democratic order and its institutions, foremost among them the institution accorded an almost sacred

What should ultimately define the Israeli collective — the Jewish principle or the liberal-secular Israeli one?

status: the Supreme Court. This is why the debate over judicial reform was so contentious. To the liberal Left, the judicial reform posed an existential threat to Israel's civic character.

A particularly stark expression of the divide came in the form of a well-known speech by artist and left-wing activist Yair Garbuz, who disparagingly referred to traditionalist Mizrahi Israelis as “amulet kissers.” The polarization on display here exhibits the inherent tension among competing forms and languages of Jewish and Israeli belonging. Seen in this light, the failure of the liberal academy to understand Mizrahi political behavior is therefore identical to the Israeli Left's failure to change it: a failure to speak in the same language of belonging.

The upcoming election will be decided in this language and will, in no small part, be a contest for the Mizrahi vote, less between Left and Right but *within* the Right. Netanyahu's governing coalition of the Right is composed precisely of the groups who did not quite fit liberal Zionism's original vision of a secular Jewish identity—the religious and the traditionalist Mizrahim. Beyond being a referendum on Netanyahu himself, as every Israeli election has been for the past decade, this one will center on one matter of public policy, the only issue powerful enough to break a coalition of the political and religious Right: Haredi conscription.

The topic is itself a flashpoint for the competing forms of rootedness and belonging, and for all its supposed sophistication, the Left still fails to address it in terms that will resonate with traditionalist Mizrahim, namely in the language of rootedness. When the Left

speaks of Haredi conscription, it does so in terms of social contract, which is to say, its civic language of secular liberalism.

This might appeal to secular voters whose sense of Israeliness accords with the liberal grammar, but it fails to speak to Mizrahi whose connection to the State of Israel and the Jewish people is pre-contractual. Even those who support legislation for Haredi enlistment, who believe that the Haredim should share in the burden of national service, hold reverence for the idea of Torah study and Jewish practice as markers of Jewish identity and belonging, a reverence that the Israeli Left does not share. In the language of rootedness and belonging, the problem is not that the Haredim are breaking a social contract. It's that they are insufficiently involved in the urgent needs of the Jewish people.

The policy question at the heart of this election is therefore a microcosm of a deeper divide running through Israeli society as a whole. Not a simple divide between secular and religious or individual life choices but about the character of the state. Is Israel defined primarily by a civic code—membership in the political community called Israel—or by a Jewish code that precedes Israeliness and defines the boundaries of the collective self?

In an era of intensifying polarization, in Israel and beyond, these competing anxieties have become increasingly acute. The Kaplan protesters who demonstrated (before October 7) against the judicial reform and (after October 7) for a hostage deal fear for Israel's future as a liberal democracy; Likud voters, by contrast, fear for the future of Israel as a Jewish state. Polarization magnifies both fears, but beneath them lies a more fundamental question that has never gone away: What should ultimately define the Israeli collective—the Jewish principle or the liberal-secular Israeli one?

At the time of this writing, two prominent Mizrahi figures are challenging Netanyahu from the center-Left and the Left: Gadi Eisenkot, the most prominent Mizrahi contender in the opposing camp, and Naama Lazimi, an increasingly influential Mizrahi

politician who was elected to the No. 2 position on the slate of Yair Golan's Zionist left-wing party.

But for Mizrahi voters of Likud and the broader Right, the crucial question is not the ethnic origins of these candidates. It is where they locate themselves on Israel's identity map. What matters is not their Mizrahiness as such. What matters is: Which language of belonging will they speak? *

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PART TWO

COMMUNITY



On Reluctant Leadership

What Moses, Jeremiah, and Esther can teach us about accepting responsibility



MY FAMILY was one of the many called to rise reluctantly in the aftermath of the October 7 massacre. Our global, and tragically failed, quest to save our wounded son Hersh from captivity in Gaza exposed our family to the halls of power worldwide. And throughout the 330 days of our personal ordeal, we discovered that the interests (that word, *interests*, would come up often) of the leaders who occupy those halls often conflicted with ours: to save as many hostages as possible as quickly as possible. Though many people have done their best to convince us that our devastating outcome was not a failure on our part, I realize that we did fail to identify and mitigate three specific flaws prevalent among global leaders: lack of empathy, inactivity in the face of urgency, and failure to foster unity.

The biblical figures Moses, Jeremiah, and Esther—called to rise against their wishes and above their personal interests—are

among our greatest teachers of leadership. When God appears to Moses at the burning bush and calls him to free the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, Moses famously responds, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt? . . . Please, O my Sovereign, make someone else Your agent” (Exodus 3:11–4:13). The prophet Jeremiah, upon having prophecy revealed to him, resists: “I don’t know how to speak, for I am still a boy” (Jeremiah 1:6). And in perhaps the most quoted line of the book of Esther, Esther’s cousin Mordechai responds to her self-doubt by insisting that she can indeed use her position of leadership to save her people: “And who knows if for just such a moment you have reached royalty?” (Esther 4:14).

What can contemporary people in positions of power and civil society learn from Moses, Jeremiah, and Esther?

We hostage families tried to foster empathy by presenting each of our loved ones as the vibrant individual that each is. Through the collective efforts of the hostage families, the world learned that Carmel loved yoga, that Chaim was an advocate for peace, and that Hersh was a radical listener and a vegetarian who didn’t eat vegetables. But it seemed that too many people in power saw only chess pieces. We repeatedly met leaders who failed to truly empathize with the suffering of their people. Conversations frequently revealed the geopolitical matrix at play (“We’ll do this, then they’ll do that, then we’ll do this . . .”), all absent one key component: that the pieces in this strategic game were real live human beings. The pawns were our beloved parents and siblings and children.

In contrast to many contemporary decision-makers who lack empathy, each of our reluctant biblical leaders mastered this capacity. Shortly before Moses is called to rise and lead the Jewish people, the text tells us *va-yar b’sivlotam*, literally that “he saw *into* their suffering.” He didn’t just observe that his people were suffering; he empathized with them in a manner that moved him to his core, that brought him inside the suffering. Every year at the Passover seder, we are asked to emulate this empathy, to see

ourselves as though we have been personally saved. Jeremiah, generally credited as the author of the most heartrending book in the Jewish canon, the book of Lamentations (Eicha), felt the pain of his people so deeply that he is known as the “weeping prophet.” He weeps as he says, “Oh, that my head were water, my eyes a fount of tears! Then would I weep day and night for the slain of my poor people” (Jeremiah 8:23). Esther is so in sync with the plight of her people that she joins them in the very action that she requests in their moment of peril: “Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf. . . . I and my maidens will observe the same fast” (Esther 4:16).

We hostage families regularly warned the people holding the reins, “Our loved ones are held by a terror organization in a war zone. At any moment, the captors are likely to line up our loved ones and shoot them execution-style. Why are you not acting with appropriate urgency to save innocent lives?” We were repeatedly told in response, “That won’t happen. We’ll get the hostages out. We just need a little more time.” While military action was consistent, the negotiations that were clearly required to free hostages happened only intermittently and often with an unclear mandate for action. On day 330, Hersh, Ori, Almog, Alex, Carmel, and Eden (the Beautiful Six) came back in body bags. Hersh had six bullet holes in his body. Forty-six of the hostages who were taken alive into captivity returned home in bags. Many of the hostages who did come home alive now ask why it took 400, 500, 600 days. Where was the required action in the face of urgency?

A bias toward action is a trait that distinguishes great leaders. Though reluctant to lead, Moses exemplified that bias. Sometimes those instincts were questionable—was killing the Egyptian who had been berating a Jew the appropriate response?—but Moses’s bias to do something led an oppressed people from slavery to freedom, and thousands of years later his methods are studied far outside the realms of Bible classes. Esther’s need to do something came at great personal risk. She understood the risk when

A bias toward action is a trait that distinguishes great leaders. Though reluctant to lead, Moses exemplified that bias.

she implemented her plan to convince the king to reverse the evil decree: “If I am to perish, I shall perish” (Esther 4:16). To state what seems obvious: Leaders must not sit idly by, especially when the situation is clearly a matter of life and death.

Finally, we hostage families, who included all stripes on the political, socioeconomic, and religious spectrums, deliberately met with communities outside our own, in Israel and around the world, to build a shared sense of support, purpose, and unity. Hostages, we pleaded, are a human issue. It largely worked. In Israel, the Haredim prayed along with the National Religious, civil society marched, and soldiers came off the battlefield and reported to the hostage families that the mission to bring our beloveds home was what motivated them to keep going. On the global stage, one memorable demonstration of solidarity occurred at the Democratic National Convention a mere eight days before the Beautiful Six were to be executed. Bracing for the possibility of a mixed, or even hostile, reaction, my wife Rachel and I were moved to tears when we walked out to address the United Center crowd in Chicago, to the roar of tens of thousands of people, a few clad in keffiyehs, chanting “Bring them home.” To so many, even in the fog of war, the hostages remained a unifying force.

Lamentably, despite commendable unity among the people, some leaders, at best, failed to use their influential voices to strengthen the unity. At worst, they used their influence to drive wedges between hostage families and soldier families, military-action-only families and negotiation-families, and more. This destructive dis-

cord hurt our cause and harmed Israel and the Jewish people, a harm that persists to this day.



Plato had the same insight as the Bible when he wrote, roughly 2,400 years ago, that “he who does not desire power is most fit to hold it.” If that is so, our age is not one rich in fit leadership. Today’s political reality is that many of our leaders are the people who most crave power, and not always because they have been called to rise by life’s circumstances. Yet, within this reality, we citizens have a critical role to play. By and large, all the hostage families, each in their own way, employed the lessons of Moses, Jeremiah, and Esther. We tried to foster empathy, we pleaded for appropriate action, and we mostly modeled the unity that is possible among diverse populations. Empathy, a bias for appropriate action, and unity are not partisan issues. These are human virtues that we all must consistently demand of ourselves and our leaders, despite our healthy political differences.

Perhaps IDF Brigadier General Dan Goldfus is well-versed in the Bible. Called to rise after October 7, Goldfus spoke these commanding words from the Gaza border in March 2024:

I ask at this opportunity to address our leaders, from both sides.... You need to be worthy of us. You need to be worthy of the soldiers who lost their lives. You need to be worthy of the reservists who don’t care what [political] side they are on, and fought and fight alongside each other...that all the effort and sacrifice won’t be in vain.... I ask of you to be together, united, push away the extreme, and adopt togetherness. Find what unites.... Make it worth [it].

The test of leadership is not how badly one wants power but whether, once given power, one can still see the suffering of the

people, hold them together, and act with necessary urgency on their behalf. The test of society is to identify and cultivate the leaders who exemplify these qualities. And, just as Moses and Jeremiah each maintained these qualities for roughly 40 years in leadership, our responsibility is to hold our leaders ceaselessly accountable to these high ideals. In the words of Emily Dickinson:

We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies—

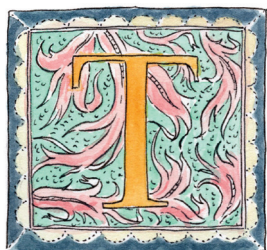


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Bad Influence

*When Israel's online supporters
do more harm than good*



HERE is one image from the war I cannot shake, and in my mind it will outlast the rest. It is a photo of a burned-out house in Kfar Aza, one of the kibbutzim where families were murdered in their beds on October 7. On the scorched wall hangs a banner in Hebrew. To one side stands ZAKA's Yossi Landau, the man whose job is to collect human remains so the dead can be buried in accordance with Jewish law. His face is weary, his shoulders slumped, and his eyes closed. Beside him, one leg lifted and her hip turned, a prominent dance influencer poses. Her Instagram caption insists that what she saw was real, and she dares anyone who doubts her to unfollow her account. There's something *Zoolander* about the whole spectacle: a model striking a pose in a place where people were slaughtered, while the dead are repurposed as set design. The centerpiece is her.

The photograph captures an indignity that has become commonplace since the weeks after October 7. Many personalities

who have been elevated within the pro-Israel community are self-promoters cloaked in activism. At the exact moment when Jews around the world need moral seriousness, parts of the communal establishment have fallen for the most opportunistic actors on the least serious platform. We are confusing visibility with leadership, and follower numbers with wisdom. The influencer economy now shapes how some of our institutions raise money and decide who speaks in the name of the community.

Consider the World Zionist Congress, founded by Theodor Herzl. This 129-year-old organization directs more than a billion dollars annually to institutions throughout Israel and the Diaspora. Its 2025 elections drew a surge of social media influencers onto competing slates, some of whom are now delegates. In this strange arrangement, the people whose main qualification is their number of Instagram followers now help direct where the community's money goes, including, at times, to organizations that pay them to speak. Some of these personalities, represented by agents who drive the market, charge exorbitant speaking fees. The case for paying them is that a famous face fills a room, and, typically, the influencer is contracted to promote the organization to his or her own audience, thereby marketing a nonprofit to eyeballs it could never reach on its own.

But would the room be emptier and the checks smaller if the person at the podium were a Nova hero, a reservist back from his 10th tour, or a struggling farmer from the Gaza Envelope? If the donors in the room could see the line item on the invoice for what the influencer was paid, would they write the next check?



The attention economy and communal authority pull in opposite directions. The attention market rewards speed and provocation, while communal authority leans on the opposite qualities: being credible, dignified, and strategic. When we lose sight of our priorities, burned homes become mere scenery.

What makes the Kfar Aza photo so enduring for me is the part that does not appear. The banner on the wall states: “Yotam Haim was kidnapped from this house.” Yotam Haim was a 28-year-old drummer. Hamas abducted him on October 7. Seventy days later, on December 15, he and two other hostages, Alon Shamriz and Samer Fouad Al-Talalka, escaped captivity only to be tragically shot by Israeli soldiers who mistook them for enemy fighters. Haim died three days before the dancer struck a pose in the ruins of his home. The day she posted the photo, his family was burying him. The banner over her shoulder had already ceased to be a plea and had become an epitaph. Her caption does not mention his name.

This is the social media machine doing exactly what it was built to do. It’s not the lapse of one oblivious influencer. Social media has decentralized the distribution of information and granted that privilege to a class of models, reality-television stars, and pranksters in place of the serious journalists, analysts, and historians who once were the gatekeepers. The most prominent among our new communicators have mastered the art of dialing up whatever the algorithm rewards, which helps explain how another prominent influencer came to bracket two Instagram Stories of herself in a pink bikini around a grieving reaction video to a shooting in Midtown Manhattan that claimed four lives, including Wesley LePatner and Julia Hyman. Once you start to notice the influence machine at work, you can trace its harmful impact on our own interests.



I’m not sure what the greatest casualty of this landscape is—dignity, credibility, or truth—but the competition is close. One aspiring influencer trades on a handful of television hits to present herself as a journalist while also, oddly, promoting her public relations firm. Her feed is filled with recycled breaking news offered as her own reporting, mixed with plugs for kosher grocery stores. As Israel and Iran traded fire in June, she posted: “Just in: Isreal

But would the room be emptier and the checks smaller if the person at the podium were a Nova hero, a reservist back from his 10th tour, or a struggling farmer from the Gaza Envelope?

[sic] Airplane attacking in Iran, explosions reported across parts of Tehran, says Mehr News Agency.” A publicist cosplaying as a journalist who misspells “Israel” and sources her “scoops” from the Iranian government is not the ideal personality that the pro-Israel community should bolster to disseminate information online.

A trendy genre of influ-tainment is the “gotcha” clip. Those who traffic in this technique approach unwitting strangers with basic questions about the conflict, expose their ignorance, and humiliate them. In one video, a popular peddler exposes that anti-Israel activists don’t even know that Israel withdrew from Gaza long before October 7. Exasperated, he concludes the segment by educating his audience that Israel, in fact, withdrew from Gaza in 2006. The problem here is that Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005. A small and forgivable mistake to be sure, but one that someone purporting to be the history police cannot afford to make.

The instinct to maximize the humiliation inevitably slides seamlessly into cruelty. One certified personal trainer has increased her Instagram following on a feed that splices fitness content and tender family moments with combative commentary. In one clip from July 2025, when claims of a famine in Gaza were rampant, she narrates a video showing a heavysset Gazan as proof that the hunger is staged. She announces to her followers that he is “the size of me and my husband put together, and I have access to a grocery store and a shopper that will bring me my groceries.” If our first line of defense against

claims of famine is a body-shaming roast from a personal trainer, it's no surprise that we're losing the media war. That her audience is primarily pro-Israel doesn't make it any better. The belittling of human suffering in the middle of a just war only serves to harden the people cheering her on, dragging everyone a little further from the values our people are meant to uphold.

The commercial commodification of it all is difficult to ignore or escape. In March 2024, the dance influencer from the Kfar Aza photo published a video featuring Raz Ben Ami, a freed hostage whose husband Ohad was still in captivity. The video opens with a familiar type of hostage testimony and closes as a commercial for Fré Skincare, with everyone shouting "We love Fré!" The testimony and sales pitch are packed into a single frame.

