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# FLEISHER: The Clash Of American Liberal Jewry And Israeli Nationalism



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The recent landslide election of Benjamin Netanyahu and the ascendancy of the Israeli Right has deepened the rift between Israeli and American Jews — the latter of whom disproportionately identify with the political Left.

Days after the Israeli election, nine leading American liberal Jewish groups sent a letter to the American president they hate so much and worked so hard to prevent his becoming a president. In it, they urged Trump to preserve the "two-state solution" in the face of a pledge by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to annex the so-called "West Bank" territory, also known as Judea and Samaria.

Four ostensibly pro-Israel Jewish Democrats — Reps. Eliot Engel and Nita Lowey of New York, Ted Deutch of Florida, and Brad Schneider of Illinois — released a similar letter warning Israel not to annex parts of Judea and Samaria because, yet again, such a move would endanger the two-state solution.

And in an article days after Netanyahu's election, Daniel Sokatch, the CEO of the ultra-liberal umbrella group New Israel Fund, wrote:

A move to annex the occupied territories would corrode Israel's international standing, rupture its relationship with the American Jewish community and likely extinguish any remaining chance for a two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians.

We have reached a point where American Jews are calling upon the American president to override the will of the Israeli people on matters of Israeli national security.

### **The Chutzpah of the American Jewish Liberal Leadership**

Such is the clamor of American liberal Jewish leadership to preserve the failed two-state solution — which calls on Israel to cut 20 percent of its New Jersey-sized landmass and give over the most storied stretches of the Promised Land to the corrupt crooks of the PLO and the terrorist group Hamas.

Yet the last Israeli election proved, and many polls reflect, that Israelis — as opposed to the American Jewish liberal leadership — are done with the two-state solution. In the aftermath of the 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the immediate takeover by jihadist group Hamas which led to three full-out wars and innumerable rockets being fired on Israel, most Israelis came to the conclusion that the "land for peace" policy is a failure. Israelis have now voiced that opinion democratically.

Much to the frustration of the American liberal Jewish establishment, the Israeli sovereignty movement, to which Netanyahu alluded and which calls for Israel to control the ancestral Jewish homeland of Judea and Samaria, is gaining momentum. And in Washington, the Trump Administration is the first presidential administration not to be

reflexively pro-two-state solution. Indeed, rumors from the Beltway whisper that the Trump Administration's much-ballyhooed "Deal of the Century" does not call for Palestinian statehood at all.

## **Red State Jews and Blue State Jews**

Being an Israeli Jew with conservative nationalistic leanings, I am often asked, especially when visiting the American heartland, why is it that American Jews are predominantly liberal? American gentiles are downright mystified as to why any Jewish person would be against what they perceive to be a natural link between conservatism and Judeo-Christian biblical values — values which, one would think, would be commonly held by Jews. Many gentiles also want to know why liberal Jews are anti-Trump and pro-Palestinian — a staunchly pro-Israel president and a pseudo-entity that many Americans perceive to be the enemy of the Jewish state.

In his 2018 New York Times article entitled, "How America's Jews Learned to Be Liberal," Steven Weisman quotes an American Jewish Committee poll which found that "Israelis approve of President Trump's handling of United States-Israeli relations by 77 percent... But only 34 percent of American Jews feel the same way."

Weisman concludes: "*Israelis are red-state Jews. American Jews are blue-state — politically liberal in their outlook.*"

To be sure, there are many American Jews on the political Right who agree with Israeli nationalist policies, and there are Israelis on the political Left who are much closer to the American Jewish liberal consensus. However, the broad trends of American Jewish liberalism and Israeli Jewish nationalism are apparent.

## **Why do American Jews Tend to be Liberal?**

Throughout the centuries, from Ukraine to England, and from Yemen to Syria, Jews lived in countries prone to anti-Semitic violence. Jews were often victims of intolerance, xenophobia, and exclusion. Yet they were able to thrive in these places by succeeding financially, excelling educationally, and by gaining social status.

In an effort to mitigate the dangers of the host country, Jews also employed a sophisticated defense mechanism — the teachings of liberalism. At the university, in the courts, in the banks, and in their dealings with local authority, Jews sent out a message of tolerance, diversity, and inclusion in hope that the host society would internalize those values and that the Jews would benefit and be spared. This strategy worked until catastrophes such as the English Edict of Expulsion of 1290, the Spanish Expulsion of 1492, and the rise of Nazism in Germany came along.

### **Anti-Trumpism as Self-Preservation**

Today's American Jews may not feel themselves to be living in a hostile country — and America is indeed a great country that has allowed Jews to thrive and live in peace. Still, the U.S. is a majority-gentile host country and not a Jewish state. Even with a high rate of public success and participation, Jews living in America feel a 2,000-year-old subconscious impulse to broadcast the values of tolerance and multiculturalism in an effort to mitigate any potential ferocity on the part of the ruling host.

The anti-Trump fervor that has seized American Jewry can be readily understood in this light. The American Jewish Left sees in Trump a personification of ultra-nationalism which, their collective memory tells them, leads directly to violent anti-Semitism. While President Trump seems to be completely pro-Jewish, American liberal Jews manage to paint him in anti-Semitic colors, seeing him as the source of white nationalism and the dangerous "alt-Right."

"Bring him down before he brings us down! Stop the growth of nationalism before it becomes full blown Nazism! Defang the potentially violent ruler using the messaging of liberalism while you still can!" These are instinctive and classical reactions of liberal diaspora Jewry.

