

Opinion // This Year Netanyahu Ditched the Jewish Diaspora. The Question Is: Why?

We now know what's behind the consistently contemptuous attitude Israel's PM has demonstrated toward American Jews - and no, it's not the cold calculus of domestic political survival. It's far more delusional than that

Eric H. Yoffie Dec 31, 2017 11:02 AM



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu chairs the weekly cabinet meeting, in Jerusalem. Dec. 31, 2017

Everyone knows by now that Benjamin Netanyahu has made an utter mess of relations between American Jews and the State of Israel. Everyone knows that Netanyahu has carved out a place for himself as the most hostile Prime Minister ever toward the Jews of the Diaspora.

Exhibit A is Netanyahu's abandonment of his own compromise on the Kotel. But there are other matters - his toying with the conversion bill, for example - that fortify the place of shame that he now occupies.

The interesting question is why. Why has he done what no other Prime Minister of Israel has done and infuriated to the point of apoplexy most of America's six million Jews?



A lone Jewish worshipper stands at the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest prayer site, in Jerusalem's Old City February 10, 2009

The usual answer is that Netanyahu was simply doing what politicians do: Saving himself at the expense of principle and self-respect. Besieged by scandal, he needs ultra-Orthodox support to assure his political survival. If that required switching sides on the Kotel question, so be it.

But if this were only a survival strategy, why the consistently contemptuous attitude that he has demonstrated toward American Jews? Why the provocative lies that he offered about the Kotel (that he "remained" fully committed to an egalitarian space there in his video appearance at the Jewish Federations of North America General Assembly in November? Why the haughty indifference about a matter of such importance?

Netanyahu could have assuaged American Jewish anger on the Kotel in a hundred ways. He could have been more or less honest, explained his political dilemma, expressed remorse, and demonstrated a willingness to do something to advance non-Orthodox interests. He could have pledged to work for inclusion of non-Orthodox Jews in the Jewish state.

But Netanyahu chose to do none of these things. Incredibly, over the last six months, instead of building trust and unity with American Jewish leaders, he has offered nothing but patronizing condescension, fostering anger and revulsion in the process. And the question remains: Why?

The best answer, it seems to me, comes from Ben Caspit, one of Israel's most respected journalists, who interviewed leading Israeli politicians and diplomats as part of an in-depth story on Netanyahu's relations with American Jews. Caspit summed up their take in a recent article in the Hebrew-language Maariv:

"Bibi has simply decided to give up on American Jews. He claims that in any case, they will not remain Jews, so why bother? When you tell him that despite all the prophecies of gloom and the assimilation, etc., there are still more than six million Jews in the United States, he snorts with contempt. He says that now the [demographic] graph is still flat, but soon they will be at the threshold of the abyss and will simply collapse from within and disappear. They will not remain Jews. So it is a shame to waste our time. They are no longer part of us."



Israelis take part in the 'March of Shame', a weekly protest against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and government corruption. Tel Aviv, December 23, 2017

There you have it. Bibi's actions begin to make sense. It is not just that he is engaging in political scheming. It is that he doesn't like or respect American Jews, doesn't think they will be around very long, and does not view them as important to Israel's survival.

According to Caspit and numerous other Israeli and American politicians and commentators, Netanyahu has expressed these sentiments a number of times in recent months, and they are not a secret among the diplomatic corps. Add to this the fact that the overwhelming majority of American Jews are Reform and Conservative in their religious identification and liberal in their political views, and you are left with the reality that Netanyahu sees American Jews as more of a burden than an asset.

Liberal - if not leftist. Internally weak. Assimilating. On the verge of extinction. And unreliable on Bibi's rightwing agenda. That is how the Prime Minister of Israel sees the members of the American Jewish community.

But what of their strategic value as Israel's most important and loyal advocates on the American political scene? What of lobbying for Israel, AIPAC, and the pro-Israel work of thousands of synagogues? What of Jewish mobilization for Israel in times of crisis?



Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, speaks during the AIPAC policy conference at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C., U.S. March 2, 2015

Bibi, it appears, is not overly impressed. He sees all of this as valuable but not durable. Given their internal weaknesses and leftist leanings, American Jews are not reliable allies. According to many observers, diplomatic and political sources, Bibi sees American evangelicals as the best and most dependable Israel lobby.

In some ways, none of this is surprising. Netanyahu's decision on the Kotel made no sense if Netanyahu truly valued Israel's partnership with the American Jewish community. In recent months, reports began to appear of dismissive comments made by Netanyahu about American Jews. And such comments were also attributed to Ron Dermer, Tzipi Hotovely, and other close associates of the Prime Minister.

Yet these reports were impossible to verify and always denied by the Prime Minister's office. But in the case of Caspit and others, their reputation and access to reliable sources lend indisputable weight to their arguments.

This, then, is our reality. Netanyahu has given up on American Jewry, and American Jews know that. And hurt feelings aside, this is also a disastrous misreading of America's political map.



Evangelical Christians praying for Jerusalem, in Jerusalem, on September 29, 2015.

Can Israel depend on Evangelicals as the "real lobby" on behalf of Israel? Hardly. New research indicates that younger evangelicals are less supportive of Israel and more supportive of Palestinians than their elders, a trend that is likely to continue. Evangelical support of Israel is welcome, but it can never be a substitute for the symbiotic ties between American Jewry and the Jewish state.

Are American Jews disappearing? Again - hardly. The community remains strong, creative, and remarkably vital, with good political instincts and an impressive sense of communal obligation.

No one can deny, of course, the dangers of assimilation. Still, the history of American Judaism is that periods of struggle and turmoil are inevitably followed by times of reorientation and renewal. Given the gusto, optimism, and adaptability of American Jews, religious renewal is a good bet for the future.

And finally, let us posit -which I do not believe - that Netanyahu is right, and that the bulk of American Jewry faces a crisis of survival. If that is so, surely there is no greater irony than this: The leader of the Jewish state has decided that he will respond to this crisis in America not with succor, encouragement, and Jewish solidarity but with sneering indifference. He will not lift these Jews up and strengthen them but lead a government that is forever insulting and infuriating them.

Is it too late? Have the bonds between Israel and Diaspora Jews been severed, thanks to the Prime Minister's catastrophic policies?



U.S. First Lady Melania Trump, President Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife Sara Netanyahu in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, D.C., U.S. Feb. 15, 2017

Some think so, but I am less sure. Despite the turmoil, Israel remains embedded in the hearts of American Jews, most of whom, including the young, yearn for a connection with the Jewish state. Still, the hour is late and the dangers are great.

And while I have little confidence that he will listen, what I would say to Benjamin Netanyahu after his disastrous year is this:

Stop jabbering about Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people if you are not prepared to accept and embrace all Jews, including political and religious liberals.

Stop deluding yourself about coalitions with Christians, however welcome these are; Israel's survival depends on the collective solidarity of the Jewish people.

Stop demeaning American Jews; the Jewish people understand political and religious differences, but they will never tolerate the disdain and scorn of which you have been guilty.

And if you truly believe that American Jews are in danger, don't walk away; do something. Being responsible for the spiritual renaissance of the Jewish people is an essential element of Israel's *raison d'être*.

And if you cannot remember these things, step down. Go. Leave us be. The State of Israel and the Jewish world will be better off without you.

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