And still, nothing quite competes with the shiva selfie, in which a creator films other people's grief for clicks. After the IDF confirmed that Omer Neutra had been killed near the Gaza border on October 7, his parents sat in mourning near their Long Island home. A self-described "self-worth coach" had herself filmed paying her respects. This "candid" encounter transformed grieving parents into props. The influencer broadcast her visit during a family's worst possible week. I understand how this post benefits the influencer, but how does it benefit the Neutras?



I know this media machine from the inside. In the immediate aftermath of October 7, I joined a group of PR professionals to help U.S. journalists connect with Israeli families of victims and hostages. In responding to horrific atrocities that included sexual assault and gruesome methods of murder, we faced scores of judgment calls that forced us to pit an individual's dignity against the need to expose the war crimes committed against Israelis. We were not perfect by any means, but we always deferred to a family's wishes, even when it meant not bringing an important story to light. In the summer

of 2024, a family whose loved one was still in Gaza captivity came to us in distress. An influencer was about to publish a video of her choreographed performance based on the hostage's plight, and the family had asked, reasonably, to review it first. They confided in us that Israeli officials had advised them to keep quiet because a hostage-release deal was imminent. The influencer refused, saying it was her right and that an Israeli organization that works with hostage families had approved it. Was the influencer within her rights to publish? Sure. Did she internalize the family's wishes or feel a sense of responsibility to them and their captive relative? Evidently not. We tried to step in, and she posted it anyway.

This is where the influencer infatuation ends up: Yotam Haim could not object; the Neutras were never asked; the hostage family we spoke with begged and was denied.

And for all of it, you lose anyway. Israel critics Gigi and Bella Hadid have tens of millions more followers than any plausible roster of pro-Israel creators, and the gap only widens as you zoom out. The numbers war is lost before it begins. Trying to out-influence Israel's online antagonists is expensive and self-abasing. This is not to say that the pro-Israel community should abandon social media entirely, but it should resist letting it become the main event both on and off our screens.

None of this seems to help Israel. Nevertheless, official IDF and Israeli-government social media channels have also adopted the cheap engagement of snark, memes, and influencer content. And when you consider the investments in this space, you must factor in the returns on those investments. In April 2026, the Israeli government voted to nearly quintuple its public-diplomacy budget, to \$730 million, with Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar arguing that it should be funded like "jets, bombs, and missile interceptors." The following month, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir posted a video to X and Instagram of himself walking among detained activists from a Gaza flotilla, their hands bound and their faces pressed against the floor. In the clip, Ben-Gvir waves an Israeli flag

over them. U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee remarked that Ben-Gvir's video, which was widely covered by news organizations around the world, had "betrayed the dignity of his nation."

No campaign, at any budget, outruns that.

Since October 7, I think, often, of those who will never trend online. I have watched dozens of friends and strangers do extraordinary things with no audience at all. They have donated bomb shelters for kindergartens and bought plane tickets for reservists rushing back to defend their communities. I know a family covering the Israeli university tuition of a foreign worker gravely wounded on October 7. There's the father who held the safe-room handle while terrorists yanked at it from the other side, the medic who ran toward the gunfire, the reservist's wife raising their kids alone for months. Their credibility comes from sacrifice rather than clicks, and no influencer can buy or borrow that. The family that begged to screen a video first was not asking for much, just to be treated as people rather than material.

And the stakes could not be higher. American support for Israel has fallen to the lowest level that Gallup has recorded in 25 years, and for the first time, Americans say they sympathize more with the Palestinians than with Israel. Among adults younger than 35, only 23 percent say they sympathize more with Israelis, the lowest figure on record for this age group. The online generation has formed its understanding of this war and of Israel on the same platforms that we have flooded with vanity and trolls, and what we are doing there is not working.

Underneath the challenge sits a fear, conveyed to me in private by older and younger community leaders alike, that our institutions are too formal, too wordy, and too old to speak to young people in their language. The fear is understandable, but it should not translate into handing the microphone to dopamine dealers. The fix is not simple and ultimately comes down to a dedicated effort to change our community's culture. Jewish organizations need to remember that influencers are vendors, not sages, and treat them accordingly.

The leadership should also collaborate on setting communal limits on honoraria and insist that Jewish nonprofits publish a set of principles that clearly outlines criteria for social media influencers they support. We should put scholars and inspiring heroes back at the center and also commission projects from leading researchers and historians to gather and preserve more October 7 testimony that will still matter when this week's outrage is forgotten.



We know from our people's history that honest criticism of our own, and of ourselves, is a form of preservation. We engage every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in *Cheshbon Hanefesh* (moral introspection) as a way to improve ourselves for the year to come. We owe our souls and our future that much, if only to stop acting against our own interests.

The October 7 atrocities forced the Diaspora community to step up in unprecedented ways. We raised staggering sums, mobilized volunteers, and found courage we did not know we had. That should not be cheapened by a parallel culture that turns Jewish anguish into personal capital. We survive as a people because we learn to remember, but today's media culture has us hooked on a medium designed to make us forget. The question for American Jewish leadership turns out to be a simple one. Go back one last time to the burned house in Kfar Aza, to Yossi Landau with his eyes closed and the banner bearing the name of a man already gone, and to the influencer posing in the foreground. Which of them should be the center of the frame? *

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BEN JUDAH

The Mistake British Jews Made

*Anglo Jewry should be leading the call
for a nonsectarian Britain*



ETWEEN July 2024 and September 2025, I served as the special adviser to the British foreign secretary. In the Italianate grandeur of King Charles Street, as the headquarters of British diplomacy is known, I worked under a gigantic portrait of Sir Henry Pottinger, the now vanished empire's first governor of Hong Kong, in the rooms known as the Foreign Secretary's Private Office. My days were mostly spent at the side of the Labour government's secretary of state, David Lammy. When not with him, I was consulting with diplomats on his behalf or fielding calls from journalists and political advisers across Whitehall. Sometimes I would take meetings in the Ambassadors' Waiting Room, where, beneath an absurdly high ceiling, Lord Walter Rothschild once waited to meet with Lord Arthur Balfour in 1917.

My work for the British government frequently brought me into contact with representatives of the Jewish community. Now out of government, and in the shadow of one of the first antisemitic murders of Jews on British soil since their formal readmission to England in 1656, I have spent time reflecting on why organized Anglo Jewry has proved relatively ineffective in its efforts to influence my country's recent politics. And I've come up with a general diagnosis: In attempting to compete in unwinnable identity politics, British Jewry has lost the art of appealing to the national interest. By often prioritizing speaking for Israel over their own more immediate local needs, British Jews have failed to grasp where their real influence lies: in championing a nonsectarian Britain as it struggles with Islamism, populism, and migration.



We British Jews would do well to reacquaint ourselves with the Rothschilds' approach. In the Rothschild family archives lives a letter that Baron Lionel Nathan de Rothschild, Walter's grandfather, wrote in 1852 during his long campaign to sit in the House of Commons as a Jew without having to swear an oath "on the true faith of the Christian." The words *Jew* or *Jewish* do not appear in this letter. "Elected originally to vindicate the great principle of religious liberty," wrote Baron Lionel, "re-elected in order to prove that the citizens of London had not deserted that principle, I believe that on my success on the present occasion the final triumph of our cause depends." As the leader of the campaign for Jewish political rights, he and his fellow Jewish campaigners and political pioneers were scrupulous to always frame his cause as not Jewish but British, a national project in the interests of all countrymen of free-thinking conscience. The argument was simple enough: Allowing Jews to participate in British politics as Jews was good for Britain. It was a British project.

The same tenor can be found in the campaign that led to the

Balfour Declaration, a campaign in which Lord Walter Rothschild was so pivotal and for which he scrupulously argued, presenting it as in the national interest of His Majesty's Government. "I tried to make it clear to him," said the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann of meeting Balfour's soon-to-be deputy, Lord Cecil, in 1915, "that it would be good not only for us but for England." This was not simply the language that Lord Rothschild and Weizmann used in private conversation in the Foreign Office but a script common to all Zionist advocates across the country. A group of Manchester campaigners wrote that the movement's British Palestine Committee was launched to propagate "this absolute identity of interest between British policy and Jewish national aspirations." The BPC's journal argued that "a British Palestine will be a source of strength to the empire and a benefit to the whole world."

There was a reason the Anglo-Jewish leadership spoke like this during the First World War. As is the case today, the Jewish community was "an embattled minority," to quote the historian David Cesarani. Some British Jews at that time misunderstood the politics of what was about to happen, and their error very nearly cost the Jewish community grave harm. As late as July 31, 1914, the *Jewish Chronicle*, the voice of British Jewry and affectionately known as the *JC*, fumed at the "wicked" idea of "spilling blood or the squandering of British resources in order that the Slavs may maintain their position against the Teutons and an effete and barbarous autocracy be sustained on a tottering throne." Even a Rothschild, Lord Nathaniel (the son of Lionel the emancipator and the father of Walter the Zionist), claiming to speak for the City of London, made a late appeal to the government for peace talks with Germany and asked *The Times* to moderate its coverage. Making matters worse, this became publicly known only after the Kaiser had already invaded Belgium and turned the nation decisively for war. "A dirty German-Jewish international financial attempt to bully us into advocating neutrality": That's how *The Times* foreign news editor denounced the man who personified the

In attempting to compete in unwinnable identity politics, British Jewry has lost the art of appealing to the national interest.

Jewish community, painting him as representing foreign interests.

It was only by reversing course that the Jewish community was able to turn matters around. As crowds rejoiced in the streets about Britain proclaiming war against Germany, the *JC* hung a banner outside its offices that read, “England has been all she could be to Jews. Jews will be all they can be for England.” This fierce identification with the nation’s chosen policy would become something of a motto. Now guided by the Rothschilds and the grand Jewish families in West London, once fondly known as “the Cousinhood,” the Jewish masses in East London navigated moments that could have turned very ugly, from an antisemitic mob smashing up Jewish shops in the East End in 1917 to accusations that noncitizen Russian Jews were evading the war effort. The prelude to what the *JC* called “a Jewish triumph” of the Balfour Declaration was an intense display of patriotism and loyalty, with British Jews serving at higher rates than the general population. This was the backdrop when a Jewish National Home in Palestine was proposed as a project to strengthen the British Empire; it was a main reason that proposal fell on warm ears in Balfour’s Foreign Office.



I can’t help but contrast this history with my own experience hosting members of the British Jewish community at the Foreign Office or in Number 10 Downing Street. Over and over again, the leaders of my community devoted their time with this precious

audience to pushing against policies where they knew they would have no purchase, such as our decision to follow France and recognize the State of Palestine. Arguing for the reversal of an already chosen foreign policy, and with virtually no domestic support outside the Jewish community, struck me as a self-evidently futile misuse of community resources. It was as if they were channeling the spirit of the wrong Rothschild: Nathaniel, in 1914, clumsily championing a foreign policy that was out of step with both government and society. That there would be no backtracking on the government's recognition of Palestine was presumably clear to all present, as was the fact that we had already heard the counterarguments from Israel's own official ambassadors and representatives. Why did British Jewish leaders devote their energy to duplicating the already failed efforts of the Israeli Embassy? I was constantly frustrated that the community's representatives were seemingly blind to where they could have real influence in our increasingly fractured society: by becoming *the* community promoting a truly nonsectarian vision for a rapidly transforming Britain.

In the wake of numerous antisemitic attacks committed by jihadist British nationals, it has become clear that anti-Jewish violence is a symptom of British non-integration. Demographically and culturally, Britain is a very different country from what it was in my youth. In 1991, the foreign-born population was 7 percent of the country. By 2021, it had reached 16 percent. In London, where most of Britain's Jews live, the demographic shift has been even more dramatic. In 1991, the foreign-born population was around 20 percent; today it is 41 percent. Across Britain, ethnic ghettoization, Islamic radicalism, sectarianism, and white counter-mobilization are all familiar and constant problems. In Lionel Rothschild's time, the Jews Relief Act 1858 addressed the rather narrow question of religious and political integration for Britain's only sizable non-Christian minority: Jews. But the more than 1 million British Hindus and nearly 4 million British Muslims make today's political landscape and

urgencies very different. In the new Britain, there is a yawning gap where integration should be.

This—a failed Britain, not a failed British foreign policy—is the real threat to British Jews. And it is in its commitment to the promise of British liberalism that British Jewry—a community unwanted for centuries but that made Britain better for everyone—has great credibility and influence. To make the most of this influence means taking a leaf out of Baron Lionel Rothschild’s emancipation playbook. Sure, it was a different time, but every era has its upheavals. Then an industrial revolution, now an information revolution. Then mass urbanization, now mass immigration. Now as then, all Britons feel the fabric of our lives and cities being transformed. Now as then, the Jews have something to say about it.

From Baron Lionel with emancipation, to Lord Walter with Balfour, the Rothschilds exhibited a detectable pattern in British Jewish history. Anglo Jewry has been at its most influential in the 19th and 20th centuries, when it has promoted projects self-evidently in the full national interest. Alas, this once obvious point has been obscured and muddled in the 21st century by the proliferation of identity politics, a contemptuous arena of competitive victimhood in which some British Jews have misguidedly thought they could win by using emotional language and accusations of double standards, often accompanied by a threat (rather than a patriotic affirmation) that Jews will leave Britain.

Much like attempts to direct British foreign policy in the Middle East, this play at identity politics is failing badly. Despite huge efforts, through endless newspaper columns and in excellent bestselling books such as David Baddiel’s *Jews Don’t Count*, the community has not been readmitted to the radical Left’s hierarchy of victimhood. Despite immense efforts to call out antisemitism and liken it to other forms of racism, now a daily online ritual for many, antisemitism has only proliferated.

British Jewry needs a new strategy. Rather than indulging the indignities of the present, it must learn the lessons of the past.

Anglo Jewry has been at its most influential in the 19th and 20th centuries, when it has promoted projects self-evidently in the full national interest.

Emancipation strengthened Britain through free thinking, and standing up to sectarianism and proposing a new progressive but assertive model of integration would do the same. It is on these questions that British Jews can make a difference—as British citizens with ideas for what needs to be done to ensure and secure a nonsectarian Britain.

So here are some ideas from a British Jew committed to a nonsectarian Britain. I've seen the proliferation of sectarianism firsthand through political engagement with the leaders of various ethnoreligious communities. Many of these leaders, whether Muslim, Jewish, or of some other faith, receive their religious training abroad, which means that they bring home with them the sectarian lessons of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Israel, and elsewhere. As far as I can tell, this has been far from helpful in soothing the ethnoreligious tensions in Britain's increasingly multicultural society.

As a first step toward stemming this foreign influence in Britain's ethnoreligious communities, the Jewish community should be out front in urging for a review of the social threats of sectarianism, the foreign funding of religious institutions, the training abroad of religious leadership, and the ethos of the growing number of religious schools at home. Such a review would investigate what attitudes toward British multiculturalism are being taught to the next generation by religious leaders and institutions.

For one thing, all foreign-trained clergy should undergo mandatory further training in the U.K. that stresses the promotion of British tolerance and nonsectarianism. As it stands, there is no barrier to foreign states paying salaries to religious leaders in Britain, which Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and others all do. It is right to ask whether this should be allowed to continue. In addition, the British government could link its funding for the multiplying number of religious schools to far stronger promotion of British values. This is about not only Islamic sectarianism but wider integration. These rules would also apply to all religions in the country. Quite a few Haredi Jewish institutions, I expect, would rightly be required to adapt as well. The review would also consider whether the registration of a place of worship or the granting of charitable status to a religious institution should come with additional regulatory oversight.

A campaign for something like this would bolster and be bolstered by Britain's ethnic and religious leaders who share a commitment to British nonsectarianism and security. Working in politics quickly teaches you where you can have influence and where you do not. The recent government decision to ban and criminalize support for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and one of its affiliates was a very forceful example of how successful a Jewish-led, cross-community campaign can be. The Jewish community spearheaded this campaign, drawing attention to how the IRGC and the Islamic Movement of the Companions of the Right were targeting Iranian exiles on British soil and compromising British national security. This alliance was front and center in the campaign that tramped to the Foreign Office, through Parliament, and into Number 10. This provides a model for future advocacy in which the community can act as a valued leader, counsel, and defender of the society that most in Britain want to see.

We can learn from our mistakes as well. It's worth remembering that, at the time of the Balfour Declaration, it was Edwin

Montagu, the only Jew in the cabinet, who opposed it and he did so on the grounds that it would lead to Jews “being treated as foreigners in every country but Palestine.” Montagu should have had more faith in Britain, but thankfully this did not come to pass and the State of Israel did. But the creation of Israel means that it’s a country with its own interests. Its ambassadors and representatives stand up for these interests every day. Too much Jewish communal energy is spent hopelessly duplicating this work, to no good effect. This is not a new thing. Thirty years after the Balfour Declaration, David Ben-Gurion came to London to seek an extension of the British Mandate for fear that the Yishuv (the Jewish community in British Mandate Palestine) would imminently be overwhelmed by invading Arab forces; no British Jew could manage to arrange a meeting between him and the foreign secretary, let alone the prime minister. What Ben-Gurion wanted—for the British to remain in Palestine another five to ten years—was not seen by Clement Attlee or Ernest Bevin as in the British national interest. This was not a calculation that any Jewish community activism could alter.



