The American Jewish Left in Exile

Those of us whose Jewishness isn't tethered to Israel find ourselves increasingly at the margins of American Jewish life. Do we need our own institutions?

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Protesters with Jewish Voice for Peace marching for a ceasefire in Gaza after occupying the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, New York City, November 6, 2023

In 2010, about a year into Barack Obama's first term as president and Benjamin Netanyahu's second as prime minister, Peter Beinart observed that a significant divide was opening between younger American Jews and their elders over support for Israel. "The leading institutions of American Jewry have refused to foster—indeed, have actively opposed—a Zionism that challenges Israel's behavior in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and toward its own Arab citizens," he argued in these pages. "For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead."

That gulf has grown more pronounced in the intervening years, as Israel's politicians have moved sharply rightward and expanded the occupation of the Palestinian territories. It has widened still more dramatically since Hamas attacked southern Israel on October 7, killing 1,200 people, and Israel launched its retaliatory war on Gaza—a war that so far has killed over 26,000 Palestinians, more than a third of them children, injured nearly 60,000 others, and destroyed or damaged more than 60 percent of the housing units in the Strip. Leading scholars of genocide like Raz Segal have accused Israel of that crime, as has the government of South Africa in a suit filed with the International Court of Justice this month. (Though it stopped short of calling for a unilateral ceasefire, on Friday the ICJ held Israel responsible for preventing acts of genocide.) Several members of Netanyahu's cabinet have made their genocidal intentions explicit by calling for the mass expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza.

The horrific violence has confirmed Beinart's diagnosis and exacerbated the ills he diagnosed. A month after Hamas's assault, by which point more than nine thousand Palestinians had been killed in Gaza, a poll by the Jewish Electorate Institute (JEI) found that 82 percent of American Jews over thirty-six approved of President Joe Biden's handling of Israel's war—then widely characterized as

a "bear hug" of Netanyahu—as opposed to 53 percent among those between eighteen and thirty-five. Support for aid to Israel followed a similar pattern. These months have been emotionally trying for all American Jews; for progressive Jews in particular, they have often entailed fighting over fundamental moral questions with family members, friends, colleagues, and sometimes even rabbis.

One sign of this generational divide is the increased visibility of young, left-wing, anti-Zionist American Jews—a cohort to which I and many of my friends belong. For months our most prominent representatives have been two activist groups calling for a ceasefire in Gaza: IfNotNow (INN) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). Broadly speaking, these groups reject Israel as the central focus of American Jewish life, and do so explicitly as Jews. They draw on language, symbolism, and values rooted in the rich and at times suppressed history of left-wing Jewish radicalism, which peaked before the State of Israel was founded and Zionism became central to diasporic Jewish identity. As Marc Tracy recently observed in *The New York Times*, this vision of "diasporism" as an alternative to Zionism has been gaining ground among progressive Jews. He quotes from an epigraph to Shaul Magid's recent book *The Necessity of Exile* (2023), from the philosopher Eugene Borowitz: "Anybody who cares seriously about being a Jew is in Exile and would be in Exile even if that person were in Jerusalem. That Exile results because our Jewish ideal is unrealized anywhere in the world."

Since the start of the war on Gaza, membership in INN and JVP has grown significantly. Through disruptive direct actions, including the occupation of landmarks like Liberty Island and Grand Central Station and the blocking of major roads and bridges, they have kept demands for a ceasefire in the headlines and on the minds of the public. Momentum is slowly growing. As of this writing, sixty-five members of Congress, all of them Democrats, have called for a ceasefire—a position a majority of Americans support. Earlier this month the progressive Zionist group Americans for Peace Now called for "an immediate cessation of hostilities," and last week J Street, the leading "pro-Israel, pro-peace" organization, finally demanded "a negotiated stop to the fighting to bring freedom to the hostages and relief to the people of Gaza." INN and JVP can plausibly claim some credit for moving the needle.

And yet even as these groups have become increasingly visible and influential, they have been pushed ever more aggressively to the margins of American Jewish life. In November Yehuda Kurtzer, the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, argued in the *Forward* that since October 7 "the messy mainstream of American Jews is energized anew toward identification with Israel and the Jewish people, expressing that identification with levels of belonging that represent a reversal of decades of assimilation and decline." The recovery of this "big tent," he argued, was made possible in part by a "rupture between the Jewish left and the rest of the Jewish community to which it was once attached." With their "open repudiation of Zionism" and their "tendentious rhetoric about colonialism, the Israeli perpetration of genocide, and other left dogmas," he suggested, groups like INN and JVP had planted "their commitments squarely outside the framework of Jewish communal respectability."

