

16. Peter Beinart, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment"

Peter Beinart, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment," *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010

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Among American Jews today, there are a great many Zionists, especially in the Orthodox world, people deeply devoted to the State of Israel. And there are a great many liberals, especially in the secular Jewish world, people deeply devoted to human rights for all people, Palestinians included. But the two groups are increasingly distinct. Particularly in the younger generations, fewer and fewer American Jewish liberals are Zionists; fewer and fewer American Jewish Zionists are liberal. One reason is that 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. 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.

Morally, American Zionism is in a downward spiral. If the leaders of groups like AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations do not change course, they will wake up one day to find a younger, Orthodox-dominated, Zionist leadership whose naked hostility to Arabs and Palestinians scares even them, and a mass of secular American Jews who range from apathetic to appalled. Saving liberal Zionism in the United States—so that American Jews can help save liberal Zionism in Israel—is the great American Jewish challenge of our age. And it starts where [Frank] Luntz's students wanted it to start: by talking frankly about Israel's current government, by no longer averting our eyes.

COMMENTARY BY SARA Yael HIRSCHHORN

Does this sound familiar?

American Zionism is in a downward spiral. If the leaders of groups like AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations do not change course, they will wake up one day to find a younger, Orthodox-dominated, Zionist leadership whose naked hostility to Arabs and Palestinians scares even them, and a mass of secular American Jews who range from apathetic to appalled. Saving liberal Zionism in the United State is the great American Jewish challenge of our age. And it starts ... by no longer averting our eyes.

When I agreed to write this reflection on an important contribution to contemporary Jewish thought, I expected to re-encounter Peter Beinart's now canonical essay "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment" (*New York Review of Books*, June 10, 2010) as an antiquated critique of contemporary Jewish-American politics. I remembered how authoritative Beinart's formidable attack on the ruling elite of American Jewish institutional life and against the status quo of Diaspora-Israel relations as well had seemed in its time. I expected that its foretelling of a soon-to-come fundamental redrawing of the American Jewish landscape would now read as a *fait accompli*. Yet, the initial paragraphs chronicling the indifference of the average Jewish-American college student to the Zionist cause, the inability of the organized American Jewish community to engage in an open and pluralistic discourse on contemporary Judaism and Israel, and the widening gap between American Jewish liberalism and attitudes toward the State of Israel could have been ripped from the headlines of any 2018 Jewish periodical. Perhaps then, despite fulsome praise for what was once perceived as a kind of prophetic jeremiad for American Jewry, the invective failed to inspire a fundamental change. Nevertheless, revisiting this treatise nearly a decade on reveals that the American Jewish establishment has changed from within and without and that Beinart's piece deserves to be reappraised today.

Beinart opens his blistering disputation by citing what he considered to be "the most damning indictment of the American Jewish community I have ever seen," a report commissioned by major Jewish philanthropists to investigate the debate over Israel on college campuses. While predating the entrenchment of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement at many universities worldwide, the study reflected the anxieties of donors that millennials (using the now-common

parlance) were "distancing" themselves from Israel. Jewish-American students were seemingly unwilling to check their liberalism at the door of the Diaspora-Israel discourse and sought a more capacious and inclusive conversation on the Zionist cause. In essence, Beinart adduced that "the only kind of Zionism [these college students] found attractive was the kind that the American Jewish Establishment has been working against for most of their lives."

Surveying the Jewish hemispheres of Beinart's piece, we find a depressing description of an increasingly right-wing and racist government in Israel, a settler movement surpassing its own apocalyptic expectations for expansion, the two-state solution in open retreat, a stalled peace process (that generated only process and no peace), and radicalized generations of both Israelis and Palestinians rooted in their own narratives of and encounters with never-ending conflict. Liberal Zionism and Israel's discouraged and dying left were under siege, from within and without. Meanwhile, in the United States, the "terrible irony" that Beinart characterized in the widening gulf between the American Jewry's "liberal vision of Israel" and the "real Israel" could no longer be denied. The "establishment" (although who this represents is never truly specified apart from some Washington acronyms like American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Zionist Organization of American (ZOA), and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (CPMAJO)), in Beinart's view, steadfastly pursued a policy of "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" when it came to Israel and silenced sharply critical voices opposed to both Israeli domestic and foreign policy (generally from the left), often finding strange political bedfellows in their uncritical support. "Unless they change course," Beinart warned with a sense of Delphian doom, this stance would "portend the future: an American Zionist movement that does not even feign concern for Palestinian dignity and a broader American Jewish population that does not even feign concern for Israel. ... Either prospect fills me with dread."