But where the British national interest and the British Jewish interest clearly coincide is in the domestic sphere and in the goal of creating a less sectarian home country. What threatens Jews in Britain is what threatens the United Kingdom as a whole: the ability of Russia, Iran, or any hostile state to recruit disaffected minority youths to engage in terrorist activity on home soil. Imagine what that could do in a war. Ill winds for Jews are always the canary in the coal mine for ill tidings for all.

And this is where the Jewish community is well positioned to have a say. Abandoning futile identity politics and embracing the logic of the national interest and the language of pride and commitment to the United Kingdom should be the community’s answer to

the internal and external forces seeking to harm it. In our day, this means rising to the challenge of “England has been all she could be to Jews, Jews will be all they can be for England.” *

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LINDSEY SPINDLE

The Outsider Advantage

Fighting the world's oldest hate with Jewish philanthropy's newest players



IN 1998, public health officials in Florida found themselves rapidly losing ground in their battle against a resurgent foe: teenage smoking. Standard approaches—namely, preaching health facts and finger-wagging—were failing terribly, with teenage cigarette use spiking during the decade. The cost of that failure was clear and painful: preventable sickness and death.

Florida needed to shake things up. Looking for a fresh approach, the state reached out to advertising agencies and my team at the PR agency Porter Novelli to tackle the seemingly impossible: Create a campaign that prevents teenage smoking. Given the scale of the problem, our chances of succeeding seemed bleak.

Our first step was to talk with Florida teens from many back-

grounds to understand the problem. What emerged was one great truth: Teens love to question authority. Could we redirect that need to challenge authority away from *parents* and toward the *tobacco industry* and its marketing juggernaut? We put teens into the creative driver's seat and handed them the keys. They helped us create *truth*, the campaign against teen smoking.

Success came quickly. By 2000, *truth* had driven a sharp, double-digit decline in youth smoking in Florida. It was adopted by the newly formed anti-youth-smoking American Legacy Foundation and scaled nationally. Very few people who viewed the now-famous “Body Bags” ad have forgotten it.

Nationally, teenage smoking plummeted from 28 percent in 2000 to less than 2 percent in 2025. *Ad Age* named *truth* one of the 10 most effective advertising campaigns of the 21st century, crediting it for preventing hundreds of thousands of Americans a year from smoking and redrawing the field of social marketing.

Visibly led by outsiders—teens and creatives instead of credentialed public health practitioners—*truth* proved to be a lifesaving, society-changing effort. It demonstrated that smoking, once ingrained as a rite of passage, but now stigmatized as a force of destruction, could, against all odds, be pushed out of American teenage life. We tackled a seemingly insurmountable problem using new thinking from unlikely sources, and we reshaped American culture.

The mechanism behind that reshaping was influence: the kind that flows from unexpected voices, fresh perspectives, and the willingness to try something new.



In the middle of our biggest battle in generations, what can American Jews learn from *truth*? Four core insights from the *truth* campaign can help Jews chart a more secure future. Each points toward the critical need for new players, innovative ideas, and an entrepreneurial, action-over-perfection mentality:

1. Nothing in society is inevitable, even when it feels irreversible.
2. Nearly any problem can be solved with the right combination of creativity, capital, and will.
3. Social change is generational work and is never achieved alone.
4. Outsiders are often the key ingredient to upend stalemates and the status quo.

These guideposts now animate my life as one of the least likely people to have made the battle against Jew-hate a central focus of their late-stage career. By sharing the story of my unexpected, sometimes uneasy immersion into combatting antisemitism over the past two-plus years, I want to offer a model for philanthropic influence that other funders and leaders who care about building a thriving Jewish life can emulate — particularly if, like me, they have not spent their careers immersed in Jewish communal structures.



I live in a surfer town in Orange County, California, hardly a center for Jewish life. My expertise is in philanthropic strategy, communications, and brand development. Although I've associated with my Jewish faith my entire life, and observed Jewish holidays with family and friends, I haven't had many professional interactions with the organized Jewish world until recently. I'm a product of boarding school, not Jewish day school. I married an Asian-American Catholic. Most of my colleagues are not Jewish. My philanthropic leadership has been in "secular philanthropy" — a phrase I didn't even know existed until I attended my first Jewish Funders Network conference earlier this year. Yet it's precisely my "outsider/insider" perspective that I believe is advantageous in addressing Jew-hate, a thorny, perennial issue that has consumed countless amounts of communal dollars, energy, and heartache.

October 7 changed everything. The ensuing, painful revelation of antisemitism's deep, broad, violent, and entrenched presence in

By sharing the story of my unexpected, sometimes uneasy immersion into combatting antisemitism over the past two-plus years, I want to offer a model for philanthropic influence that other funders and leaders who care about building a thriving Jewish life can emulate.

America influenced me and the philanthropists I work for, Henry and Susan Samueli, in ways we could not have anticipated.

The Samueli Foundation, which I run, was already six months deep into a critical review of our investments when October 7 happened. What followed was a *truth*-like epiphany: We needed a bold, no-regrets, strategic redirection of our Jewish portfolio. Instead of allocating our funding broadly across a set of established, traditional Jewish organizations (like you'd spread peanut butter over a slice of bread), we could leverage the philanthropic experience we had developed in other areas to address the complicated issue of reducing anti-Jewish hatred. We needed a new approach designed to incentivize audacious ideas and bring transformative capital together quickly in service of those ideas, conveying a can-do, results-oriented spirit that would attract other newcomers to the field.

Speed and teamwork were nonnegotiable. We could not do this gradually or alone.

It turned out that my longtime friend Fay Twersky and her boss, philanthropist Arthur Blank, were thinking similarly. Fay is a

We had confidence in our approach and zero assurances that it would work. But we all believe that philanthropy at its best and purest form is risk capital.

national expert in effective strategic philanthropy, with decades of executive experience in complex issues. We had not worked together before, but we had had similar experiences with bold philanthropic initiatives in various areas of American life. We joined forces and immediately brought in a third critical partner who also had experience with transformative philanthropy: William Foster, CEO of the Bridgespan Group, a global consulting firm for the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. Although we each have varying degrees of personal engagement with Jewish life, none of us were steeped professionally in the American Jewish philanthropic sector. This, we hoped, might be our superpower—the source of a unique sort of influence over the field and one another.

Our initial convening was at a retreat center in the rugged hills above a stretch of the Yellowstone River in Montana, an ideal setting to begin imagining something new.

We used a proven playbook for rapidly and effectively unleashing creative thinking and mobilizing capital at the scale of the challenge: my and William's experience helping to build the Audacious Project, alongside Bridgespan and TED—a collaborative funding initiative tackling the world's most urgent challenges, which has catalyzed \$7 billion in giving since 2017.

The Samuelis gave me the gift of trust, ample resources, and runway to lead without fear, lending their personal engagement at pivotal moments. The Bridgespan team brought world-class

analytic research capabilities, scalable and mission-aligned manpower, and deep expertise on big-bet philanthropy. William's personal involvement sent a powerful signal to his firm about the importance of the cause.

We put a premium on recruiting visionary partners to join us, throwing ourselves out there in search of those willing to take a risk with us. It forced each of us into an energizing but uncomfortable zone of speed dating and rapid decision-making. We intentionally looked for other non-usual suspects—funders with deep experience in innovative American philanthropic efforts who were only newly energized about the issue of combatting antisemitism and investing in Jewish thriving. We knew there were a lot of us out there—philanthropists and professionals who watched with shock and horror the events of October 7 and all that has followed. New donors bring value to the work well beyond their capital: unique capabilities, connections, and critiques, all of which sharpen our effort and extend our influence.

With a group of brave first-movers, we quietly launched the Har Initiative, a new philanthropic collaborative, mobilizing nearly \$75 million from 11 donor entities in our first year of work. Har, the Hebrew word for “mountain,” was inspired by the big-sky thinking of Montana where we first met and by the steep climb we would be on together.

Our orientation focuses on building rather than fighting, since others had already stepped into that lane. After learning with several experts at that first gathering, we understood that to meet such a complex moment, we would need to experiment in several areas all at once. We selected six pathways that are ripe for innovative investment: safety in institutions; healthy discourse on Israel; social media; strategic alliances; democracy and polarization; and thriving Jewish life.

We had confidence in our approach and zero assurances that it would work. But we all believe that philanthropy at its best and purest form is risk capital. The role that foundations can play in

the ecosystem of social change is to take big bets that other players cannot take.

In our first year, we made multiyear grants to 15 organizations and leaders with bold five-year plans for safer and stronger Jewish life. Our grantees range from major Jewish institutions, such as Hillel International and Repair the World, which gave us ideas for critical new projects or scaling effective interventions they were struggling to fund, to social entrepreneurs starting new enterprises from scratch. Nu Reads—a subscription book service created by author Tova Mirvis and housed at the Jewish Book Council—addresses emerging waves of Jewish-author blacklisting by driving substantial purchasing of Jewish-authored fiction.

We've also identified organizations fully outside the Jewish community that have a role to play in this society-wide project. PERIL, for example, focuses on using public health approaches to prevent online radicalization, recognizing that antisemitism is often a gateway drug to violent extremism, while Interfaith America's work on college campuses can strengthen the pluralistic fabric of our diverse country. And the important work of small nonprofits such as Project Shema, which addresses antisemitism in progressive organizations, could do with support for scaling up.

For many of our grantees, the investment from Har donors was the largest in their organizational history. Significant financial capital is, of course, its own form of influence—the kind that changes what an organization can attempt. Our nonprofit partners gave our process a perfect net promoter score, virtually unheard-of in measurement and evaluation, recognizing the depth of strategic planning support offered by Bridgespan, the generosity and flexibility expressed by the donors, and the community that encircled them with nonfinancial support. Nearly all the organizations are already meeting or exceeding targets they laid out in their proposals.

In our second year of climbing, we added additional funding partners (including Maimonides Fund, the publisher of SAPIR).

Influence in this field need not flow only from the longest-tenured, most credentialed insiders. Sometimes it flows most powerfully from people who arrived late, came from elsewhere, and had the chutzpah—and the deeply felt passion—to try anyway.

Har's donors have committed roughly \$120 million for this second round. Our partners bring differing ideological orientations—center-Right to center-Left, more religiously affiliated to completely secular—and expansive professional backgrounds and philanthropic portfolios. Some are professionally staffed foundations; some are not. Some have a history of giving in the Jewish world, but most do not.

This diversity, too, is an asset: The conversations among our funding partners are deep and fascinating, provocative and challenging, and we know our grantmaking will be richer because of it. Especially when we're dealing with complex issues for which there are no simple solutions, funders must also influence one another—bringing our extensive and diverse range of experiences to bear as we bounce multiple viewpoints, theories, and strategies off one another. The distinctiveness of what we are building together comes, in no small part, from that mutual shaping.

Our donors also have a great deal in common: We share a sense of urgency, possibility, and curiosity. We believe that to fight, you must build; that territorialism must shrink in service of building trust; that none of us has all the answers, but that this mustn't prevent us from trying; and that you can and should have fun in

the pursuit of difficult work—to tighten our bonds for the inevitable steep switchbacks that will come.

Two short years, three unlikely outsiders, more than a dozen donors, 20-plus social innovators, and nearly \$200 million later, we have built a test bed for incentivizing innovation in service of a safer, thriving, enduring Jewish world. By harnessing significant capital, embracing new mindsets, and creating a uniquely diverse philanthropic collaborative, we are demonstrating that influence in this field need not flow only from the longest-tenured, most credentialed insiders. Sometimes it flows most powerfully from people who arrived late, came from elsewhere, and had the *chutzpah*—and the deeply felt passion—to try anyway.



In April 2020, with the world in an economic freefall, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said, “None of us has the luxury of choosing our challenges; fate and history provide them for us. Our job is to meet the tests we are presented.”

The challenge of reducing antisemitism chose me. It is the hardest thing I’ve done professionally since *truth*. It is also, by far, the fullest expression of Jewish identity I could have ever imagined. As much as I feel that I, the Samuelli Foundation, and the Har Initiative partners are influencing the field through our grantmaking, living in this time of deep challenge to the Jewish people is also profoundly influencing us.

The quest for a safer, thriving Jewish life is a cause that’s worth fighting for, no matter the cost. It’s worth pushing through the feelings of discomfort from being new to the game. It’s worth the risk of losing money, time, even friends and social standing. And it’s worth devoting expertise gained elsewhere to this cause. Education, finance, law, business, media, technology, governance, psychology, democracy—all of these areas have a role to play in addressing this exceptionally complex challenge.

On the other side of these risks are assured rewards: wonderful new friendships, a renewed sense of purpose, faith-driven connection, the emotional high that comes with building new things, and a decent shot at making a substantial dent in the world's oldest hate. None of us chose this moment, but we can choose, together, what to make of it. *

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PART THREE

CHANGE



ADAM BELLOW

A New Battle of the Books

*How (Jewish) publishers can save
Western civilization*



AMERICA and the West are going through a civilizational crisis. The clearest sign of it here in the United States is the rapid rise of a radical socialist movement winning elections all over the country, coupled with a vicious turn against Jews and Israel and an alarming embrace of political violence. Americans who wonder how this movement emerged seemingly out of nowhere have since learned that its roots lie in a farrago of anti-Western, anti-capitalist, anti-American ideas that have been taught for years in elite universities and are now being exported to society at large.

Many feel the problem is insoluble. But as a 40-year publishing veteran of the American culture wars, I reject this despairing assessment. It may seem quixotic to suggest that all this civilizational damage can be undone by the activity of publishers. But we shouldn't underestimate the continuing power of books to change minds and influence social and political outcomes.

In a word, books got us into this mess, and I believe that only books can get us out.



In 1704, Jonathan Swift published “The Battle of the Books,” a dramatic representation of a literary argument then raging between parties called the Ancients and the Moderns. The Ancients held that the wisdom contained in old books had not been surpassed by modern authors, who stood upon the shoulders of these giants. The Moderns held otherwise. In Swift’s satire, the books come to life in the king’s library and slug it out in physical combat. He doesn’t say who won.

In fact, the battle never ended. Nearly three centuries later, Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* kicked off what were called the Canon Wars—a passionate debate that arose in response to the multicultural movement that had recently swept through American universities. Bloom made a powerful argument against the cultural relativism that underpinned this movement and defended the Great Books as the best form of education for modern democratic citizens whose culture and institutions had their roots in the Western tradition.

Many liberals at the time agreed with the “inclusive” multicultural agenda while worrying that an ethos that celebrated difference over unity would dangerously fragment our society. But the radicals prevailed, and decades later, it is possible to see what they have wrought. In higher education, the Western classics, if they are read at all, are viewed as instruments of white male capitalist supremacy. Meanwhile, multiculturalism has replaced earlier assimilationist models of citizenship, with the result that the electorate is increasingly split into warring identity groups. Americans may still live in the same country, but no longer are we a nation inhabiting the same mental universe.

This social fragmentation has everything to do with the loss

of a common culture, since a large and diverse nation like ours must have a unifying principle other than ethnic or religious identity. In the United States, this has traditionally meant adherence to the civic nationalism enshrined in our founding documents, which in turn have their roots in the twin streams of the European Enlightenment and what we broadly call the Judeo-Christian heritage—a uniquely dynamic inheritance that has helped to make America exceptional. In recent years, however, the idea of American exceptionalism has come under attack, and the national story that people of my generation grew up with has been discredited and replaced by one that sees America as inherently bad—born in the original sins of slavery, ethnic cleansing, colonial theft, and genocide.

In 2017, writing mainly in reaction to the election of Donald Trump, columnist David Brooks directly linked the displacement of the traditional liberal arts curriculum during the Canon Wars to a host of contemporary problems, including the collapse of centrist parties, the emergence of authoritarian strong men, threats to the liberal world order, and the rise of anti-Western ideologies.

All these developments, Brooks wrote, were ultimately the result of jettisoning the Western narrative—and, with it, important liberal ideals. He cited as evidence one of its most influential vehicles: *The Story of Civilization*, by Will and Ariel Durant. This immensely popular 11-volume series, published over four decades between 1935 and 1975, presented Western history as “an accumulation of great ideas and innovations, from the Egyptians, through Athens, Magna Carta, the Age of Faith, the Renaissance and the Declaration of the Rights of Man.” Significantly, this influential Western narrative, though undoubtedly selective, was also “confidently progressive,” advancing ideals of tolerance, free speech, rule of law, and universal human rights that fostered a sense of pride and civic unity in a nation of assimilating immigrants.

In stark contrast, the anti-Western narrative deconstructs this liberal story and replaces it with a simplistic morality tale in which

Books have authority, longevity, and inherent prestige, and they drive other aspects of popular culture. Put simply, if bad books can hollow out a civilization, better books may be able to restore it.

everything Western is bad and everything non-Western is good. It also portrays liberal values and the idea of the West itself as a smokescreen for domination and hypocrisy. This intellectual jiu-jitsu has led to an astonishingly rapid erosion of civilizational confidence, along with a decline in the cultural unity and sense of shared identity we once took for granted.

But it is also, in its way, a backhanded testament to the continuing power of books. For we can hardly fail to notice that the bad effects Brooks pointed out were the direct result of replacing one set of canonical books with another. At Columbia University, the original home of the Western Civ curriculum, books by Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Paulo Freire, and Howard Zinn are heavily assigned in core humanities and social science courses, to the point where the anti-Western movement is virtually unopposed in the institutions molding our future leaders.