For those of us who insist that protesting Israel's treatment of Palestinians is not only about ending an ongoing injustice but also about reclaiming Jewish identity in accord with our progressive beliefs, it is insulting to be told that we have separated ourselves from the Jewish community writ large, or that we must. But Kurtzer's premise is not so easily dismissed. Despite the much-discussed and growing generation gap, his views on Israel still align far more closely with those of most American Jews than do those of the anti-Zionist left. JEI's November poll, after all, suggested that a narrow majority of even the youngest cohort of American Jewish adults was still standing with Israel in the aftermath of the attacks. Nearly all mainstream American Jewish institutions remain powerfully tied to Israel, from the well-funded lobbying groups that represent Jewish interests in the political arena to the major organized Jewish religious denominations, including the Orthodox Union, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and the Union for Reform Judaism.

The young, non-Zionist Jewish left has been able to protest the collective punishment of Gaza at the cost of often painful alienation from the American Jewish mainstream those organizations represent. Aside from a few relatively small magazines, activist groups, and scattered individual anti-Zionist congregations, there seem to be few institutions where we can congregate as Jews, and few occasions

for us to speak and to be counted as fully welcome members of the Jewish community. In the eyes of most elected officials, meanwhile, that community is the sum of its major denominations and donor-funded institutions, virtually none of which reflect the feelings of the Jewish left toward Israel. For all the progress anti-Zionist Jewish activists have made, they have yet to win over the sitting Democratic president or the majority of Democrats in Congress, let alone any Republicans. So when Kurtzer warns that "the Jewish left will have no seats at any tables besides the ones they set for themselves," those of us who identify with the Jewish left need to take seriously the possibility that he's right.

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The right to speak on behalf of the Jews has always been fiercely contested. In 1897, the same year Theodor Herzl launched Zionism as a political movement, the General Jewish Labor Bund was founded in Vilna (now Vilnius, Lithuania) as a socialist party. As Molly Crabapple has recounted in these pages, for the next several decades Zionism and Bundism competed to win over the millions of Jews then living in the Russian Empire and what would become an independent Poland. Where Zionism emphasized the ever-present threat of European antisemitism and the need for a Jewish homeland, Bundism stressed *do'ikayt*, or "hereness"—the right for a Jew to be free from threat wherever one lived. In contrast to Zionism, which called for the rebirth of Hebrew as a modern language and the assimilation of Jews of different backgrounds into a new polity, Bundism rooted itself firmly in the Yiddish of the Ashkenazi working class in the Pale of Settlement. On the other hand, as Crabapple noted, "the Bund had little to offer Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews"—groups that a few generations later would become crucial demographic bases for Zionism, and today make up the majority of Israel's population.

In the United States, home to at least a third of the world's Jews (the large majority of them Ashkenazi), the legacy of Bundism can be seen in the labor activism and left-wing agitation that dominated Manhattan's Lower East Side a century ago. Bundists were central to establishing the Workmen's Circle and the Jewish Labor Committee, which are still active today. The Bund-influenced Jewish labor movement shaped New Deal policymaking (Sidney Hillman, the head of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and a major figure in the New Deal coalition, had been a Bundist in his youth), but it faced significant repression in the McCarthy era and never fully recovered. In its early days Bundism had the numbers to rival or even surpass Zionism; today it exists primarily as a kind of nostalgic antecedent for the Jewish left.

The triumph of Zionism is inextricably connected to the Holocaust, which both exterminated most of the Bund's social base in Eastern Europe and, to many around the world, seemed to prove that Jews could never be safe as a minority in Europe or elsewhere. Many American Jews came to identify more strongly with Israel after its seemingly miraculous victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, which marked the beginning of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. In post-1967 Zionism, Jews raised in the assimilationist climate of the McCarthy years found a model of proud, assertive Jewish identity—a way to live publicly as Jews, aligned with a US Cold War proxy, thereby bolstering rather than undermining their claim to Americanness as the last barriers to their advancement into the professional elite were falling away. As Yuri Slezkine writes in *The Jewish Century* (2004),

In the 1970s, most American Jews by blood became Jews by conviction—and thus full-fledged Americans.... The American Jews had finally become regular American "ethnics," complete with an old country that was also a new state with a flag, an army, and a basketball team.