### **Why Israelis Tend to be Nationalistic**

In contrast, the modus operandi of Israeli Jews is not like that of the Diaspora Jews at all. The Jewish state is just that: An ethnic-national Jewish state in the ancient Land of Israel. The collective unconscious of Israelis tells them that they live in their own land, speak their

ancient language, are rightful sovereigns, and are in the process of rebuilding the Third Commonwealth.

The message that is conveyed to the elected officials from the average Israeli citizen is not of liberalism at all, but is rather: "Rule in strength! Defeat the enemy! Defend our family nation-state and do not be overly-liberal to our foes! Never again!"

In this light, Israeli support of the current American president makes sense: Trump is understood to be a determined, defense-minded fellow sovereign, a strong ruler, and an ally.

Many American Jews are dumbfounded at the nearly ubiquitous Israeli approval of a man they detest so much. But from across the pond, and in the tough Middle East reality, things look quite different. Trump's nationalism and certitude might threaten American liberal Jews, but these characteristics play well in Israel where those very characteristics are needed and admired.

### **Immigration Policy and the Wall**

Another example of the difference in outlook between American and Israeli Jews can be seen in immigration policy. American liberal Jews perceive themselves to be an ethnic-religious minority in America and descendants of recent immigrants. They tend to identify with potential incomers — and therefore call for a liberal immigration policy.

Unsurprisingly then, Trump's tough stance on Muslim and Mexican immigration is perceived as a direct attack on American liberal Jews and their values.

The Israeli Jew, however, sees it quite differently. For many Israelis, African or Arab migration to Israel is seen as a threat — a concerted effort to chip away at the Jewish state from the inside and endanger Israel's stability. In Israel, Trump's wall policy is understood to be a normal course of action for a sovereign nation surrounded by hostile countries. Indeed, Israel itself has put up defensive walls!

Clearly, the contrast in the reality of Israeli Jews and American Jews leads to policy prescriptions that are drastically different. The very modes of thinking about these problems are oceans apart.

## **For Some, Nationalism Looks Like Fascism**

So if Israeli Jews are red-state Jews and American Jews are blue-state Jews, it is not surprising that they often collide with one another.

American liberal Jews tend to see the "Palestinians" as a downtrodden minority, but Israelis, in large measure, see them as part of hostile Arab Middle East majority. Similarly, the "West Bank" which the American liberal establishment continues to see as "occupied" is seen by a majority of Israelis as an integral part of our ancestral homeland. The same goes for the behavior of the Israeli army, which American liberals often see as being too forceful, while Israelis, whose children serve on the front lines, often see as being too restrained.

In turn, many Israelis discount American liberal Jewry's policy prescriptions. Without verbalizing it, Israelis wonder whether American Jews, whose approach to statecraft is one of a powerful and vocal minority in a host country, can give useful advice to Israeli Jews who drive tanks and fly jets in defense of their own threatened yet sovereign Jewish state.

## **Israel's Security is NOT a Jewish Issue**

Recently, I was in Washington and sat with a Christian red-state congressman. We talked about Israeli sovereignty in Judea and Samaria and the position of the "settlers" — Jews proudly living in the ancestral homeland and blocking a jihadist takeover — who clearly favor Israeli control of the areas in which they live. Suddenly, the congressman asked me: "OK, but what will my colleagues, the Democratic Jewish congressmen, say about this?"

I replied: "Congressman, do you ask these Democratic Jewish congressmen how to vote on issues of abortion? Of course not. So why would you ask them about Judea and Samaria? What should be done with these territories is an Israeli issue — not a Jewish issue. The American liberal congressmen don't serve the Israeli constituency, they haven't served in the Israeli army, and they don't bear the burden of dealing with jihadism. They don't own this issue."

Indeed, when it comes to policy issues in the Jewish world, there should be a distinction between general Jewish issues and local ones.

General Jewish issues might be the question of conversion, or even of religious control at the Western Wall. However, the issues of Israel foreign policy, Israel security, dealing with Palestinians, decisions on Judea and Samaria, Knesset election — these are not general Jewish issues, but rather are Israeli issues. The loud parading and weighing-in of the collective American liberal Jewish voice on strictly Israeli issues is illogical, patronizing, and shameful.

## **Loving Israel to Death**

American Jews and Israeli Jews are two related communities living across the ocean who share DNA, familiarity, goodwill, a love of the Torah, and a love of the homeland. However, we live very different lives and have consequently developed a very different mindset.

Rather than fighting about it, the way forward is to adopt a posture of mutual respect and support where possible — but also allow for some daylight between one another when dealing with respective regional policy issues. It's great to pipe up because it shows love and care, but on the other hand, since the American Jewish and Israeli realities and perspectives are so different, it is also good to know when to butt out.

Those American Jews who publicly defend Israel's choices give voice to the Israeli policies in the halls of American power — and that is an important task. Yet those American liberal Jewish voices who have become detractors from Israeli policy should have less sway. They endanger the U.S.-Israel alliance and, frankly, endanger Israel's security. They advocate for bad policy, like the misbegotten "two-state solution," for a region they do not understand and in circumstances they do not share. They go against the will of the Israeli people and give Jewish cover to anti-Israel forces. Their mindset and behavior are that of a minority ethnic group living in a host country, and not like that of Israel — a sovereign state, an American ally, and a burgeoning regional power dealing with the harsh everyday reality of the Middle East.

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