The amazing success of this strategy of narrative inversion should lead us to ask how the Western canon, and the cultural identity and unity it fostered, became canonical in the first place. The answer is, it didn't arise out of nowhere; it was the product of a decades-long effort by a group of like-minded educators, writers, and publishers. As it happens, Jewish immigrants were deeply involved in this project and frequently played overlapping roles. Those who seek to

reconstruct the classical liberal narrative today have much to learn from their success.



In 1918, the War Department developed a course for young men about to go abroad to fight in Europe. Offered as part of Student Army Training Corps programs at some 500 colleges around the country, the “War Issues” course sought to inculcate an understanding of the causes and stakes of the Great War and featured readings in economics, government, history, literature, and philosophy. The idea was to improve morale and make them better fighters—naïve perhaps, but also a ringing endorsement of the role of books in shaping minds and forming character.

After the Allied victory, a follow-up program was devised for the million-odd American soldiers still in Europe waiting to be shipped home. Eighteen months of brutalizing trench warfare had rendered many of these young men unfit to return to civilized society. The solution? More books! The “Peace Issues” program provided instruction in the history of the West, the cultural traditions of its peoples, and an introduction to the philosophic study of humanity and human nature. Subsequently adopted by Columbia University in 1919 as the Introduction to Contemporary Civilization course and further expanded through the University of Chicago’s “Chicago Plan,” which emphasized interdisciplinary study based on the Great Books, the Western Civ curriculum quickly spread to liberal arts colleges across the country, where it remained ensconced for decades.

Also in 1919, an obscure Midwestern Jewish newspaper editor named Emanuel Haldeman-Julius—a committed socialist, free-thinker, and early feminist—launched a series of cheaply printed pamphlets that came to be known as the Little Blue Books. His first batch included *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, and the *Soviet Constitution*. The initial offerings

sold surprisingly well, and over the next 20 years, he published some 2,000 more. The series was a cornucopia of history, philosophy, classic literature and poetry, humor, practical advice, how-to, and, of course, sex.

Altogether they sold more than 100 million copies via mail order, newsstands, and vending machines. At a nickel apiece, meant to be read and discarded, they did particularly well in rural areas without access to bookstores or libraries. They were in effect a popular university course for farmers, mechanics, and tradesmen. It was also Haldeman-Julius who, after hearing Will Durant lecture on philosophy, began publishing the young historian. He also advised the Jewish owners of Simon & Schuster to collect Durant's lectures in *The Story of Philosophy*, the bestselling book that launched S&S as a publishing powerhouse. S&S later published the aforementioned *Story of Civilization*, which sold more than 2 million copies.

Other publishers also saw a market for classic books, with Jewish publishers taking the lead. In 1917, Albert Boni and Horace Liveright spun up the Modern Library and stocked it with European and American classics. In 1925, a pair of Jewish businessmen, Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer, acquired the franchise and expanded it still more, going on to launch Random House two years later, initially as an imprint. Then, during World War II, Harold Guinzburg, co-founder of Viking Press, launched the Viking Portables, which introduced the work of classic American authors to a general audience.

These and other companies founded by New York Jews who couldn't get jobs in stuffy WASP-run houses formed a constellation that quickly turned American publishing into a globally dominant enterprise. While they mostly eschewed Jewish books in favor of promoting highbrow culture, they had a lot in common that could be traced to their Jewish origins. They were also frequently larger-than-life impresarios, projecting their infectious love of books through sheer force of personality. Mortimer Adler, the philosopher who turned the Chicago Plan into something approaching a global franchise, was a template of this Jewish entrepreneurial type, which

Only the sustained attention required to read difficult books—books that challenge preconceptions, demand argument, and refuse to resolve easily—can build the capacity for the kind of independent thought that a free society requires.

included not only dedicated book men such as Alfred Knopf and Cerf but Leonard Bernstein, with his Young People's Concerts, and theatrical producer Joe Papp, who brought Shakespeare to Central Park. Today we would call them "cultural influencers."

Why Jews should have been so enamored of the Western classics is a topic for a book in itself. But we can suggest one reason for the prominence of Jews in popularizing the Western tradition: its support for liberal values, which fostered tolerance for vulnerable minorities, freedom of speech, due process, civil rights, and other important protections. Affirming the Judeo-Christian roots of that civilization had particular value to Jews, giving them a claim to be included in American society and the American story more broadly.

It therefore seems appropriate, especially now when the liberal tradition is under assault from both ideological extremes, for Jewish publishers to take the lead in reminding modern liberals what liberalism originally meant.



Today there is a new battle of the books going on, and in case you haven't noticed, the Ancients are losing again. But here is the

good news: By all available evidence, books remain extremely consequential. They have authority, longevity, and inherent prestige, and they drive other aspects of popular culture. Put simply, if bad books can hollow out a civilization, better books may be able to restore it.

The agenda for publishers committed to this fight should have five main components.

First: Deconstruct the anti-Western canon.

In a remarkably short time, the founders of what we may call the pedagogy of the oppressed—critical race theory, DEI, intersectionality, anticolonialism, cultural Marxism, and related disciplines—have moved from being dissident intellectuals to the leaders of a prevailing academic school, a cultural movement, and finally a priesthood whose dicta carry the authority of revealed truth. In their wake, a flood of anti-capitalist and antiracist books have reshaped the assumptions of a generation. Anyone who doubts that books change minds should note that a single volume published in 2020 called *In Defense of Looting* helped make this kind of antisocial behavior an acceptable form of social protest on the Left within a matter of months.

These books should not be banned or suppressed. They should be read, taught, and then criticized with the same combative energy that they brought to deconstructing everything they inherited. The anti-Western canon was built by argument; it can be challenged by argument. We must meet it on its own terms.

Second: Restore the philosophical foundations of the liberal tradition.

As Allan Bloom famously argued, the abandonment of philosophical seriousness and the embrace of value-relativity lead inexorably to nihilism, the inversion of civilized values, and the glorification of

revolutionary violence. The remedy is a recovery of Enlightenment fundamentals—among them truth, objectivity, the idea of human nature, and the priority of individual rights over the claims of the state. It also means restoring basic concepts that have been systematically vandalized: the idea of the West, the Enlightenment and the liberal tradition, the Judeo-Christian heritage, and the legacy of Greece and Rome.

This philosophical recovery must be practical as well as theoretical. We need books that teach basic economics, civics, the sociology of mass movements, and so on. We need books that restore the accurate understanding of words such as *fascism*, *socialism*, *capitalism*, and *democracy*—words that ideological usage has rendered nearly meaningless. We also need books that explain the difference between logical argument and motivated reasoning, since, as the resurgence of antisemitism amply demonstrates, people cannot be argued out of convictions that reason did not get them into in the first place.

Third: Retell the American story.

This is the year of America's 250th anniversary, and American exceptionalism—the proposition that this country is uniquely founded not on blood and soil but on a set of ideas available to all who freely embrace them—has never been more embattled or more worth defending. The academic Left has spent decades poisoning the wells of Western and American history, to the point where generations of students have been formed entirely by its distortions. We need a revised and updated account of Western and American civilization—warts and all, incorporating what is legitimate in the anti-Western critique—that shows the positive arc of this tradition and its unique contribution to human freedom and prosperity without inducing the cultural despair that has become the academy's default product. In short, we need a new American story—one we can all fall in love with again.

Fourth: Reform the cultural feeder system.

American culture today reflects the worldview and prejudices of those who make it—people who for the most part attended the same schools, inhabit the same elite milieu, and share a similar left-liberal outlook. The result is a uniformity of taste that propagates itself through M.F.A. programs, fellowship committees, literary-prize juries, publishing choices, and a book-review culture now dominated, since the collapse of regional and local reviewing, by a single New York newspaper with a pronounced coastal perspective. To break this self-reinforcing cycle, we should insist that literary merit, not political alignment, determines what gets published, reviewed, and rewarded. Prize committees should evaluate work blind, without knowledge of the author's identity.

We should also actively promote the revival of America's regional cultures—those diverse traditions that produced some of our greatest native talents and that have since been paved over by an ersatz national culture promulgated by coastal elites. A new WPA-style project to recover and publish the forgotten ephemeral substrate of American culture—the Little Blue Books model, in print and digital form—could cultivate genuine awareness of this country's cultural richness and variety.

Fifth: Promote literacy and critical thinking.

None of the above will accomplish anything if Americans stop reading and forget how to think. Film and digital media have their place in the transmission of culture, but they are not sufficient to form the mental habits on which critical thinking depends. Only the sustained attention required to read difficult books—books that challenge preconceptions, demand argument, and refuse to resolve easily—can build the capacity for the kind of independent thought that a free society requires.

This was understood by the original advocates of liberal education—including the U.S. Army, which wanted not mindless

automatons but thinking individuals who understood what they were fighting for. We as a society must promote habits of reading beginning in early childhood and then sustain them through an adult culture that treats serious books as a civic resource rather than a luxury. This is not only in our interest as publishers. It is our obligation as citizens.

The position of Jewish publishers in this effort is a special one. After a century of full and productive participation in American literary life, Jews are being actively forced out of the profession. More and more often, Jewish books are not being published, reviewed, or distributed. In their place, a wall of anti-Zionist books now greets the astonished bookstore browser. And anti-Zionism, as demonstrated with painful clarity since October 7, is not merely a political position about a distant conflict. It is a knife in the heart of the liberal tradition itself—the reemergence, in progressive dress, of the oldest and deadliest prejudice in Western history.

The defense of Israel is therefore inseparable from the defense of the West, and Jewish publishers who understand this have both a particular stake in the enterprise and a responsibility to advance it. The story of Jews in Europe, America, the Middle East, and Israel urgently needs to be told, and told accurately, against the systematic campaign to demonize it.



Is all of this achievable?

The level of indoctrination in our schools and universities has reached a depth that will require a generation, perhaps more, to reverse. It is possible that we are entering a new dark age in which the culture of literacy itself is the first casualty.

But the power of books never did lie in their ability to impose correct ideas. It lies in their tendency to challenge entrenched orthodoxies by presenting alternatives that require us to think for

ourselves. That capacity—for challenge, for self-revision, for genuine argument—is what we are ultimately defending.

Above all, it is the vocation of publishers to fall in love with books and to transmit that enthusiasm to others. That is what (Jewish) publishers did for the Western classics, and they must do it again today for the American cultural heritage. Win or lose, the time to begin is now. *

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Where the Soviets Won

*Anti-Zionism has succeeded in the West
more than it ever could in the East*



STRANGE THING occurred on September 25, 1991. After decades of developing and promoting it, Soviet Foreign Minister Boris Pankin stood at the United Nations and declared that his country was ready to bury one of its most durable exports: anti-Zionism. “Our organization has been renewed,” he announced, “and it is imperative that once and for all it rejects the legacy of the Ice Age in which Zionism was compared with racism.” The same week, *Izvestia*, the state-sponsored newspaper that had for many years churned out anti-Zionist talking points, described Israel as a “democratic” state and Iraq as “despotic.” Just three weeks later, the Russian airline Aeroflot signed an agreement with Israel’s El Al to establish direct immigrant flights from Moscow and St. Petersburg to Tel Aviv.

For three decades, the USSR had been busy crafting a titanic campaign that blamed Israel and Zionism for crimes against

humanity. How, then, can one account for such a dramatic shift in state policy vis-à-vis anti-Zionism? And how did a manufactured ideology so vacuous come to flourish, decades later, in Western cities such as London, Berlin, and New York?



The answer to the first question contains the answer to the second, and together they reveal a paradox with urgent implications for the present. The difference between anti-Zionism in the East and anti-Zionism in the West is that in the former it was part of the coercive structure of the state, whereas in the West it is an anti-state strategy.

In the East, the educated class—the poets, the physicists, the dissidents—saw through anti-Zionist propaganda precisely because the state was its author. But in the West, where no state imposed it, anti-Zionism found what the Soviet Union could never manufacture: eager consumers. It arrived not as an order but as an invitation, slipped inside the American moral framework of antiracism, and was voluntarily embraced by the very class of people—professors, writers, artists, human rights activists—who resisted its equivalent in the East. Anti-Zionism has succeeded in the democratic West more than it ever could in the totalitarian East. To understand why, one must first understand why it failed at home.

For the USSR, Zionism was a useful symbol of all the evil isms: imperialism, colonialism, racism, fascism. It stood in for the global conspiracy of American capital. The Soviet focus on Zionism was therefore totalizing and relentless. But who actually believed it? Citizens of the Soviet Union lived inside a system of mandatory lying. The newspapers lied. The party congresses lied. The school textbooks lied. Many knew this and, crucially, some knew that everybody else knew it. The regime's insistence that Zionism was evil was evidence that it was not. Its propagandistic nature was so apparent to the intelligentsia that it could never be truly

believed even by a population already so inclined toward antisemitism. The chant “Bey zhidov, spasaj Rossiyu” (“Beat the kikes, save Russia!”) had echoed through the tsarist empire long before any KGB operative dreamed up Zionist demonology. What the population possessed, in other words, was hatred; what the state supplied was ideology. The two coexisted but never really merged. “Bytovoy antisemitism”—everyday, street-level Jew-hatred—ran on its own ancient fuel and needed little doctrinal sanction, while state anti-Zionism relied on printing presses, “Zionology,” and party directives that rarely translated into conviction.

The intelligentsia had a word for Soviet doublethink: *pokazukha*, loosely understood as “façade over reality,” the performance of belief with no inner meaning behind it. When the state declared Zionism the enemy of all progressive mankind, sophisticated Soviet citizens filed it alongside the five-year-plan figures and the grain-harvest statistics—information to be nodded at in public and quietly discarded in private. Refuseniks found significant sympathy among Russian dissidents, not because dissident Russians were necessarily philosemites, but because the propaganda bore the same stench of official mendacity. The dissidents felt a sense of kinship with those targeted for social engineering by the totalitarian state.

While the state could command conformity, engineering true belief proved a difficult task. For this reason, when the Soviet empire collapsed, the entire anti-Zionist complex collapsed with it. In the turbulent months leading up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the imperative to stay in power coincided with pressure to normalize relations with Israel. This abrupt reversal on anti-Zionism should be read for what it was: evidence that anti-Zionism had been a political instrument rather than popular conviction. As Izabella Tabarovsky recently observed, it was embraced insofar as it served the regime’s interests and discarded just as quickly once it no longer did.

To be sure, the disappearance of state anti-Zionism did not signal the end of anti-Jewish hostility in the former Soviet states.

My mother, who grew up in the Soviet Union, puts it simply: ‘The Soviet reader developed a skill almost entirely absent in the free world, an instinctive nose for ideological slop.’

Indeed, the best evidence of anti-Zionism’s shallow purchase lies in what happened to the politics of Jew-hatred after the collapse of the USSR: It migrated to the political Right, shed the language of anti-colonialism, and returned to what Soviet Jewish writer Friedrich Gorenshcheyn calls “national zoological tendencies,” captured in popular Russian antisemitic sayings such as “If the tap has run dry, the Jews drank the supply; if the tap runs anew, it’s been pissed in by a Jew.” Tellingly, post-Soviet anti-Jewish hostility revived the ancient blood libel in *Pravda*, the former flagship newspaper of the Communist Party.



Here we come to the second question: If the Russian intelligentsia, the educated class of writers, professors, poets, artists, and human rights activists, could see through the lies of anti-Zionism, why is the exact same class of citizenry in the West the one most reliably promoting the same lies? Why is anti-Zionism voluntarily embraced by those who claim intellectual independence? How have they helped anti-Zionism succeed in the West more than it ever could in the East?

The answer is: timing. Anti-Zionism arrived in the United States during the era of the anti-Vietnam War protests and the civil rights movement—the precise historical moment when the

In the antisemitic imagination, the Jew is not subhuman but superhuman, possessed of an almost supernatural capacity to infiltrate, manipulate, transform, and corrupt.

American moral imagination was being reorganized around the single axis of racism versus what would later be called antiracism. The timing was auspicious for anti-Zionism. While in the Soviet Union anti-Zionism was an extension of the cold and bureaucratic state, in America it was packaged as part of the armed struggle against racism. As Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton wrote in a 1970 statement: “We support the Palestinians’ just struggle for liberation one hundred percent. We will go on doing this, and we would like for all of the progressive people of the world to join our ranks in order to make a world in which all people can live.” When George Jackson, known as the Black Panthers’ field marshal, was killed by San Quentin prison guards the following year, a handwritten copy of the poem “Enemy of the Sun,” by Palestinian poet Samih al-Qasim, was found among his belongings, and the *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* erroneously attributed its authorship to Jackson.

This rather literal conflation of Palestinian nationalism with revolutionary black nationalism illustrates how anti-Zionist propaganda from the Soviet revolutionary empire slipped through America’s moral cracks, namely, anti-black racism. Once inside that moral framework, it became nearly impossible to dislodge because to question anti-Zionism was to question the entire tradition of American antiracist thought to which it had attached itself. The parasite found its ideal host in the American protest

movement, embedding itself within the structure of the activist and academic disciplines devoted to social deconstruction.