Zionism has been the central concern of virtually every American Jewish institution ever since. Some of the most influential have come to represent it in a particularly militant, right-wing form. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which emerged as a true force in the 1970s and has since grown into one of the most powerful single-issue lobbies in the US, is widely recognized as the cornerstone of what Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, in a controversial 2007 book, called "the Israel Lobby"—a network of well-funded institutions that work to keep Washington in lockstep support of Israel. Prior to 2021, when AIPAC finally launched a political action committee of its own, it used its

Lithuanian socialists and Bundists paying tribute to the victims of anti-Jewish pogroms, Vilnius, October 1905

influence over pro-Israel PACs and donors to steer funds toward elected officials who uncritically back Israel and to subsidize challenges against dissenters.

Pro-Israel demonstrators at a rally in Lafayette Square, just north of the White House, during the Six-Day War, Washington, D.C., June 8, 1967

Though AIPAC claims to be bipartisan, in practice it has long allied with the Israeli right. Recently it has also grown closer to the Republican Party, especially during its efforts to torpedo the Obama administration's 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, which succeeded under the AIPAC-friendly Trump administration. In 2022 AIPAC endorsed 109 Republican candidates who supported the January 6 insurrection. This year it is expected to spend at least $100 million targeting vulnerable members of the progressive "Squad" in Democratic primaries.

Beginning around 1979, the Anti-Defamation League—founded in 1913 with the aim of defending the civil rights of Jews and other minorities—also shifted right. Its national director for much of the 1980s, Nathan Perlmutter, helped forge an unlikely alliance between Israel, its American Jewish supporters, and Evangelical Christians, many of whom support Israel out of a doctrinal conviction that doing so will help bring about the Rapture. "Jews can live with all the domestic priorities of the Christian Right on which liberal Jews differ so radically," Perlmutter wrote, "because none of these concerns is as important as Israel." Today the ADL is run by Jonathan Greenblatt, a veteran of the Obama White House who made explicit in 2022 that he regards anti-Zionism as inherently antisemitic. Greenblatt is as comfortable working with today's conspiratorial right as Perlmutter was with the Christian right. In November, after Elon Musk voiced agreement with a Twitter user espousing the antisemitic theory that Jews are flooding the US with "hordes of minorities," Greenblatt praised the tech mogul's "leadership in fighting hate"—that is, his denunciation of pro-Palestinian rhetoric.

Just how thoroughly right-wing Zionism has come to dominate mainstream American Jewish institutions was on display in November, when tens of thousands of Jews gathered in Washington for the "March for Israel." Its organizers—the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which was run from 1986 to 2018 and is still influenced by the fiercely right-wing Zionist Malcolm Hoenlein, and the Jewish Federations of North America—kept the specific aims of the rally vague to ensure that as many Jews would attend as possible. But the limits of this inclusivity were revealed on the morning of the event, when it emerged that one of the featured speakers would be Pastor John Hagee, the infamous eighty-three-year-old founder of Christians United for Israel, who in 2005 sermonized that God sent Hitler to punish the Jews for their sins.

The announcement came as a shock to the small peace bloc. Hadar Susskind, the president of Americans for Peace Now, and Rabbi Jill Jacobs, the head of the human rights group T'ruah, both expressed outrage that Hagee would be speaking at a rally they had endorsed. So did J Street, which also sent a delegation. No doubt the peace camp's sense of betrayal was genuine, but whether Hagee's appearance should have come as a real surprise is another matter. This was an event that also saw the Democratic Congressional leadership share a stage with Mike Johnson, the newly elected Republican speaker of the House and an outspoken Christian nationalist, homophobe, and QAnon enthusiast, who called demands for a ceasefire "outrageous." Unlike Hagee's, Johnson's appearance was announced in advance; this is the kind of bedfellow one makes when marching for Israel.

