

Opinion

This Is a Grim Time for Diaspora Lovers of Israel

From jettisoning LGBT and minority rights to befriending the European nationalist right and abjectly surrendering to ultra-Orthodox dictates, Netanyahu serially chooses the path of stupidity, political convenience and moral obtuseness

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Whenever I think that Israel-Diaspora relations cannot possibly get any worse, I am proven wrong. The last 4-6 weeks have been, arguably, the worst period ever in the history of relations between Israel and world Jewry.

Israel's current government occasionally gets something right. It has done a good job, for example, in handling the difficult situation with Syria and Russia on Israel's northern border.

But when it comes to managing ties with [Diaspora Jews](#), it abandons good sense and trades it in for either outright stupidity or moral obtuseness. [American Jews](#) in particular are bewildered by actions that they view as openly hostile to American Jewish values, interests, and sensibilities.

There is, of course, something deeply ironic about the fumbling and stumbling of Mr. [Netanyahu](#). On the one hand, he talks incessantly about Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. But on the other hand, he appears to care little if at all about what the Jewish people think of Israel's - and his - actions.

Let's review just a few of the recent actions of Netanyahu and the government of Israel as they relate to the question of Israel-Diaspora ties.

First: The abject surrender of the government of Israel to the [ultra-Orthodox](#) parties on issue after issue, alienating not only American Jews but civilized people everywhere.

We all remember, of course, Netanyahu's shameful decision to [renounce](#) the compromise on the Western Wall that he himself had fashioned. We must now add to that failure two more, each a reflection of cowardice in the face of ultra-Orthodox blackmail.



An Israeli walks with a flag in front of a banner showing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a rally against inequality for the LGBT community in Tel Aviv, Israel. July 22, 2018

Especially shocking is his [backtracking](#) on surrogacy rights for gay male couples after specifically endorsing those rights.

Originally, Netanyahu simply did the right thing. Beyond that, acceptance of gay rights has become an identifying characteristic of the civilized, developed, western world, where Israel proudly places itself. Furthermore, Israel has for years given special emphasis to its progressive position on [LGBTQ](#) rights as a means of differentiating itself from its hostile, backward neighbors.

But now, with barely a thought, Israel has jettisoned its long-held principles, damaged its diplomatic standing, and made common cause with fundamentalists in the region.

And why? To meet the never-ending demands of ultra-Orthodox Jews who are entitled to their views but who never seem to care about anything or anyone but themselves.

To this collapse must be added another: The [nation-state](#) bill contained what should have been an utterly uncontroversial section affirming the commitment of the State of Israel to protect Jews around the world and preserve the cultural and religious heritage of the Jewish people. Who could disagree with that?

And yet, because the ultra-Orthodox parties feared that such a clause might encourage Israel's government and courts to support Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel, the wording was changed. The final text of the law contains an awkward formulation saying that Israel would act to strengthen Jewish culture and religion in the Diaspora - but only in the Diaspora, without any reference to Jewish life in Israel.



Thousands of Israelis protesting against the passage of the nation-state bill.

This wording, of course, is nonsensical: What does it mean for Israel to promote Judaism in Melbourne and Paris but not in Tel Aviv and Haifa? The result: Diaspora Jews were **infuriated**. They rightly saw what should have been an embrace as a slap in the face, intended to ensure denial of support for their brand of Judaism in the Jewish state.

It is common for the ultra-Orthodox religious monopoly in Israel to be seen as an unfortunate but insignificant fact of political life. With time, the argument goes, technology and modernity will break down the walls of Bnei Brak and Mea Shearim, and the ultra-Orthodox will lose their political clout and rejoin mainstream Israel.

But what recent events have shown is that Israel cannot wait another generation to escape the ultra-Orthodox chokehold on religious life in the Jewish state. The price to be paid is simply too high.

The time has come for Benjamin Netanyahu, together with parties across the political spectrum, to rein in ultra-Orthodox blackmail and political hooliganism and to restore Israel's good name as a civilized nation.