Americans are, in many ways, culturally conditioned to view political mobilization and public dissent as democratic virtues. Yet this very openness, America's identity as a beacon of freedom, also renders it vulnerable to propaganda. The euphoric support that anti-Zionism enjoys among left-wing protesters stands in direct contrast to its failure to find a foothold among those who protested the regime that manufactured it. My mother, who grew up in the Soviet Union, puts it simply: "The Soviet reader developed a skill almost entirely absent in the free world, an instinctive nose for ideological slop." In effect, anti-Zionism was a product of state propaganda that entered the American landscape in a highly strategic way. It passed through the field of vision in a free society ill-equipped to confront blatant hatred veiled as legitimate discourse.

This reveals something distinctive about American culture itself, specifically about the limits of how Americans understand hatred. As Shaul Kelner recently observed, "Americans do not have a conceptual language of thinking about the Othering of Jews" outside of "Nazi and racist referents." Can an American recognize hate that has nothing to do with race?

The question is not rhetorical. A dominant framework through which Americans process bigotry can be seen in what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, a sociologist and proponent of critical race theory, calls the "racial grammar of everyday life," the underlying structure through which people interpret reality. Consider how the Holocaust is taught in American schools: as a story about political power. The Nazis had it; the Jews did not. The Nazis othered a powerless minority on the basis of racial impurity. That framing, however well-intentioned, quietly assimilates the Holocaust into the American story of racial oppression. It makes it legible to a society that thinks of oppression in primarily racial terms.

But antisemitism is not racism. Or rather, it is not *only* racism, and the part that is not is the part that matters most.

In conventional racism, the hatred flows downward: The powerful despise the powerless precisely because they are seen as subhuman. But the Jew-hater does not hate Jews this way. The antisemite is not so much contemptuous of the inferior Jews as he is afraid and resentful of them. In the antisemitic imagination, the Jew is not subhuman but superhuman, possessed of an almost supernatural capacity to infiltrate, manipulate, transform, and corrupt. The threat is that the Jew will get inside your institutions, your culture, your bloodline, and make you into something you are not. “Yes, through the Jewish nation, Germany will become a western New Palestine,” wrote Wilhelm Marr, the father of modern antisemitism, in 1879. That same year, the chaplain and conservative politician Adolf Stoecker said that “we are on the way to having public opinion fully dominated by Jews and labor fully exploited by them,” constructing the Jew as a moral villain. Likewise, the anti-Zionist is not genuinely concerned with Zionism or Israel as they exist. Rather, the Jewish state is distorted and mythologized into a 21st-century bogeyman, a repository for society’s fears, grievances, and moral anxieties.

Americans are susceptible to the equation of anti-Zionism with antiracism, which is simply an alternative form of the USSR’s equation of Zionism with racism. Like a sniper trained to hit a single target, the American moral eye has been calibrated with extraordinary precision on one thing: racism. But a sniper’s focus is also his blind spot. Everything outside the crosshairs blurs into illegibility. Anti-Zionism simply had to step inside the one narrow field of vision that scrutiny was already trained on. And everything outside that field, 2,000 years of the particular, shape-shifting hatred of Jews, remained exactly where it had always been: out of frame, out of focus, and therefore invisible.

There is a revelation here as fascinating as it is frightening. To riff on an old adage, there are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and definitions. Anti-Zionism was easily definable as a lie in the Soviet Union but is less so in the West because it is defined

Sincere convictions cannot be decreed out of existence; they can be undone only where they are formed. And in America, they are largely formed in educational settings. The corrective, therefore, must be educational.

as a movement against the power structure rather than a product of it. Soviet anti-Zionist arguments, which found limited traction within the totalitarian state that manufactured them, have found extraordinary hospitality in the free democratic West because for Western audiences, and for Americans in particular, anti-Zionism offers Americans a guilt-free way to reckon with race and power by divesting themselves of neither but of Israel instead.

The history of American racism has, in addition to its many horrors, produced a myopic and self-referential moral framework that attempts to place every social phenomenon somewhere on the spectrum of racism to antiracism. Within its logic, power is to oppression as smoke is to fire. Wherever there is the first, there is also the other. Here is what happens when the logic is applied to the all-powerful Jews or the all-powerful Jewish state: The Jew is powerful, the powerful are oppressive, ergo, the hatred of the Jew or the Jewish state is not hatred but justice. Anything can be done in the name of justice, including everything you saw on October 7. This is why so many Americans educated in this narrow framework insistently refused to mourn or love the dead Jews of that day. Instead, they saw the massacre as an act of virtue and “an inevitable consequence of apartheid,” as Melat Kiros, a democratic socialist and Colorado congressional candidate, said in May.



Anti-Zionism is thus living a very different life in America than it did in the Soviet Union, a life of conviction rather than coercion. And that is precisely what makes the West's predicament harder. Sincere convictions cannot be decreed out of existence; they can be undone only where they are formed. And in America, they are largely formed in educational settings. The corrective, therefore, must be educational.

America's education system needs to stop teaching about antisemitism as an example of racial hatred. As important as it is that most states require Holocaust education in K-12 schools, these mandates and requirements tend to become the anchor for teaching antisemitism through the prism of racial othering of which the Holocaust is considered a historic example. It's a cautionary tale in the culmination of racial violence. In that context, when Jewish students tell administrators that a course on the "genocide in Gaza" is antisemitic, the administrators genuinely do not understand the complaint because within the framework they were given, it's not. It is akin to the Holocaust education mandated by the state. Many of them genuinely don't understand that in the historical span of Jew-hatred, the Holocaust is one version among many, and that anti-Zionism is another. Nothing in their education prepared them to recognize a hatred aimed at perceived power, which is one of the threads that connects anti-Zionism with conventional antisemitism and that is absent from most forms of racial hatred.

The corrective is that educational requirements must be reformulated to teach that while America's history of hatred is oriented primarily around race, there are many other forms, and students must learn how to identify them. We need a new curriculum not merely on antisemitism but on the broad spectrum of hatred and prejudice. That educational program will necessarily stress the uniqueness of anti-Jewish hate as an act of demonization cloaked in virtue. Here is the essential lesson of anti-Jewish hostility in

all its forms (anti-Judaism, antisemitism, anti-Zionism): Jews are hated not merely for being different but for allegedly corrupting the world's morality. A reformation of education around Jew-hatred must therefore precede any broader intervention. *

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Can Parents Change a School?

Start by asking, ‘What do they read here?’



NE OF THE more powerful, if unexpected, legacies of the Covid pandemic began with the startling view it gave us into our children's schools. As Zoom school dragged on—and *on*—and our exasperation mounted, we ended up receiving an infuriating gift: an extended close-up look at an educational system that was losing its way. There's no need to recount the staggering academic, social, and emotional costs of virtual schooling, from which some children may never recover. But it became clear that the failures often ran deeper than Zoom school. Loosening standards, sclerotic teaching methods, and administrations content to be on autopilot had seen academic performance take a yearslong dive.

Sure enough, after classrooms reopened, the problems hardly abated. A raft of studies shows that educational achievement has been on the decline across America since the mid-2010s, including

one released earlier this year by Stanford's Educational Opportunity Project, which suggested that the United States was in a decade-long "learning recession." The pandemic may have served as a wake-up call, but math and reading haven't come close to recovering. This summer, a viral article in *The Atlantic*, "The End of Reading Is Here," noted that school librarians were resorting to graphic novels to meet high schoolers at their reading level. Schools award diplomas, only for graduates to arrive at college unable to read 20-page articles, let alone books.

For many of us, it has never been clearer just how thoroughly a school can stand in the way of a good education. As we've found our voices, we've run up against administrators, school boards, and state officials who can be hard to budge. Undaunted parents have entered school board races, while others have turned to homeschooling, left for different schools, or started their own. Parents'-rights groups come in different flavors, and news coverage of them has, perhaps unfairly, produced an endless stream of headlines and short-form video of fiery school board clashes. They have successfully highlighted the indoctrination of students into trans ideology and successfully brought legal action to end policies that allow schools to keep parents in the dark about their children's "identity" issues. Since October 7, shocking political displays in the classroom and a rash of K-12 antisemitism scandals have added another angle to this fight for Jewish parents.

Still, for most moms and dads, the demands are simple: They want to make sure their kids are reading books and learning math and that they aren't targeted by antisemitism. They don't want to get swept away in overheated culture wars or be harassed in political battles. What are the levers they can pull as they engage with schools? Which ones tend to work, and which don't?



For starters, the fundamentals never change. Another major lesson of Covid-era schooling was that education happens at home as much as it does at school, on or off Zoom. A 2019 meta-analysis of hundreds of studies found positive associations between parental involvement in schooling and their kids' academic performance, regardless of school quality. Raising kids in an environment where books are read, multiplication tables are memorized, and screens aren't worshipped is foundational.

When engaging with a school, start at the beginning, asking questions and setting expectations before a new school year begins. In my experience, the most valuable question to ask is "What do they read here?" Yes, you should care about the people, materials, and methods a school employs to teach math and science—heaven knows there is some awful pedagogy out there—but the failures of these programs will become evident quickly. If your fifth-grader can't do basic multiplication, you will find out soon enough. But the reading list, at different stages of development, is where the value system, worldview, and habits of mind will be imparted. And you might be surprised how difficult it can be to get a straight answer to this fundamental question.

When my kids were getting started at our local public middle school, the administration gave me examples of books that had been read in the past, but they were reluctant to name any books slated to be read that year. They seemed to want to give teachers the flexibility to decide from one year to the next what was "relevant" or how much the kids could accomplish. On the occasion that a list was announced at the beginning of the year, teachers rarely got through it. Every year, the standards seemed to drop. During the pandemic, my seventh-grader at a top-rated public school read *The Hunger Games* and Dr. Seuss's *The Sneetches*. When I asked why it took three months for the eighth-graders to read *Animal Farm*, the principal informed me, "I don't know if you're aware, but there are a lot of metaphors in this book."

I wish I could say it was easier when my kids were at a Jewish

When I asked why it took three months for the eighth-graders to read *Animal Farm*, the principal informed me, ‘I don’t know if you’re aware, but there are a lot of metaphors in this book.’

elementary school, but I encountered the same obstacles to getting a straight answer about the reading syllabus. It astonished me that even veteran educators chafed at the question and couldn’t simply give an account of what they planned to read that year. Letting teachers decide what books will be read and how much will be covered in any given year is a recipe not only for classes that stray from a school’s mission but also for frustration with the school generally. Why were some kids in fourth grade learning more than others? How can fifth-grade teachers prepare when the fourth-grade curriculum is always in flux? Why have schools given up on not only books but also textbooks? How can parents assist with a homework question when they have no reference for what kids learned in class? Why are teachers going home at night and looking up activities online that they can do with their classes?

A lone parent doesn’t have a great deal of pull in setting curriculum standards, nor should she. But if the problem in a given school or district is big enough, a critical mass of engaged parents can initiate change. With coordination, an administration will be forced to care, and you’ll have a good shot at pressuring it to commit to a reading list that parents are comfortable with. A competent principal or assistant principal should be expected to hold teachers’ feet to the fire and tell them what every fourth-grader should be able to do.

When a parent body is galvanized, it has several levels at which it

The goal is to build common cause with other parents and with the people educating your children. You don't want power over them. You want to partner with them.

can operate: the school, the school board, or the state. The higher you go, the more time, effort, and resources you'll need. It can take years, and most parents aren't interested in sticking around after their kids have already outgrown the battle at hand. But meaningful progress is possible. In 2022, Buffalo parents, educators, and local organizations joined forces to form the Western New York Literacy Initiative. Just two years later, their persistence paid off: New York became the latest state to follow Mississippi (one of the only states to have seen rapid gains in reading ability since 2010) and pass a bill adopting the phonics-based "science of reading" approach.

Yet, according to a May 2026 report, more than 100 New York school districts still haven't adopted the new policy, even though the legislation mandated a September 2025 deadline. An informed, energized community of parents in a district could make all the difference. Bootcamps and fellowships have cropped up across the country to train parents in how best to do this. Parents are often made to feel as if teaching is rocket science and that, unless they are experts, they have no business offering input on curriculum. Even school board members may feel as if they are only there to decide on school-construction projects or teacher contracts, not what students are learning. Perhaps these programs will give parents the confidence they need to get more involved.

At the same time, there are pitfalls. We've all seen the shouting

matches at school board meetings or attempts to shame certain teachers or administrators in the media. These tactics can be counterproductive. Many of the problems in the education system can hardly be considered, at bottom, political. But the second they reach the media, they become political and you lose control of the agenda. For parents who aim to have genuine influence over the direction of a school, antagonistic relationships with school leadership will likely prove to be a liability and a hindrance rather than an asset. If being under an unforgiving microscope is the new reality, the social media panopticon might be driving potential teachers away from the profession or making talented instructors walk on eggshells. According to a 2022 University of Chicago poll, nearly half of Americans said the stress of dealing with parents was too high to go into teaching.

That said, parent groups can be useful tools to build networks and share information. Many parents have found success, for instance through groups such as Wait Until 8th, which pushes back against phones in schools. Once parents gain a critical mass, they have been able to go to school leaders and ask them to respond to concerns about the effects of technology in the classroom. The goal is to build common cause with other parents and with the people educating your children. You don't want power over them. You want to partner with them.

Antisemitism is another matter. As recent events have proven, virality and the outside pressure it brings are sometimes your only recourse. *The Free Press's* Frannie Block reported that a classroom at Brooklyn's PS 261 displayed a map of the Middle East that erased Israel, part of an "Arab Culture Arts" program funded by Qatar Foundation International. She also highlighted how Brown University's Choices Program, which produced K–12 curricula, was infusing the classroom with pro-Palestinian bias. When parents are confronted with challenges like these, they should press for institutional neutrality, with groups such as the North American Values Institute producing sample policies that administrators or school boards can adopt.



When should you throw in the towel and look elsewhere? The costs of leaving can be high — both socially in terms of uprooting your child from his environment and financially, with private school tuition or the cost of moving from one town to the next. You will need to do an honest accounting of what went wrong with the previous school to assess whether the new one will have a better chance of success. And if you don't think it will, you're left with the nuclear option: starting a new school.

Take it from someone who has spent a lot of time on the ground at new educational institutions (both K–12 and colleges): The first thing to remember is that children and parents come and go, but faculty are forever. Most will outlast the children they teach. (If they don't, you should be suspicious of the high turnover rates.) The initial crop of teaching staff is crucial, and settling for people who are not completely qualified or not aligned with the mission of your new school can be devastating and have a cascading effect.

The only way to be sure you get the faculty you want is transparency about the school's expectations of its teachers. The more school leaders tell educators up front about the school's specific expectations, the less likely conflicts will arise down the line. But it won't solve everything. A friend of mine who runs a charter school had to fire a teacher in the school's first year of operation. His school's mission seemed abundantly clear, but the employee seemed to be willfully ignoring it when he took the job. Transparency makes it easier to part ways with staff who have gone off the rails: "Look, we told you what was and wasn't acceptable."

One common mistake I see is founding a school based on what it opposes. In the current climate, it might be tempting to establish schools that are avowedly anti-woke, against gender ideology or intersectionality or "antiracism." But this amounts to being defined by your opponents, and it's not enough to sustain a school

in the long run. Ideological trends shift, social movements fizzle out. What happens after you manage to beat your opponents back? Without a positive mission, success can paradoxically take the wind out of your sails or lead to mission drift.

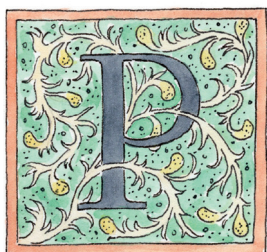
There's an undeniable attraction to being a pioneer generation, and it's worth applauding parents who take on what is often an arduous task. But I should also mention that there's a danger: You risk attracting people who will never be satisfied with a school that does not respond to every demand. Building new institutions that will last requires collaboration, not just righteous anger. For every parent who wants to burn it all down and start over, you need dozens more who can, to borrow a phrase, "love the one they're with." *

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The Mobilization Ladder

And how to get off it



OLITICS IN AMERICA and much of the Western world are often said to be polarized. The reality is worse.

We reach for the word *polarization* as though we are witnessing an unusually heated but still recognizable democratic argument. But polarization is only the surface manifestation of a more dangerous phenomenon unfolding in our society. Beneath polarization lies something far more combustible: moral mobilization.

In a polarized society, people disagree. In a morally mobilized society, people are sorted into warring tribes. Each tribe assumes a combative posture, and victory is about subjugating and destroying the other side. A morally mobilized society is engaged in a permanent civil war in which dehumanization flourishes. Tribal victory does not resolve the conflict; it intensifies it. When one side triumphs, the other does not feel persuaded—it feels humiliated. And humiliation is the most reliable engine of political radicalization

we know. The humiliated do not reflect. They consolidate, harden, and countermobilize.

All of us, ourselves and our enemies alike, are trapped in this mobilization cycle. Each side uses the fear of its opponents' mobilization to fuel its own. In doing so, both evade responsibility for the society they are jointly creating. We treat the other side's escalation as proof of its depravity and our own as a justified response, refusing to see the feedback loop by which each side radicalizes the other. Everyone is feeding the fire, poised to burn our collective civic life. Democracy can survive disagreement. It cannot survive the loss of pluralism, and pluralism is exactly what moral mobilization erodes.