Beinart's column struck a chord at a moment of collective soul-searching amongst Diaspora Jewry, especially in the United States. Penned in the aftermath of 2008 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (which saw serious Palestinian civilian casualties and global opprobrium against Israel), the Gaza Flotilla of 2010, the re-election of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud government coalition, the middle of the first Obama presidency, the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, and tensions over the reanimation of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process under the new American administration, the piece was published at a kind of tipping point for American Jewish politics. Like the

First Lebanon War had been in 1982, the “Gaza War” was a watershed for young American Jews who were struggling to reconcile the Zionist idealism that had been instilled in them at Jewish schools, overnight camps, and synagogues with a country they perceived as committing war crimes. Meanwhile, Israel was increasingly becoming a wedge issue in US elections, leading to philanthropist Sheldon Adelson later quipping, seemingly on behalf of entire older generation of Jewish-Americans, that “I didn’t leave the Democrats, they left me.”¹ As Beinart points out (presciently articulating the findings of the Pew Research Center’s “Portrait of Jewish Americans” survey in 2013), a major demographic shift that would profoundly impact American Jewish identity, religion, and politics as well as Diaspora-Israel relations was well underway, with the decline of the denominational Judaism and the dramatic boom in American ultra-Orthodoxy. Young American Jews (apart from the strictly devout) increasingly could not see eye-to-eye with their elders in the establishment, and the two camps were on a kind of collision-course.

Despite its full embrace by the liberal American Jewish intelligentsia and associated institutions, the “failure” of the essay was that this fateful encounter never really seemed to materialize. While Beinart essentialized the “us” and “them” of his essay, the predominantly white, Ashkenazi, wealthy, politically influential, and overwhelmingly male senior leadership of major Jewish organizations has carried on mostly unscathed, while the young, unaffiliated, and increasingly non- or anti-Zionist youth are progressively alienated. Occasionally, the two constituencies have collided over communal priorities—such as the rejection of the liberal Zionist group J Street from under the Conference of Presidents’ umbrella in spring 2014, the second Gaza-Israel war of July-August 2014, and the election of President Trump in 2016—but for the most part, the two “sides” have pursued their own agendas with growing polarization.

Yet, time itself has wrought significant changes that bring Beinart’s arguments into sharper definition. Evolution within the establishment itself softens some of the blows of the essay’s critique. For example, the “changing of the guard” at some of the major communal Jewish organizations as a generation reached retirement age has yielded communal activism with a new face. (The lively riposte from Abraham Foxman, then National Director of the ADL published in the NYRB Letters to the Editor section now seems a bit quaint with the recruitment of Jonathan Greenblatt, an entrepreneur and former assistant in

¹ Sheldon Adelson, “I Didn’t Leave the Democrats. They Left Me,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2012.

the Obama White House, to lead the organization after Foxman's retirement.) Further, although many of the institutional heads who, according to the Pew survey, failed an entire generation of America Jewry, continue to hold office, their like-minded donor pool is also aging and new allegiances and agendas are being adopted in a desire to reach out to younger financiers. Even at organizations where there has been little turnover or change in direction, current events have sometimes weakened their sway on the American Jewish imagination—notably, the unsuccessful lobbying of AIPAC against the Iran nuclear deal during the Obama presidency, leading some to claim that the lobbying organization had been reduced to a paper tiger.

On the left, however, the monopolization of a discourse of identity politics (especially on university campuses and in the political parties) has also magnified some of Beinart's admonitions. With BDS and the denial of the right of the State of Israel to exist becoming increasingly fashionable on the far left, and more young American Jews drawn to non- and anti-Zionist activism on its fringes, the divergence between liberalism and Zionism has been drawn into starker relief. While the "establishment" remains slow to react (and often does so badly in a way that millennials see as a kind of bullying behavior), the growing hand-wringing over "distancing" may finally produce new ideas and institutions. (It is most likely that these models may emerge from the middle, as it is moderates who feel most profoundly implicated by the orthodoxies of identity politics.) Last but not least, demographic change may soon overtake these questions, as the American Jewish millennial of tomorrow will most likely be ultra-Orthodox with a very different relationship to modernity and communal modalities.

While rereading Beinart's essay is a timely reminder of the polarization that persists in American Jewish politics, it misses the point that the distance between American Jewry and Israel is not between Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, Long Island and Long Beach, but between Teaneck and Tel Aviv. Jewish and Israeli identity have never been—and certainly are not—synonymous, and the interests that animate Diaspora Jewry about Israel are often religious and moral issues that speak to American Jewish principles and practices, rather than Israeli priorities. Those like Beinart who care deeply about the relationship between US Jewry and Israel may focus less on deconstructing the American Jewish establishment than developing a shared vocabulary and values between Diaspora and Israeli Jews in the future.