Second: The **willingness** of the government of Israel to distort the history of the Holocaust and downplay the role of its collaborators in order to strengthen **alliances** with right-wing European states.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán **arrived in Israel** two weeks ago and received an enthusiastic welcome from his good friend Benjamin Netanyahu. Orbán is a contemptible, authoritarian politician who is dismantling democracy in Hungary and hovers on the edges of outright anti-Semitism in his political campaigns.

Orbán has expressed lavish praise for Milos Horthy, Hungary's Nazi-supporting leader during World War II. And in Orbán's recent reelection campaign, he used ugly anti-Semitic terminology to describe George Soros, the Hungarian Jewish philanthropist and champion of European democracy.

Was any of this a problem for Benjamin Netanyahu? Apparently not. Bibi referred to Orbán as a "true friend of Israel," offering him a diplomatic bear hug that conferred on Orbán the political legitimacy that he craves.



"Stop the Soros candidate" next to a "stop" (migration) campaign poster in Budapest, Hungary.

But Bibi did more than that. In response to a proposed Polish law to effectively criminalize research on the Holocaust, Bibi had already signed a [joint statement](#) with the Polish Prime Minister minimizing the role of Polish authorities and individuals in supporting the Nazi extermination efforts during World War II.

This was a giant step too far, a crushing blow to Jewish collective memory. It was also a profound affront to every Jew - myself included - who lost large segments of their family on Polish soil during the Holocaust.

Poland is awash in Jewish blood. Yes, the Poles were not the Nazis, and not all Poles were implicated. But the masses of Jew-haters who colluded in the slaughter must not be forgotten or forgiven or pushed from our consciousness.

And who gave Bibi the right to fiddle with the facts of history on this exceedingly painful subject?

Netanyahu heads the "national camp" in Israeli politics, which for more than 30 years was led by Menachem Begin. When David Ben-Gurion proposed that Israel accept reparations payments from the German government in 1952, Begin - backed by the left-wing Mapam party - responded with outrage, demonstrations, and even violence.

It was unthinkable to Begin that the government of Israel should extend even a modicum of forgiveness or "understanding" to those implicated in the exterminations at Auschwitz and elsewhere.

Ben-Gurion's actions were probably justified because Israel was broke, desperate, utterly alone, and without resources to support the masses of immigrants then arriving at its shores.

Still, that was a time when the "national camp" had a moral backbone, and Begin's moral righteousness resonated with many in Israel. Netanyahu's declaration, on the other hand, was not motivated by compelling need; it was merely an act of political convenience.



Far-right activists wear masks of Poland's PM Mateusz Morawiecki and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu to criticize Morawiecki's 'backtracking' on the Holocaust speech law. Warsaw, Poland. July 2, 2018

Yad Vashem, the U.S. Holocaust Museum, and prominent Holocaust historians protested the Prime Minister's statement. For a variety of reasons, their protest did not receive the publicity it should have. Nonetheless, Diaspora leadership took careful note of this gratuitous blow to the holiness of our Holocaust memories.

There is much else that could be discussed here about Israel-Diaspora relations: the conversion crisis, the detention of a Conservative rabbi for carrying out his religious duties, Israel's retreat from minority rights not only for Reform Jews but for all minorities, and the prime minister's failure to share with world Jewry any coherent vision of Israeli-Palestinian peace.

This is a grim time for Diaspora lovers of Israel, and many feel discouraged and abandoned. There is no point in glossing over the harsh realities of the moment.

Still, those of us in the Zionist camp in the Diaspora refuse to despair. The devotion of the Jewish people to Israel is strong and the case for Zionism remains compelling.

The problem is not Israel. The problem is the weak, cowardly, unprincipled, self-serving politicians of the current government.

Caught up in their petty, internal quarrels, they have inflicted on the Jewish people the problems enumerated above and forgotten the importance of an inclusivist Jewish vision.

Israel needs leaders who speak the language of a single Jewish people and who reach out to Jews everywhere that are moved by its vision and summoned by its call.

Jewish life cannot be sustained without Israel at its core, and Israel cannot be sustained without the Jewish people at its side. Sometime soon, we hope and pray, Israel will have leaders who understand that.

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