Instead, what protects democracy and a healthy civic culture is a cultural *demobilization*. Demobilizing does not mean abandoning moral clarity. It means recognizing that this moral combat is self-perpetuating and ultimately self-defeating.

In a mobilized society, beliefs are not just beliefs. They are identities, and a demand that one renounce one's beliefs is therefore a demand that one renounce oneself. This is why conversion—the attempt to move someone from the wrong belief to the right one through exposure, shame, or sanction (and a topic worth its own essay)—is so unlikely to prove successful. It requires a level of self-negation that is foreign to most people in free societies.

Much of the Jewish community has adopted the same mobilized posture as the society surrounding it. Because antisemitism is existential, it provokes an equally totalizing desire for moral victory: If anyone has earned the right to fight without restraint, surely it is us. The problem with this is not a moral one. It's that the mobilizing posture is to our strategic detriment, often strengthening the very dynamics we are trying to defeat, hardening opponents, intensifying tribal identification, and pushing people further into entrenchment and radicalization.

Ideological conversion and political conquest are the dominant response in a mobilized society; complexity and humanization are the key operational levers of demobilization.

To understand why so many of our efforts have failed, we must first understand how mobilization works: how people are drawn into moral combat and how to attune our interventions to what will interrupt that process rather than feed it.



A helpful metaphor for thinking about mobilization is a ladder. The ladder of mobilization has six rungs; the higher one goes, the harder it is to demobilize. The more clearly we understand this ladder, the more prepared we will be to keep people from climbing it and the greater our chances of remaining grounded in the more productive world of generative disagreement.

Rung 1: Blank Beginning

At the lowest rung of the ladder is not hatred but absence, a blank slate before belief has formed. As children, we all exist at this rung, and on some matters, it's where we always stay.

But what happens at this rung can end up being a first cause. Imagine a Christian child asking a Jewish classmate what she got for Christmas, or a teacher scheduling a big test on Yom Kippur. No malice, just non-awareness. In our mobilized society, there is a tendency to treat even innocuous occurrences as slights or worse, as though honest ignorance were some kind of evil. It is easy at this stage to mistake ignorance for hatred. But ignorance is simply the absence of a specific piece of knowledge. Our response should be that you are allowed to not know and you are welcome to explore, not that you should already have this piece of knowledge. Respond to questions, even awkward or bizarre ones, with warmth, openness, humor, and an exploratory tone. This signals that not knowing something is natural. People who feel embarrassed for asking are likely to withdraw or start climbing the ladder. People who feel invited lean in.

At this rung, the goal is to prevent mobilization in the first place.

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an equally totalizing desire for moral victory:
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restraint, surely it is us.

That starts with humanizing the person standing in front of you. Vilify someone's ignorance, and you put him on the defensive. Invite him in instead, and you create a positive foundational experience for him while planting something durable: an initial map of warmth that later vilifying stories about Jews and Israel will have to contradict. The seedling of humanization you plant will grow even in a corrupted soil of antisemitic stories because those stories become harder to absorb. They no longer arrive on empty ground. They collide with a personal experience that does not fit the caricature.

As the psychologist Gordon Allport observed, prejudice weakens when people encounter out-groups as recognizable human beings rather than abstract symbols. My own research with psychologist colleagues at the Psychometrics and Hate Mitigation Lab narrows that further. In the antisemitism context, highlighting Jewish achievements can often backfire, since they signal elitism rather than warmth. Telling someone that Jews should be liked because they have contributed to civilization is like expecting a child to like vegetables because they are healthy. The objective of this rung is not to convince but to cultivate a sense of safe inquiry.

Rung 2: Ambient Absorption

One rung above the blank beginning is ambient absorption, the stage at which loosely held cultural narratives that circulate through

society become adopted in a person's mind. Jews and money. Immigrants and crime. Rural conservatives and ignorance. These associations are often absorbed passively, through media, family, and cultural signals.

At this stage, the belief is not deeply held. It has not yet fused with identity or ego. It is simply the familiar explanation someone has heard before. Shame someone here, and the conversation shifts instantly from learning to self-defense. Take the greedy Jew trope: If someone surveying the American economic scene observes the disproportionate wealth of the Jewish community, a demobilizing intervention might be to acknowledge the accuracy of the observation while offering humanizing context as backstory. Explain that Jews were not allowed to own land and were forced into careers of banking, and that the way history unfolds often lends itself to different religious and ethnic groups having disproportionate representation in different fields for cultural or historical reasons. Or, that, after Jews were exiled, stripped of assets, and banned from professions, financial savvy became a survival skill. This explanation does not ask the person to deny what he thinks he noticed. Or take the sense that Jews are insular and clannish. Explain that for centuries, survival depended on discretion and hiding religion, identity, and assets from anyone who might confiscate, convert, or kill Jews. Neither reframing asks anyone to admit he was racist or even wrong to notice the correlation.

Lee Ross, the Stanford social psychologist, found that misunderstandings often arise from “failures of empathy,” and that attempts at persuasion tend to be blocked by the conviction that one already knows the truth. For these reasons, interventions that disrupt certainty outperform direct confrontation. *‘Huh, that’s funny. What you see is true, but here’s the weird reason it exists’* opens up a conversation in a way that *‘How could you believe that?’* cannot.

The trouble is that what a person says at this rung sounds identical to what he says at higher ones. Same words, same trope, different attachment underneath. Up and down the ladder, the diagnostic is rarely what someone has said but how he holds it.

Someone repeating a trope without much emotional charge is likely still at this rung even if he doesn't know it. Offer context without attacking the person, and if he's open to it, that tells you which rung he's on. If he argues back and resists the reframe, he is higher up, and this rung's approach is no longer sufficient.

The instinct to assume the worst, to hear an ambient script and respond as if the person were already entrenched, risks missing an opportunity to demobilize.

Rung 3: Reality Retreat

The third rung is where the ladder gets steep, driven upward by the energy of mobilization. A person at this rung begins attaching her sense of identity and security to the beliefs she holds. Giving it up can mean losing both.

Someone in reality retreat stops exploring in an open and unencumbered way. She starts filtering or reinterpreting anything that threatens her worldview. A patriot recoils from history that complicates the nation she loves. Someone who will not acknowledge a politician's antisemitic rhetoric is usually protecting something bigger than the political claim: her own moral innocence, political or social belonging, or a stable sense of self. Anything that undermines the belief feels like a personal attack. On lower rungs, attuned framing can keep someone from feeling defensive in the first place. Here, defensiveness is already embedded. People on this rung are not simply resisting an argument; they are defending themselves from information that could destabilize their sense of reality, something all humans naturally resist, given its implications for their survival.

This is where conversion starts reliably backfiring, because the problem is no longer the lack of better information but the psychological cost of accepting that information. Confrontation strengthens the very defenses it needs to dismantle. It also reinforces the person's sense of embattlement, not to mention the rigid binaries from which antisemitism draws: Either Israel or Jews are perfect and

Label someone antisemitic too fast, and that person—who most likely sees herself as committed to justice for all—will simply never take you seriously.

incapable of wrong, or the opposite—they are incapable of good.

At this rung, then, demobilization must operate differently. It does not force reversal. It makes complexity manageable to hold. It starts by affirming the person's values before touching her beliefs. *I know you care deeply about fairness* demonstrates that you see the person as a morally responsible agent, a human being. It places you beside someone rather than standing in opposition.

Once that affirmation lands, belief becomes examinable, and competing-goods reasoning becomes possible. Name the conflict as a tension between two legitimate priorities—security and liberty, compassion and accountability—allowing her to see their various values at play on all sides.

Jewish advocacy has often triggered this rung by shaming opponents without prior relational groundwork. Label someone antisemitic too fast, and that person—who most likely sees herself as committed to justice for all—will simply never take you seriously. You have attacked her moral identity, which is not a way to her heart or mind. She will move further up the ladder if only to get away from what she regards as a false accusation.

Reducing identity threat is the goal at this rung, and it should be a central discipline in all Jewish political communication, not an accident of tone. Leaders should be trained to affirm shared values, safety, dignity, and opportunity before they present a critique. Public humiliation may energize a base, but it hardens the

opposition and creates more enemies than friends. Leaders who do this well are genuinely unthreatened when presented with criticism of Israel. They know and are unfazed by the fact that our side gets some things wrong. This demonstrates moral confidence rather than weakness, proof that loyalty does not require blindness.

Rung 4: Self-Sighted Symbolism

By the fourth rung, the mind starts building. It constructs distortions that make the world feel coherent again. Individuals begin interpreting events through a moral storyline in which they occupy a particular role: the betrayed patriot, the silenced dissenter, the righteous defender. The opposing side is no longer simply mistaken; it becomes an archetype—colonizer, traitor, extremist, oppressor.

Hostility toward Jews or Israel starts doing work. It stabilizes identity. It externalizes grievance. It gives shape to pain.

This is why conspiracy thrives here. There is a villain now, a hidden cause, a story that finally makes sense of amorphous frustration, fear, and despair. Someone who feels helpless and disenfranchised, and therefore comes to see power as fundamentally corrupt, can find in Israel its ultimate symbol. Israel ceases to be a country and becomes a container for everything he hates about power, corruption, and elites. Jews and Israel become the explanation for suffering itself, transforming what feels overwhelming and unknowable into something concrete, personal, and blameworthy. That is the seduction of conspiracy. It replaces an impossibly complicated world with a single, morally satisfying answer: the Jews. Jews and Israelis aren't seen as people at this rung. They are seen as symbols, and a symbol can survive almost anything except emotional connection with an actual person.

Demobilization on this rung begins by acknowledging the underlying frustration or fear that fuels conspiracy narratives, while undermining the narratives themselves. The aim is not to win the argument but to interrupt the narrative's simplicity. So the

task is to separate the underlying fears and grievances from the Jews on whom those fears and grievances are projected. Progress here is quiet. It means moving people away from accusations that *'Israelis are evil'* to assertions such as *'I strongly disagree with Israeli policy.'* It means recognizing that Israel is not the culprit behind the litany of domestic factors fueling public anger—immigration, civil liberties, health care, or economic inequality. That is not a small shift. It is fundamental: the difference between political persuasion and existential legitimacy, between contesting what a government does and contesting whether a people deserve to exist at all. The moment a person is fighting over the former instead of the latter, he is demobilizing, whether he realizes it or not.

Rung 5: Tribal Truth Trap

At this rung, beliefs are sustained not only by the individual psyche but by communities, digital ecosystems, and social environments, where belonging, status, and moral identity are all at play and dependent on others. Doubt now carries real social consequences: humiliation, group exile, loneliness.

What defines the rung is not the belief's origin. It is the addition of collective reinforcement. External pressure, condemnation, and public shaming often strengthen the worldview instead of weakening it, because they confirm the group's self-image as righteous and embattled. Some of the Jewish world's most combative advocacy has unintentionally served the very ecosystems it meant to dismantle, validating the persecution narrative holding them together.

The Kanye West episode is as an example of crystallized failure. When West made openly antisemitic statements in 2022, the response followed the standard template: swift condemnation, corporate severances, wall-to-wall denunciation. Morally, that was appropriate. Strategically, it was costly. The coordinated-looking sequence did not refute the trope about Jewish power in media and finance. For anyone already carrying that narrative loosely,

it illustrated it. And because the condemnation came almost entirely from Jewish organizations rather than respected voices inside West's own community, it was easy to dismiss. Beliefs at this stage are propped up by the group as well as the individual. For that reason, the demobilization at this rung requires the participation of in-group members. A progressive is more reachable by another progressive, a veteran by another veteran. Nuance from within the tribe reads as self-correction. The same message from outside reads as an attack. Insider correction creates the permission structures that outside pressure cannot.

Not everyone in a mobilized community plays the same role: enforcers, amplifiers, peripheral believers, silent skeptics without cover to speak. If you treat them as a mass, the reachable ones get defensive, handing the enforcers the very persecution narrative they wanted. The target is the movable middle.

The task at this rung is to build off-ramps that do not require public defection from the group. Create communities that allow people to hold their convictions while not being ostracized or not going along with extremes.

Rung 6: Dogma Dead End

By the final rung, belief has fused with a person's sense of self, and no amount of complexity, humanization, or expansion can reach that. At lower rungs, mobilization can be interrupted if the need the belief is serving gets met in a different way. At this rung, the belief has replaced the need entirely.

Removing someone from this rung is nearly impossible. It requires something close to ego death. So the task changes. While the earlier rungs asked how to reach the person, this rung asks how to contain him, because people here often function as amplifiers and ideological anchors within mobilizing ecosystems. You are no longer treating the patient. You are managing the outbreak, preventing him from infecting others.

That shift changes who the target is. A person at this level cannot be convinced of anything, so the only thing left to move is how the rungs beneath him see him: not the purest voice in the room, but a hypocrite or a fringe act that no one else is willing to follow that far out. Containment, done well, is more severance than confrontation, cutting him off from the rungs beneath him until he stops being the pacesetter whom other people are racing to keep up with.

The most consequential error is failing to distinguish Dogma Dead End from the rungs below it. Treating those at the lower rungs as though they are on the sixth is a sure way to push them upward, while resources that could fund what works lower down—education, relationships, identity-threat reduction—get spent on spectacle at the top. The same error runs the other direction too: Naming a fringe actor as representative of a movement inflates exactly what that movement wants, and being called the primary opponent of powerful institutions raises his status within the movement's own ecosystem.



One of the most unsettling lessons of the 20th century is just how little separates those who don't march from those who do, and how ordinary the machinery of mobilization can be.

After the Second World War, the American psychiatrist Douglas Kelley was assigned to evaluate the imprisoned Nazi leadership during the Nuremberg Trials. Kelley conducted extensive examinations of figures such as Hermann Göring and the other defendants. In the book he wrote about his analysis, his unnerving conclusion was that, with one exception (the Nazi labor-movement leader Robert Ley), the men tried at Nuremberg were not insane. Under certain social and political conditions, he believed, similar crimes could have emerged anywhere. The book was a flop. At the time, few wanted to believe that the capacity for such evil might exist beyond the defeated regime they had just fought.

But the psychological and social mechanisms that drive mobilized hate are not alien pathologies. They are human instincts, easily activated under sufficient pressure or incentives. Our current political moment has been cooking up those pressures and incentives for years, and the end result is, predictably, the mobilization we see all around us. Antisemitism is perennial, but mobilization need not be. The ladder of mobilization works just as well as one of demobilization. It teaches us how to live inside an unjust world, and how to make it at least safer, one rung at a time. *

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What Donors Should Know About Universities

Think like an academic



HE post-October 7 reckoning in American higher education began mere hours after the attack. While the blood was still drying in Kfar Aza, a coalition of more than 30 Harvard student organizations published a joint statement holding “the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence.” In the days to come, the surface cracked open. At Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, named for a Jewish philanthropist, a professor in a mandatory introductory course referred to the school’s benefactors as “wealthy white capitalists” who “laundered” “blood money.” Other Jewish students at Columbia would be told to “go back to Poland.” Their peers downtown at Cooper Union were trapped in a library by an angry mob. Across the country, at Stanford, a lecturer in an introductory core course told Jewish and Israeli students to identify themselves, take their belongings, and stand in a corner. At least one UCLA professor would later be accused of referring to the state regents as “a bunch of Jewish pigs.”

How did institutions from coast to coast, generously supported for generations by American Jews at levels far exceeding their proportion of the population, come to produce this hate and exhibit it so vividly? The answer many donors have reached for is a story about ingratitude, ideological capture, or the radicalization of the faculty. Each of those contains some truth. But they do not provide the most useful answer. That requires an understanding of how universities operate and where power resides.

Donors from the private sector who have supported modern research universities have tried to pull levers that would move a corporation. Most have been unpleasantly surprised to find that universities, despite being corporations, do not behave like corporations.

The two of us arrive at the question of how to understand the drivers of institutional change from different directions. One of us has spent a career inside the American research university, leading two institutions over three decades. The other has spent his career looking at institutions from the outside, as a private equity investor and former management consultant whose work turns on the question of how organizations behave when their stated purposes collide with their incentives. We do not agree on everything. But we both see clearly that the relationship between the American university and its many Jewish supporters is broken and that repairing it will require both sides to think differently about how philanthropic support effects change and how long it takes.

The work of Jewish philanthropy now is to give differently and to accept that reshaping institutions of higher learning runs on a horizon measured in generations rather than news cycles.



For as long as there have been American universities, they have been chartered as corporations. Hence the temptation to think of them in corporate terms, particularly for donors whose mental model of an institution is the company they built, bought, or led.

A corporation has a chief executive, a board that hires and fires him or her, a chain of command through which decisions flow, and shareholders whose interests the whole enterprise is meant to serve. Invest capital, the thinking goes, and you become something akin to a shareholder with certain governance and information rights.

But inside the academy, almost nobody thinks about the institution this way. The self-understanding of a research university, beginning with the faculty, is that of a polity: a quasi-sovereign “republic of scholars” where authority flows upward from the faculty (who alone possess the legitimacy and the right to weigh in on its internal affairs) rather than downward from the governing board.