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As influential as these political organizations are, the foundational institutions of American Jewish life are religious. Religious Judaism is not centralized: American Jews are split into several denominations with dramatically different levels of religious observance, which broadly correlate with political leanings. A Pew survey from 2020 found that 9 percent of American Jews are Orthodox (a large majority of whom reliably vote for Republicans, unlike the majority of non-Orthodox Jews, who vote for Democrats), 17 percent are Conservative, 37 percent are Reform, and 32 percent are unaffiliated. For politically progressive Jews inclined toward any degree of religious observance, Reform Judaism is the likeliest denominational home; it has a long history of progressive activism and a broad commitment to social justice causes like criminal justice reform, gun violence prevention, and LGBTQ+ equality.

The Reform movement's central institution is the Union for Reform Judaism (formerly called the Union of American Hebrew Congregations), which sets guidelines for hundreds of congregations across the country. It has been staunchly Zionist since the late 1930s, and even more decisively so since 1967. Even in the most progressive congregations in the US—whose members are the most inclined to vote for Democrats, to criticize Netanyahu's right-wing coalition, and to support a just and peaceful resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—there are hardly any ordained rabbis unambiguously speaking out against Israel's war. Last month, 1,200 current and former URJ members signed an open letter calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, but only three of the signatories are rabbis, none of whom are currently employed by Reform congregations.

The large Reform synagogue that I grew up attending in Washington, D.C. always displayed the American and Israeli flags side by side on the bimah, thereby grafting the spiritual to not one but two nationalisms. In November its head rabbi expressed solidarity with Israel and encouraged congregants to attend the March for Israel. Weeks earlier, on October 14, the head rabbi at the largest Reform synagogue in Brooklyn, where I now live, condemned the left for casting Israel as a colonial state and offered a limited defense of Israel's war on Gaza. "Israel is now seeking to incapacitate Hamas and to bring back the hostages. Those are legitimate goals, and we must not ask Israel to refrain from pursuing them," she said, before urging that Israel not pursue them in a way that leads to mass Palestinian casualties: "we must also plead, pray, and lobby that they stop doing so through indiscriminate bombing." (Then as now, it was far from clear how Israel could fulfill its stated goal of incapacitating Hamas militarily without killing large numbers of Palestinian civilians.)

Both rabbis also spoke out in favor of the rights of Palestinians and called for peace and an end to the occupation. "Killing thousands of Palestinian civilians will not bring back the Israeli civilians who are so bitterly and excruciatingly mourned," the Brooklyn rabbi said. That some rabbis are trying to strike this balance is arguably a sign of progress: they are struggling to maintain their moral legitimacy in communities where some congregants are growing alienated from Zionism while others remain deeply committed to it. It's an unenviable task, and they run the risk of satisfying neither camp. As a progressive Los Angeles rabbi recently told the *Times*'s Ezra Klein, "there are very few people who are actually shedding tears when both Israeli Jews and Palestinians are dying."

Demonstrators lighting Hanukkah candles during a sit-in for a ceasefire in Gaza, Chicago, December 7, 2023

I grew up in an unusually active Reform Jewish household, but organized religious Judaism has never been for me. I disliked having to sit still in services and attend tedious Hebrew school classes, which I was compelled to do every week until my confirmation at sixteen (a Protestant ritual adopted by Reform Jews in the nineteenth century, on the theory that thirteen, the traditional age for a bar mitzvah, is too young for full religious maturity). But I wonder whether I might have felt more comfortable with organized Judaism had my childhood temple's rabbis not insisted on foregrounding Zionism, along with a panic over intermarriage that in retrospect seems almost quaint. Even before I had the opportunity to educate myself more deeply, at a basic level I understood that what I was being taught about Palestinians, both at temple and at home, dehumanized them.

I'm not unusual among non-Orthodox Jews my age or younger in feeling a lack of interest in religion. According to the 2020 Pew survey, only one in five American Jews attends synagogue as often as once a month; among Reform Jews, only 14 percent do, and among unaffiliated Jews, it's down to 2 percent.

Declining religiosity is a national trend that cuts across all major religious affiliations, but last month URJ officials suggested to *The Washington Post* that "some people are leaving Reform communities because of the movement's official responses" to the war. A pro-Israel college student told the paper that "a lot of people feel isolated, pushed away because they don't consider themselves Zionists."

