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# American Jews, You Have to Choose Sides on Israel

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Ever since Israel's founding in 1948, supporting the country's security and its economic development and cementing its diplomatic ties to the U.S. have been the "religion" of many nonobservant American Jews — rather than studying Torah or keeping kosher. That mission drove fund-raising and forged solidarity among Jewish communities across America.

Now, a lot of American Jews are going to need to find a new focus for their passion.

Because if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu succeeds with his judicial putsch to crush the independence of the country's judiciary, the subject of Israel could fracture every synagogue and Jewish communal organization in America. To put it simply: Israel is facing its biggest internal clash since its founding, and for every rabbi and every Jewish leader in America, to stay silent about this fight is to become irrelevant.

The Jewish Telegraphic Agency just ran an article that offered a revealing glimpse into this reality. It quoted a Los Angeles rabbi, Sharon Brous, as beginning her sermon on Israel last month with a content warning to her congregants: "I have to say some things today that I know will upset some of you."

Every American rabbi knew what she meant: Israel has become such a hot-button issue that it cannot be discussed without taking sides for or against Netanyahu's policies.

As Rabbi Brous told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, "You have a wonderful community, and you love them and they love you, until the moment you stand up and you give your Israel sermon." She said the phenomenon has an informal name: "Death-by-Israel sermon."

*Death-by-Israel sermon.* Never heard that before.

What makes the situation even more incendiary is that the fault line on Israel — pro- or anti-Netanyahu — often overlaps with the fault line between Democrats and Republicans, and we know how explosive that divide is.

The reality, though, is that the interests of American Jews and Israel have been diverging for many years, but it's been papered over. Up until the early 2000s — as Israel was focused on absorbing Jews from Russia and Ethiopia with the help of American Jewry, pursuing the Oslo peace process with the help of American presidents and launching start-ups with the help of American investors — the interests between the two communities seemed to be generally aligned.

But roughly since 2009, Netanyahu — he is currently leading his sixth government as prime minister — has increasingly partnered with more and more ultranationalist and ultrareligious parties and has come to embrace the Trumpist playbook. He has increasingly sought to win elections by radicalizing his base, attacking Israel's legal, media and academic institutions and inciting his loyalists against centrist and left-wing Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. In the last election, in November, Netanyahu abandoned any attempt to build a broad centrist coalition.

Under Netanyahu, Israel's governments sought every way possible to avoid the peace process with the Palestinians and used every opportunity possible to demonize Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, even though Netanyahu knew that for years Abbas's Palestinian Authority was providing essential security cooperation with Israel in the West Bank.

Netanyahu and his team also dismissed liberal American Jews, viewing them as a dying breed, intermarrying their way to irrelevance. Netanyahu and his allies have instead focused their energies on building support for Israel with Republicans and their evangelical base.

Still, the leaders of the major American Jewish institutions worked hard to deny the implicit contempt that Netanyahu manifested toward them, putting out pabulum statements about the need to respect Israel's democratic process and judge Israel's government "on actions" — as if Netanyahu's appointment of two ex-convicts and nationalist, messianic zealots to key cabinet posts was not worthy of condemnation.

But as Netanyahu's latest government has pressed ahead with its attempt to crush the independence of the Israeli judiciary, splitting Israeli society, American Jewish leaders now have no choice but to choose sides.

Because what began in Israel as a protest against Netanyahu's judicial putsch is expanding into a much broader revolt by the most productive elements of Israel's society, who also carry the security burden and fight its wars. That sector is now looking at Netanyahu's cabinet — many of its members have never served in combat (none of the ultra-Orthodox and only some of the ultranationalists) and many pay little or no taxes but devour huge budgets for their religious institutions — and saying: "Enough! We are not taking this from you anymore."

Last Saturday, an estimated 250,000 Israelis took to the streets (roughly the equivalent in population to 8.6 million Americans) from across the political spectrum, demanding a halt to Netanyahu's attempt to destroy the independence of Israel's judiciary. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of reserve pilots in an elite air force unit notified their commanding officers that, in protest of the government's judicial coup attempt, they would not participate in training.

It is no wonder that Israeli economist and demographer Dan Ben-David remarked to me that "this is our second war of independence, and all Jews have a stake in its outcome."

Alas, though, most American Jewish organizations and lay leaders — particularly the leadership of the powerful right-leaning Jewish lobbying organization AIPAC — are not built for this kind of existential fight inside Israel. For 75 years, they've been built to rub elbows with Israeli dignitaries, pose with Israeli fighter pilots, visit Israel's tech scene and do whatever Netanyahu tells them. They have never been asked to choose BETWEEN Israel's prime minister and its fighter pilots.

Now they have no choice.

Next week, Netanyahu is shoving his politics right in the face of American Jews by sending his extremist finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, to Washington to speak at an Israel Bonds conference. Smotrich is the coalition partner who publicly declared that the entire West Bank Palestinian town of Huwara — where a Palestinian gunman killed two Israeli settlers and then was ransacked by settlers — "needs to be wiped out" in revenge and that "the State of Israel should do it." (He later said it was "a slip of the tongue in a storm of emotions.")

Israel Bonds, an organization that markets the government-backed bonds for the Ministry of Finance, had to issue a statement saying the event would go ahead as planned, explaining that its job is simply to sell the bonds for the "development of Israel's economy without regard to politics."

But that's the point: There is no more "without regard to politics" when it comes to Israel's current government. So, for the first time, you will see an Israel Bonds event attended by American Jews and picketed by Israeli Jews living in America.

Recently, three of the most important centrist voices from Israel who write for American Jewish audiences — Rabbi Daniel Gordis, Yossi Klein Halevi and Matti Friedman — published an open letter in The Times of Israel basically telling Americans that they have to stand up if they want to preserve the U.S.-Israel relationship.

"To Israel's friends in North America, we are taking the unusual step of directly addressing you at a moment of acute crisis in Israel," they wrote. Protecting Israel today "means defending it from a political leadership that is undermining our society's cohesion and its democratic ethos, the foundations of the Israeli success story. ... A prime minister currently on trial for corruption, and who has appointed ministers with criminal records, is claiming legitimacy to overturn the legal system."

How to respond? I am hearing some radical new ideas. Gidi Grinstein, the founder of the Israeli think tank Reut and author of "Flexigidity: The Secret of Jewish Adaptability," published an essay a few weeks ago in The Times of Israel calling for American Jewry to reimagine itself as "a robust, resilient and prosperous diaspora" that invests in its own vitality and institutions and contributes to American society — no longer accepting the "domineering Zionist discourse that holds American Jewry to be second-class Judaism."

The sound you hear is the start of a huge paradigm shift.

At Sabbath services on every Saturday across America, the standard Jewish prayer book includes a prayer for the United States and another for Israel. My own middle-of-the-road Conservative synagogue in Maryland recently substituted its own "Alternative Prayer for the State of Israel," written by a congregant, Alan Elsner. It is built around key lines from Israel's Declaration of Independence — vowing that Israel must always be built on "freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel" — and says, "Let us pray that these words will continue to guide Israel's leaders."

Yes, let us pray. But prayer alone will not be enough.

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