The lineage runs deep. American universities’ European forebears grew from two medieval institutions: self-governing guilds (monopolistic, exclusionary, and self-perpetuating by design, where only existing masters could elevate a new one) and ecclesiastical bodies such as cathedral chapters and monasteries, which sat in a liminal space just beyond the reach of the secular ruler. The Latin terms *collegium* and *universitas* were used to refer to these associations of peers.

The republic of scholars took legal form in 1200, after a tavern brawl at the University of Paris left students dead. A dispute ensued between the city and the university masters over which had the jurisdiction to discipline students, with the professors closing ranks and threatening to leave the city. To retain them, King Philip II issued a royal charter that exempted professors, students, and staff from secular jurisdiction. The template quickly spread across Europe, and its vestiges survived for centuries. It was only in 1977 that Parliament abolished the civil jurisdiction of Oxford and Cambridge under which scholars were subject to the university’s own courts rather than the courts of the realm.

The precise legal arrangement may have never crossed the Atlantic, but the cultural reflex certainly did. After protesters were cleared out of Columbia University’s Hamilton Hall in April 2024, Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg dropped the criminal charges on the understanding that the university would discipline them

internally. About a week earlier, a group of mostly young Google employees had occupied part of the company's offices in Manhattan's Chelsea district to protest Google's contract with the Israeli government. They were arrested that day for criminal trespass. Apparently, it did not occur to Bragg to suggest that Google's corporate HR was better positioned to discipline them. The university was still being treated as a liminal space beyond the ordinary reach of law in a way that applies to no other type of institution.

One practical legacy of this inheritance is that top-down corporate control at research universities is essentially a fiction, at least as far as the faculty are concerned. The university's self-conception as a center of research and learning derives from the faculty. A faculty member has no "boss" in the traditional sense of the word. (In most cases, he or she is appointed, tenured, and accountable to the governing board rather than a department chair, dean, provost, or president.) Their most important colleagues are their departmental and disciplinary peers, who wield decisive power over their tenure and promotion. Once tenured, they cannot be dismissed absent extraordinary misconduct or financial exigency.

One of us can confirm from direct experience that a university president who tries to lean on a tenured faculty member will be reminded, politely but firmly, that the faculty member was here before the president arrived and expects to be here after the president leaves. In this sense, a president is something closer to the managing partner of a law firm than a CEO of a corporation. The managing partner can cajole, persuade, mediate between, and jaw-bone other partners, who are professional peers, not subordinates. But he cannot order them around.

This structure of individual autonomy is the strength of the university. Combined with the protections of tenure from retaliation, and the resources of the postwar federal research partnership, it created the most successful knowledge enterprise in history.

In a healthier era, the features of this enterprise would support, nurture, and protect scholars of all backgrounds. But they have a

consequence that donors do not always absorb: The normal tools of corporate influence, the ones that work so well in every other institution that a major donor has ever touched, do not work here. Directives are ignored. Ultimatums produce martyrs. Even a polite expression of concern, if framed in the “wrong” terms or expressed through the “wrong” channel, is experienced as a violation of intellectual autonomy, and resisted on principle. Over a thousand years of storied history, the university has developed powerful institutional antibodies against perceptions of outside meddling.



This is the point at which a lot of donors run into a wall. Having discovered that only very limited strings can be attached to their giving, they conclude that nothing can change and that the only options left are to walk away or to escalate into open confrontation. But they discount the one lever that is at their disposal: incentives.

Universities have every reason to tell their supporters that their ways of working are too ancient, too mysterious, too otherworldly to be understood by outsiders, and certainly too enigmatic for outsiders to play any constructive part in. The cultivated mystique is itself a defense mechanism: Please give us money, don't ask too many questions, and leave us alone.

But the reality is more prosaic. Like any other human institution, universities are governed by incentives and norms. Unusual ones, to be sure, but perfectly legible to anyone who has ever run an organization.

Two in particular matter most. The first is the prestige hierarchy. Past a certain level, compensation in the academy within disciplines is relatively flat, at least compared with the private sector. What drives behavior is recognition, publication, citation, peer esteem, invitations to give keynote addresses at major conferences, prizes on a résumé. A scholar's standing among the 50 or so people in the world who work on the same problems is worth more to her than anything a dean or provost can offer.

The second is a fierce defense of autonomy. Academia is, among other things, a labor-sorting mechanism. Those who self-select into a life of the mind forgo more lucrative careers in part because they need to feel that their intellectual choices are their own. Any intervention that threatens that feeling will be rejected on principle, regardless of its merits.

Understanding these two forces is the beginning of a theory of university influence. The donors who learn to work within the prestige hierarchy and the autonomy requirement, rather than against them, are the ones who will reshape the institution.

Research that one of us has published at the American Enterprise Institute's Center for the Future of the American University shows that over the past few decades, a handful of foundations have built a far-reaching influence architecture on exactly this premise, and they have aimed it squarely at the fields that shape culture. The strategy deserves respect and invites careful study, whatever one thinks of its direction.

So what are these fields? They are the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Decades of hiring, funding, and promotion flowing (mostly) in one direction have produced departments where certain questions are pursued and others are not. The problem is not that progressive scholars hold the positions they hold. They should, and much of their work is valuable. The problem is that the absence of genuine intellectual competition narrows the range of questions that scholars in a field are willing to ask. The joint Vanderbilt–Washington University “Report on the State of Scholarship in the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences” cited the existence in certain fields of a “toxic intellectual climate in which reasonable dissent on politically charged topics is routinely suppressed and punished.” A field that cannot seriously engage perspectives held by large portions of the public it serves has a credibility problem that will eventually become a funding problem.

In addition, the American higher education system uniquely values the liberal arts core as a foundation of an undergraduate

education, regardless of later specialization. Undergraduate programs, because of their history and residential experience, occupy a disproportionate footprint in the popular imagination. However strongly alumni feel about the culture of their alma mater, they can probably accept that it's not set by the dental school. A prospective computer science or physics major is just as likely to encounter an English or history professor in his first week of classes as he is anyone in his intended field, thanks to core-curriculum requirements. To illustrate this outsize influence on culture, consider that in 2024—the year of the encampments—Columbia University's Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies tallied just four majors out of its flagship undergraduate college's graduating class of 1,247.

These are also the fields where relatively small amounts of money go furthest. Mellon, Ford, MacArthur, Open Society, and roughly 20 other foundations together provide more than 70 percent of disclosed U.S. private-foundation funding for the humanities, arts, and social sciences. In 2023, this totaled roughly \$1.2 billion, a minuscule 0.16 percent of the \$772 billion total revenue pool in American higher education. Instead, the vast majority of sponsored funding, amounting to more than \$60 billion a year, goes to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects.

With non-STEM fields starving for cash, small and well-timed grants (particularly in critical or catalytic career-transition points) can and do have outsize impact. A fully funded two-year postdoc can get a prospective faculty member's foot in the door. And for an assistant professor, \$200,000 can be life-changing: It buys out teaching for a year, enables her to finish her first book, and smoothes the path to tenure. In contrast, a \$200,000 donation hardly warrants a breakfast meeting at a medical school, where a single federally funded lab could consume \$10–20 million a year. This stark asymmetry is what makes philanthropic influence in these disciplines so feasible.

Foundations that have already recognized this dynamic are the ones with the greatest impact today. Given the absolute scarcity

of external funding in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, a sliver of a sliver, placed correctly, bends a field. And those doing the placement act with restraint. They do not tell scholars what to study. Such a transgression would trigger backlash. They define (with input, or at least the convincing appearance of input, from the field) what is fundable, and in a field where no one else is funding much of anything, the definition does the rest.

In other words, the scholar who adjusts her research agenda to match the available grant is making a rational choice shaped by incentives, and the choice was genuinely her own. Meanwhile, the funder is perfectly well aware of, and is likely pleased with, the outcome. Everyone wins.

For a Jewish donor community that cares about the fields where the fight over Israel, antisemitism, and the modern Jewish experience is actually being fought, such as history, political science, international relations, and psychology, the operational implication is almost embarrassing in its simplicity: A small amount of money can go a long way. The difficulty is not the check but rather the duration. Faculty make rational choices about incentives, and they correctly discount episodic giving; no junior scholar will build a career around a funding stream that may vanish before her tenure review. What changes behavior is duration, or the credible expectation of recurring (even if conditional) support.

This is where the generational horizon matters. A Ph.D. student writing her dissertation as you read this in 2026 may still be teaching in 2066, and along the way, she will do more than produce her own work. She will train the doctoral students who absorb her methodology, and, in time, she will sit on the search committees, tenure reviews, and editorial boards that constitute the prestige hierarchy itself. The first cohort a donor supports will review the second and hire the third. Their influence is a multigenerational cascade.

There is a hurdle that must be acknowledged. The foundations that built this influence architecture were pushing on an open door. The scholars they supported studied topics that the gatekeepers in

these disciplines already approved. That same prestige hierarchy will create friction for a scholar whose work disrupts a field's settled assumptions. This makes the work of building a career outside the intellectual bandwagon harder and slower, but not impossible.

The goal is not to counter-capture these fields for a different orthodoxy but to restore the contest of ideas to fields that have stopped having one. Ideological capture is the disease, whoever the captor. The test of whether a person actually believes that is simple: whether the capture alarms them in only one direction.



So how should funders adjust their strategies? They should begin by following these five giving principles.

First, make peace with overhead costs—it is a necessity for the small-scale, highly distributed funding that can influence change. The instinct of most donors is to press program ratios as high as possible and to treat administrative spending as waste. That instinct is almost exactly wrong for influence in the academy. Close diligence and oversight are part of the strategy, and a foundation will build influence by deploying relatively small amounts to resource-deprived fields, in a time-limited way, tightly scoped to specific projects and faculty, monitoring them closely.

The data show that the average size of a foundation grant in the humanities, arts, and social sciences is under \$300,000. Such funding is always time-limited, the implication being that if the work drifts from the funder's priorities, the grants need not be renewed. Small, targeted grants tied to scholar-level incentives require serious program officers, serious due diligence, and serious post-award monitoring, all of which cost money. After all, it takes roughly the same amount of time and effort to source, perform due diligence on, administer, and monitor a \$300,000 grant as it does a \$3 million grant—creating a natural incentive for efficiency-minded funders to cluster their grant-making to fields that can absorb larger

grants, while leaving the highest-leverage fields under-served precisely because attending to them is so time- and labor-intensive.

Second, rethink perpetual endowments. With the exception of genuinely neutral use cases such as need-based financial aid, perpetuity creates structural and open-ended risks of mission drift if not corruption. It hands control to unknown stewards whose intentions in 50 years cannot be discerned today. Rather than endowing perpetual chairs, the foundations that have appropriate structures should consider long-term pledges of “endowment equivalents,” such as covering a chair’s annual costs for five or 10 years at a time, subject to renewal procedures. This mechanism would guarantee the stability of long-term support but incentivize a more faithful and continuous alignment with donor intent.

Nor should foundations themselves be exempt from periodic examination. Foundation professionals should be evaluated frequently, lest they confuse mission stewardship with personal advocacy. The cautionary tale every donor knows and too few internalize is the Ford Foundation: The drift of its entrenched professional management away from the pro-capitalist, if otherwise flawed, values of its founding family and toward a certain conception of social justice became so pronounced that Henry Ford II resigned from its board in 1976 in a letter that should be required reading in every donor orientation.

The now-shuttered John M. Olin Foundation is the proof of concept of these first two points. It spent three decades providing modest grants and fellowships for law and economics scholars who had to survive peer review in hostile faculties, and the result was a generational shift in American legal thought. The needle was moved by careful curation, not overwhelming volume, along with the mere creation of options and support structures where none existed. And then it spent itself down and sunsetted within 25 years of its founder’s death as a safeguard against mission drift and professional capture.

Third, adopt the language of the academy. The foundations that have been most effective at shaping scholarship are the ones that

describe their work in the vocabulary the academy already uses: competitive grants, peer review, fellowships, prizes, conferences. Their program officers are “familiar faces,” often former faculty or faculty on leave, who are seen as peers, not adversaries. And they do it quietly, often with little pomp and circumstance.

Contrast this with the dominant register of donor reaction since October 7, which has been loud, public, and often contemptuous of the university itself. The anger forced a reckoning that quieter methods never did. But while anger can get a university’s attention, it does not change the underlying incentives of what gets taught and rewarded.

Fourth, and hardest, accept that you will always be at least one step removed from the outcome. Donors who are heavy-handed in their interventions, such as attempting to make or veto faculty appointments, trigger the institutional antibodies into overdrive and are swiftly shown the door. Investing in relationships with the unsung deans and department chairs (who appoint search and tenure-review committees) is a more reliable and replicable path. Along with adopting the language of the academy, today’s reformers should translate their feedback into a form that can be accepted and absorbed.

Finally, collaborate and align. The foundations that support the humanities, arts, and social sciences often coordinate priorities, share due diligence, divide fields of responsibility, and exchange personnel. Think burden-sharing rather than jealous gatekeeping. Scholars who pursue ideas outside the prevailing orthodoxy still need the validation of peer review to succeed and, by implication, a thriving body of peer reviewers who are eager to engage with their work. The scale required is smaller than most donors assume.

American higher education received roughly \$23 billion in private grants, gifts, and contracts in 2023. To match the largest player’s annual footprint in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, a coordinated donor vehicle would need to redirect less than 1 percent of that flow. The obstacle is not resources but absence of a shared table where donors who care about the same problem

can pool their knowledge, align their grant-making, and hold one another accountable to the discipline the work requires.



The Exodus story is one of the most powerful narratives of a people emerging out of darkness toward freedom, and it carries two warnings. The first is that every generation must learn the lessons of freedom anew; it takes only one generation of forgetting for a civilization to die. Young people cheering for terrorists and chanting “death to America” suggest that we are uncomfortably close to that tipping point. The second is that the journey to freedom took 40 years of wandering in the desert, and the price of entry into the Promised Land was that the prior generation had to pass first.

This is how the university became what it is today, and it’s how the university will become what it is tomorrow and the day after. The donors who faithfully supported the universities that failed them in 2023 were not wrong to be generous. They were wrong about the methods, the destinations, and the horizon.

In fields defined by scarcity, concentration creates power, and power shapes culture. Those who wish to influence that culture must first reckon with how it was formed and then commit to the generational timeline on which it can be remade. As Rabbi Tarfon once taught, “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it” (Pirkei Avot 2:16). If you are reading this, you are not short of vision, courage, or clarity about the problem. Be the ones to lead us out of this desert. *

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DEPARTURES



JENNA WEISSMAN JOELIT

Jewish Masterpiece: *Judaism as a Civilization*

Mordecai M. Kaplan's reconstruction



HERE HAD NEVER been a book quite like it. From its mouthful of a title to the density of its 500-plus pages forested with footnotes, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* packed a wallop, every page sung with passion. A mix of res-

ignation and optimism, sober assessment and lively imagination, this 1934 publication was one of the signal contributions of Mordecai M. Kaplan, arguably the most creative, if not the most controversial, of American Jewish religious personalities of the 20th century. It chided and cajoled, challenged and encouraged 20th-century American Jews to embrace their identity, to go full throttle rather than be recessive, apologetic Jews. Or, as its self-styled theological maverick of an author once inventively put it: Be “plus Jews,” not “minus Jews.” Live a “maximum” Jewish life. Enlarge rather than diminish Judaism’s presence in modern

America. Welcome change. And don't give in or retreat in the face of antisemitism.

Far more than the sum of its admonitions, *Judaism as a Civilization* also stunned. In a dramatic reversal of received wisdom, it argued that while modernity for the Jew as an individual was a boon, for the Jew qua Jew, it was a disaster. “Before the beginning of the nineteenth century,” went its electrifying first sentence, “all Jews regarded Judaism as a privilege; since then, most Jews have come to regard it as a burden.” And with that pronouncement, Kaplan was off and running.



Marshalling his arguments, arraying the facts as if compiling a legal brief, he wrote of a modern Judaism on the precipice of disappearance; of an allegiance to one's ancestral faith so attenuated that it was hanging by a thread; of an American Jewish landscape fractured by division and buckling under the weight of so many duplicative organizations that it seemed likely to “disintegrate.” And there was more. From where Kaplan sat, sentimentality had supplanted literacy, occasional participation had replaced steadfast commitment, and Judaism had so completely lost its hold on the Jewish body politic that it was unlikely to ever regain it unless drastic measures — his own — were taken.

By the time the book's chastened readers were nearly one-third of the way through, many were probably tempted to put it down. Kaplan's wounding observations, born of firsthand experience as a longtime congregational rabbi and educator, were hard to absorb; they wore one out. Had his audience stopped reading around page 169, his enduring contribution — the heart of the book — would have been lost. Those who kept going were rewarded. Amid its sharp edges they found a bracing, even comforting counter-narrative: a novel understanding of identity and an equally novel format, soon to be named Reconstructionism, in which to practice it.