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Perhaps nowhere has the gulf between the younger Jewish left and the American Jewish mainstream been wider since October 7 than in their views on the threat of antisemitism. Many American Jews are only a generation or two removed from experiencing state-endorsed violent antisemitism in Europe and elsewhere. Although the US has never descended to that level, there are still Jews here old enough to remember restricted neighborhoods, university quotas, and McCarthyist terror against the heavily Jewish left. Most American Jews of my generation were taught our history as a series of persecutions, from the Spanish Inquisition to the Pale of Settlement pogroms to the Holocaust.

We're now being told—by politicians, the media, and Jewish institutions—that an unprecedented wave of antisemitism has spread across the United States following the October 7 attacks. "I truly believe, were there no Israel, no Jew in the world would be ultimately safe," President Biden said just days after the incursion. "It's the only ultimate guarantee." More recently, Chuck Schumer said on the Senate floor that, as Jews, "we fear a world where Israel, the place of refuge for Jewish people, will no longer exist. If there is no Israel, there will be no place for the Jewish people to go when they are persecuted in other countries." Many American Jews surely agreed. In a poll conducted weeks after the attacks by the Jewish Federations of North America, "some 70 percent of Jewish respondents said they feel less safe than they did a few months before," the group reported. Nearly three quarters "said they thought antisemitism in their local community was rising."

To me and others on the American Jewish left, in contrast, it was not so much comforting as unsettling to hear the president and the Senate majority leader imply that our safety isn't guaranteed on their watch. We live thousands of miles away from Hamas; instead of marinating in fear, we might use caution in assessing the figures cited by many journalists and elected officials to indicate a nationwide spike in antisemitism. Those figures are collated and published by the ADL, which has been criticized for including, alongside cases of genuine antisemitism, many instances of what the group calls "public statements of opposition to Zionism." The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, recently endorsed by the House of Representatives by a vote of 311 to 14, likewise includes any pro-Palestinian activism that claims, for instance, "that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor."

The Jewish community is steeped in both personally experienced trauma and ritualized invocations of historical trauma. It's essential to memorialize the darkest moments in our history, but fixating on them can lead to myopia and self-obsession. Over the past few months, as university administrators and politicians have noisily debated whether American campuses are safe for Jews, three Palestinian American students were shot in Burlington, Vermont; meanwhile, Israel has bombed campuses in Gaza to rubble.

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In December the *Times* ran an article about Jewish students at Harvard who feel anxious about publicly expressing their Jewishness. "For students who are feeling increasingly isolated," it noted without further elaboration, "it did not help that many of their Jewish peers had joined the pro-Palestinian demonstrations." The implication was that the Jews joining pro-Palestinian demonstrations are not the Jews whose feelings matter. But are not they, too, increasingly isolated?

Recently I've been talking with a friend who grew up Orthodox in a staunchly right-wing and Zionist home. She has backed away from that environment, which she finds irreconcilable with her politics in general and specifically regarding Israel. But that process has been painful for her—it has ended

childhood friendships and strained familial bonds. Moreover, she still understands Judaism through the traditional ritual with which she was raised, which more liberal denominations don't seem to offer. "I can't stand being in any service that isn't doing it right," she told me, "but I can't go to shul now because I know what they're going to say about Israel and I just can't hear it." When I suggested that perhaps the Jewish left needs its own institutions, she wondered what could unite a group of people with such varying degrees of observance, besides Zionism.

Despite our very different backgrounds, I need a good answer to that question as much as she does. The Jewish left includes Jews like her who are struggling to live religiously observant lives consistent with progressive values, alongside Jews like me who feel stubbornly attached to Jewish identity even as we barely partake in the associated traditions and actively protest the associated nation-state. For my friend, the meaning of Judaism is found in ritual and tradition; for me, the value of Jewishness lies in its alienation from the mainstream, which so often produces an outsider's vantage steeped in irony and humanism. But for both of us, Jewishness provides the consciousness of apartness and critical detachment that draw us to progressive politics and to lives of intellectual and moral inquiry. In this sense, the Jewish left's estrangement from mainstream Jewish institutions has been a source of renewal as well as trauma. By taking a lonely moral stand—in many cases risking real loss as a result—we are learning precisely what it means to be Jewish.

An earlier version of this article mischaracterized Malcolm Hoenlein's current role at the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; it was also updated to reflect the latest estimated death toll in Gaza.

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The Library of Unconventional Lives

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