

Opinion Why American Jews Need to Lose All Faith in Israel's Government

Move on from your outrage on the Wall. To really change Israel, the Left must win power. That means you breaking your 'apolitical' taboo and supporting it

Rami Hod Jul 11, 2017 11:34 AM



To really change Israel, the left must win power. And U.S. Jews have to break their 'apolitical' taboo and support it: Tel Aviv protest against housing prices and social inequalities. July 30, 2011

The freezing of the agreement to establish a shared prayer space at the Western Wall is a severe blow to the accepted values of most American Jews. Nevertheless, Israeli citizens, politicians and social activists are apathetic about the cancellation of the agreement, in the same way they were apathetic to the decision about making it.

In recent years Israelis have held mass demonstrations against giving our natural resources to a handful of oligarchs. We have held rallies for free public pre-K education and won. Two hundred thousand Israeli workers have joined unions as part of an unprecedented revival of the labor movement taking place in the country since 2008. But the protests and prayers of Women of the Wall have never achieved a similar public effect.

We need a frank discussion about this gap between Israeli indifference and American Jewish outrage. Not because it's surprising, but because despite both sides recognizing it, there's still an assumption a rightwing Israeli government will embrace political change contrary to its nature. And why would it?

A dose of hard reality is in order. The Israeli Reform and Conservative communities are politically weak. Their concerns rank at the bottom of priorities for left and center parties.

And only few members of Israeli city councils, communities and social organizations take part in their just struggle. Why, bearing all this in mind, would someone think it is possible to rise above the internal power relations in Israel and accomplish something?

Two explanations are generally given as to why. First is the government's need for amicable relations between Israel and American Jews. Namely, the government will placate the Jewish diaspora by upholding its values. Secondly, and more cynically, the threat of American money - or withholding it. Our American uncles will stop sending us money if we cross them. It's hard to completely dismiss these arguments. Still, it's rather strange to think that one side can convince the other something is black when they see it as white.

So why did liberal American Jews think that the agreement would be implemented in the first place? And similarly, why do some of their leaders continue to believe Netanyahu's hollow promises to work for a two-state solution?

The key to an answer is hidden in the strategy guiding a considerable part of the institutions of liberal American Judaism in attitudes towards Israel. The formula is simple: conservative American Jews support the Israeli right while liberal American Jews support Israel. Not the Israeli left, but Israel. As Mikhael Manekin wrote, some progressive American Jews don't think the Israeli left exists. And if it does, it has no strategy on how to change Israel and no chance of winning.



American Jews, give up the faith. The Netanyahu who broke his promise on the Wall won't keep it on the two-state solution

However, conservative American Jews support the Right's educational program, pre-military academies, Torah settlement groups, think tanks and public campaigns. The American Jewish right and Israeli rightwing are synchronized in their objective to influence Israel's power relations, to win the war of ideas, and to strengthen a political camp and its institutions.

Liberal Jews, however, are do-gooders. They "strengthen social cohesion in Israel," "advance a vibrant civil society," and "create dialogue between the various tribes" in the spirit of President Reuven Rivlin's diagnosis.

But one taboo undergirds these shibboleths: liberal American Jews can't be political. The Reform movement, liberal federations and various liberal-leaning foundations can't be perceived as partisan on Israeli politics or as supporting organizations with a certain political agenda. There are certainly exceptions like the New Israel Fund and some family foundations, but though liberal Jewish organizations are politically engaged in the United States, they remain Apolitical in their action in Israel. The annulment of the Kotel agreement proves that is a mistake.

The lesson is clear: Liberal American Jews need to give up on the faith a rightwing government ruled by rightwing ideology will advance anything resembling a two-state solution, social justice or Jewish pluralism. It just won't happen. No matter how many government ministers attend Reform movement conferences. Or if Conservative Judaism helps build community centers in the Israeli periphery.

It won't happen because to really change Israel, the Israeli left must win power. And for the Israeli left to win, we must build a political civil society, not one that serves as a provider of social services the government privatizes, or merely advocates abstract values of solidarity and partnership between peoples. We need a civil society with think tanks, pre-military academies, educational programs, journals, local communities, unions and campaigns- all working to promote progressive solutions and to build power. Just like the rightwing does in partnership with conservative American Jews.

The shameful cancellation of the Kotel agreement is certainly a step backward. But it's also an opportunity. Liberal American Jews must exchange moral outrage that falls on deaf ears with new, more daring and explicitly political strategy. Only then will we move forward in strengthening our shared values and build a truly effective progressive movement both in Israel and in the United States.

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