Unlike Reform, which, Kaplan maintained, threw out too much of tradition in its accommodation to the modern world, and Orthodoxy, which threw out too little, his affirmative vision of Jewish life offered an alternative perspective: democratic, forward-looking, balanced, propelled by choice, open to but not bound by tradition or Jewish law, and fueled by lots of new words—*folkways*, *sancta*, *group consciousness*, and, of course, *reconstruction*—and the tools to deploy them. The “solution of the problem of Judaism,” he explained, “must be a philosophy that discerns

an organic connection among the experiences and needs of Jewry, its dispersion and its diversity, its past and its future, its religious commitments, its manifold expressions, its many traits and tendencies, its need for self-adjustment and its prerogative to mold environment.

Kaplan’s reimagined and reconfigured Jewish universe had no room for coercion or guilt, much less sin. An exercise in latitude, it dispensed with the denominational scaffolding characteristic of American Jewry, along with the understanding of Judaism as a faith, with its adherents exclusively a religious entity. Despite, or perhaps because of, his rabbinic education, this Jewish Theological Seminary-trained clergyman drew instead on the more elastic, capacious armature of “civilization,” whose adherents formed a “distinct social” grouping, a “community of feeling” with ample room for “all who want to remain Jews, whatever the reason or the motive be.”

Elaborating further, Kaplan put it this way:

Some basis of creative unity among Jews has to be found that will not require anyone to surrender his convictions, or to do violence to his conscience. Such a basis, it would seem, can be found in the conception of Judaism as a civilization, because that conception allows for diversity of belief and practice, for

To define Judaism exclusively as a form of religious expression confined it to a tiny corner of the modern world where, Kaplan declared, it lived unhealthily, ‘pruned and clipped.’

all forms of socially useful activity and all types of group association, without in any way impairing the organic character of Jewish life.

Lest anyone remain in the dark as to what Kaplan had in mind, he spelled it out: “It is imperative, therefore, to find outlets other than religion for the collective life of the Jewish people. *Paradoxical as it may sound, the spiritual regeneration of the Jewish people demands that religion cease to be its sole preoccupation*” (Kaplan’s italics).

Kaplan’s formulation expanded the limits of what it meant to be Jewish in 20th-century America, turning the age-old definition on its head. To define Judaism exclusively as a form of religious expression confined it to a tiny corner of the modern world where, Kaplan declared, it lived unhealthily, “pruned and clipped.” To define it as a civilization of which religion was but one component alongside ethics, history, a “place in the sun,” movement and gesture, food, aesthetics, language, and literature rendered it “habitable.” As a civilization, Judaism was “not a form of truth, but a form of life.”

Once its circumference expanded, so, too, did its portfolio. Reconstructionism trained its sights on the present: economic justice, the “betterment of the social order,” as well as Zionism or nationhood. Kaplan, writing well before the Holocaust, saw the last of these as more of a cultural than a political or territorial

phenomenon, a “call of the spirit.” Kaplan’s panacea didn’t so much break with the past or conserve its traditions as boldly reconstruct or realign Jewish priorities in the here and now of modern America, redefining the synagogue, for instance, both as a center of sociability and a house of worship, an institution that would attract Jews at leisure as well as at prayer: a *bet am*, a house of the people, he called it.

Were all that not enough to shake things up, *Judaism as a Civilization* also served as a resolutely modern “how to” ritual compendium. Inspired by Maimonides, Kaplan first envisioned his own compilation as a traditional guidebook, an homage to the medieval philosopher, and titled it *Whither Judaism?* In 1904, then in his early twenties, he confided in his diary that, with “G’s help,” he had big plans, among them “writing a work which shall be a kind of *Guide to the Perplexed*.” By the time it came into being, decades later, the text bore a new title and, most especially, a distinctive, even idiosyncratic tone. Historically, Jewish prescriptive literature ranging from the *Guide to the Perplexed* to the *Shulchan Arukh*, the authoritative 16th-century code, insisted on compliance with Jewish ritual, which it defined as obligatory, a given, nonnegotiable. Kaplan’s version was gentler, softer, pliant. Construing ritual as an opportunity, it encouraged, rather than demanded, fidelity.

Insights, aperçus, observations, and recommendations sit confidently on the page, making it hard to believe that *Judaism as a Civilization* was a very long time in coming. So long, in fact, that in early 1934, when Kaplan, by then in his fifties, finally submitted the manuscript to his publisher, he wondered whether he was 15 or 20 years too late.



It wasn’t as if he hadn’t beat the drum for his radical ideas and circulated them well before putting them between the covers of a book. Throughout the late 1910s and 1920s, Kaplan took to the road,

giving speeches throughout the country to Jewish women's groups, brotherhood forums, synagogues, and rabbinical associations on his newfangled notions of community, belonging, and ritual behavior, in the hope of winning adherents to Reconstructionism as a sensibility, a "way of talking." An excellent orator who relished words and drew large crowds—he noted in his diary the substantial size of his audience and the extent to which they seemed to cotton (or not) to what he had to say—the peripatetic rabbi eventually tired of speechmaking. Its impact, he realized, was short-lived, likely to dissipate much like water rolling off a duck's back.

Mindful of these limitations and determined to place his program of revitalization on a much more secure footing, Kaplan took to writing articles, publishing them in highbrow American Jewish magazines such as the *Menorah Journal*, at the time the community's leading journal of arts and letters. Their titles were bold—"How May Judaism Be Saved?" was one, "A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism," another—and their contents bolder. They created a stir and made him a household name. "The ship of Judaism is bound to be wrecked upon the dangerous shoals towards which it is drifting unless we immediately take hold of the helm and try to steer it to safety," Kaplan glumly predicted, offering his own "program for the reconstruction of Judaism" as a lifeboat.

No matter how hard-hitting, galvanizing, or inflammatory, a series of articles, he knew, was not enough to save Judaism or American Jews. Fired by a sense of urgency, undeterred by controversy (one of the *Menorah Journal* articles had a hand in costing him his position as rabbi of Manhattan's Jewish Center), and buoyed by the conviction that he had all the answers, Kaplan was determined to write a full-length account that would bring every one of his propositions into the light, translate them into being, and guide the way. Besides, *Judaism as a Civilization* would burnish his laurels: It would be Kaplan's calling card within both the academic and wider world.

Despite the best of intentions, the creation of a manifesto-cum-roadmap, a volume that combined the philosophical with

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the programmatic, the historical with the sociological, eluded him, leaving its would-be author frustrated, downhearted, and prone to second-guessing. What took Kaplan so long? Self-doubt, for one. Within the interior landscape of his diaries, which he scrupulously kept for 70 years, feelings of writerly inferiority, of being “deficient in the mental qualities necessary to clear and effective writing,” filled the page. “Had I possessed a facile pen or an eloquent tongue I would have dared Satan himself,” he said, selling himself short.

Now and again, Kaplan wondered—though not for very long—whether American Jews, as stiff-necked and stubborn a people as their ancient ancestors, would ever be truly receptive to his innovative conceits. Or would they cling to the familiar, the outworn, and the “reactionary,” momentarily chilling his enthusiasm for publicizing them?

His difficulty in writing the book was also a function of the inordinately busy life that this most engaged of Jewish communal leaders led, seeding his ideas hither and yon, as he shuttled between the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the Manhattan congregation he founded in 1922 and led for decades; the Jewish Theological Seminary, where, for half a century, he taught homiletics and religious philosophy to rabbinical students while also serving for decades as dean of its Teachers Institute; and Zionist affairs, in which he was a steadfast and active participant, attending frequent rounds of meetings, drafting resolutions, and working

with The Hebrew University. There were not enough hours in the day in which to sit quietly and spin sentences; nights spent burning the midnight oil or leisurely summers writing by the sea and in the mountains were not enough to compensate for the time consumed by communal pursuits.

Eventually, though, things came together, enabling Kaplan to transcend his personal limitations, overcome his temporal constraints, and produce this whale of a book. Eagerly anticipated, its first printing sold out almost immediately, setting American Jewry abuzz. Pungent adjectives and fiery nouns saturated the air as the community's different segments voiced their respective positions.

Kaplan's champions cheered the book, commending its "fierce honesty" and "surgical precision." Orthodox Jewry pronounced it a "menace" and warned that it was "dangerous." Reform Jews took it to task for its "demotion" of the "high and exalted" role of religion. Secular Jews, in turn, thought it overstuffed with "God-speak." Zionist Jews rebuked it for minimizing the significance of sovereignty; non-Zionist Jews said it was "barnacled" with too much "statecraft." Still other American Jews applauded the diagnosis but thought the cure fell wide of the mark and would "not work in the American environment." Everyone had something to say. The raft of responses only confirmed Kaplan's analysis of a community adrift, riven by boundaries rather than rooted in common ground.



Judaism as a Civilization carries the signal distinction of being a text that is not only a reflection of its time but also an index to our own. In the years following its publication, Kaplan fretted over the book's fate, anxious lest it gather dust on a library shelf. The staying power of Reconstructionism, especially its twin intellectual and emotional pillars of civilization and peoplehood, also kept him up nights worrying that its contribution to modern Jewish life would remain either a one-generation phenomenon or, worse,

a marginal one. Writing in 1970 to Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a cherished colleague and former student, he ruefully acknowledged that, as a movement, “Reconstructionism has had something of an impact on Jewish life in terms of self-concern and social concern,” but its effect on “social engineering,” on influencing the behavior of American Jews, was negligible.

Fretting about the impact of Reconstructionism was one thing, but Kaplan need not have worried about the reception of the book. Subsequent generations of American Jews, including many leading lights outside of the Reconstructionist movement, among them Professor Arnold Eisen, a former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, have hailed *Judaism as a Civilization* as a “rare book...still capable of igniting debate and stimulating insight in a very different age.” Ninety-two years after first being published, the volume continues to be read, consulted, taught, and discussed wherever Jewish history, culture, philosophy, and practice find a home.

More strikingly still, Kaplan’s vocabulary, much less his way of seeing, is continuously invoked these days and critical to our understanding of the contemporary Jewish experience. It’s not just that American Jewish thought leaders across the board, when pressed to account for the most generative and influential of 20th-century American Jewish personalities, are apt to place Kaplan high on their list. It’s that his ideas have become the ground of our being. When modern-day American Jews at the grass roots, as well as their leaders, refer ringingly and often to “Jewish civilization,” embrace the porousness of post-denominationalism, celebrate a bat mitzvah (Kaplan held the first one, in 1922, for his eldest daughter, Judith), relate more to Israeli culture than to the State of Israel, and evoke the power of peoplehood, they are conjuring Mordecai M. Kaplan. They just don’t know it. Or explicitly acknowledge his influence. Kaplan’s consciousness has become our own.

Once again, American Jews have lost their way. For the first time since the 1930s and 1940s, contemporary American Jewry is as fractured and destabilized as were its forebears just before

World War II. Back then, *Judaism as a Civilization* was at the ready: admonishing, clarifying, exhorting, and reminding earlier generations of American Jews—who, like us, were very much in need of reminding—of the malleability of Jewish tradition and thought, the consolations of connectedness, the allure of resilience, and, above all, the imperative of having faith in the Jewish people.

Judaism as a Civilization, this thick stew of a book, is once again at the ready. With a steadying hand, Kaplan's words reassure us that the atomization, chaos, emotional baggage, and diversity characteristic of modern Jewish identity in 2026 are neither a burden nor a death knell but a life force. *

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Letters

Readers respond

The letters below respond to our (Fixing) America issue of Spring 2026. Additional letters can be found on sapijournal.org/letters. We welcome your responses to the current issue at letters@sapijournal.org.

To the Editor:



EIHAN Salam wrote a brilliant and brave essay analyzing two ideological tendencies in the American Muslim community. Most enlightening perhaps was his explanation for seemingly contradictory beliefs held by the Third Worldists. The example of “Queers for Palestine” is illustrative.

Sadly, the article veers into whataboutism when it compares the Third Worldist American Muslims to the radical Jews of the 1920s and '30s. A comprehensive analysis will reveal that this comparison is rather superficial. For starters, the core of Jewish radicals was made up of immigrants from Eastern Europe who were reacting to the dire poverty that most Jews in the era suffered from. That stands in stark contrast to the wealthy, educated first-generation Muslim Third Worldists. Jewish radicalism, representing no more than 10–15 percent of the community, extinguished itself over time, as first- and second-generation Jews realized the American

Dream. They raised themselves above the business and educational prejudice that was rampant then and assimilated, becoming civic-minded Americans. Finally, acts of violence and “civic terrorism” were decidedly rare.

So while both immigrant groups flirted with radical ideologies, the cultural, economic, behaviors, and historical contexts are quite different.

CARY C. SCHWARTZBACH
Fairfax, Virginia



To the Editor:



AVID Wolpe’s distinction between spirituality and religion is especially important. Spirituality can remain a feeling. Religion disciplines feeling through practice, community, ritual, sacrifice, and obligation.

It asks us not merely to admire virtue but to perform it.

But this raises a further question. Religion forms people, yet it does not always form them for freedom. Religious traditions have cultivated humility and service, but they have also justified coercion, hierarchy, exclusion, and political supremacy. The public need is therefore not simply for “more religion,” but for forms of religious life capable of producing morally serious people who also accept equal citizenship, freedom of conscience, and constitutional limits on what any community may impose on others.

Religious institutions must also confront why so many people ceased to trust them. Any religious humbling of America must include a humbling of religion itself: acknowledgment of hypocrisy, abuse, political capture, and failures of moral authority.

Wolpe has nevertheless identified the indispensable problem. A free society cannot survive on freedom alone. It requires institutions that teach citizens that not everything permitted is admirable, that life is received rather than wholly self-created,

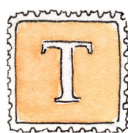
and that liberty carries obligations to others and to the world we inherit.

The challenge now is to recover moral formation without recovering religious domination.

ALLEN ZEESMAN

Querétaro, Mexico

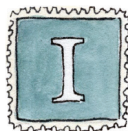
David Wolpe responds:



HANKS to Allen Zeesman for this thoughtful response. Religion is a force multiplier, and when it is thoughtless or cruelly motivated, it can be destructive. Its greater aims endure, however, and I agree that a self-reckoning is both important and in the very nature of faith.



To the Editor:



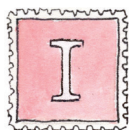
RETIRED last year from a career spent in cybersecurity working with the intelligence community and most of the armed services. I therefore agree with much of what Anne Neuberger says on Jews needing to view a badge and a security clearance as forms of *kiddush Hashem* (a sanctification of God's name). At the same time, I am disappointed that she does not discuss the fact that so many of those conducting background investigations for government agencies are biased against anyone having a connection to Israel—whether it's having relatives there visiting (even, say, on Birthright) or any other tie. I myself failed to get certain clearances because of this issue. This dates from way before September 11 and is all owing to the antisemitic diatribe that Jews have dual loyalties.

While I heard through the grapevine of minyanim at the National Security Agency, I found no equivalent elsewhere. Nor,

with some exceptions, were there meaningful opportunities for Jewish employees to gather to observe holidays, Yom HaShoah, and other important occasions. If Jews, and especially Orthodox Jews, are to be encouraged to enter government service, they must know that, like any other racial or ethnic group, they will have the chance to demonstrate pride in their faith tradition as well as in what they do for the defense of the United States.

DORON BECKER
Potomac, Maryland

Anne Neuberger responds:



THANK Doron Becker for his service. I wrote about my own experiences, which have not included the difficult ones he cites in his letter. At the NSA, we had an annual Hanukkah celebration and a Yom HaShoah event (at which I spoke one year). The NSA also moved their family day to Sunday when I noted that Shabbat-observant Jews couldn't attend family day if it was on Saturday. With that said, I have heard of individuals with connections to Israel who have faced obstacles in getting security clearances. I would note that in certain cases, it's hard to know whether it comes from a legitimate counterintelligence concern or bias.

I met with Jewish intelligence officers at another intelligence agency who described their challenging experiences as Jews. Their concerns seemed credible to me, and I flagged them for that agency's leadership at the time. So Mr. Becker's final point is well taken. *

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JON POLIN is the husband of Rachel and the father of Hershele, Lebbie, and Orly. Prior to October 7, he was a tech entrepreneur.

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וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת
רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבָנֵת הַסִּפִּיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטֹהַר:

— שמות כד:י

Right-wing influencers are either insufficiently radical, like Carlson, or too small, like Fuentes, to greatly move public attitudes on Jews or Israel.

ERIC P. KAUFMANN • 18

Empathy, a bias for appropriate action, and unity are not partisan issues. These are human virtues that we all must consistently demand of ourselves and our leaders, despite our healthy political differences.

JON POLIN • 64

I was constantly frustrated that the community's representatives were seemingly blind to where they could have real influence in our increasingly fractured society: by becoming the community promoting a truly nonsectarian vision for a rapidly transforming Britain.

BEN JUDAH • 78

For most moms and dads, the demands are simple: They want to make sure their kids are reading books and learning math and that they aren't targeted by antisemitism.

NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY • 112

When modern-day American Jews at the grass roots, as well as their leaders, refer ringingly and often to 'Jewish civilization,' embrace the porousness of post-denominationalism, celebrate a bat mitzvah, relate more to Israeli culture than to the State of Israel, and evoke the power of peoplehood, they are conjuring Mordecai M. Kaplan. They just don't know it.

JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT • 156