

JEWISH

CONSERVATISM

A MANIFESTO

BY ERIC COHEN AND AYLANA MEISEL



ONE

The Present Condition

THE QUESTION Norman Podhoretz asked in his 2009 book—*Why Are Jews Liberals?*—seems only more consequential after President Obama’s two terms in office. The Obama years were unsettling for Jewish conservatives on many fronts. The Iran nuclear deal, the broader American retreat from the Middle East, and the delegitimation of Israel at the UN left the Jewish state in a weaker geopolitical position. Many religious Jews worried that an activist judiciary and administrative state might eventually force traditional Jewish schools and synagogues to accommodate progressive practices like same-sex marriage or else lose their tax-exempt status. The continued expansion of the progressive welfare state and the intolerant culture of political correctness seemed like a direct assault on core conservative beliefs.

Viewed historically, the Jewish devotion to liberal politics has deep and understandable roots. Jewish immigrants to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

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saw liberals as the best defenders of Jewish rights. Liberals cared for the poor, including the Jewish poor. Liberals fought against social prejudices and privileges, including unjust barriers to Jewish advancement. And liberalism's secular understanding of American democracy offered Jews (and many other religious and ethnic subgroups) a pathway to American normalcy.

In economic and social life, Jews soon succeeded in myriad spheres: business and media, politics and culture, law and academia. As the 20th century progressed, they ceased being outsiders and became a part of the American establishment. And along the way, Jews began to assimilate—with intermarriage rates moving steadily up from 17 percent of all Jews married before 1970 to 58 percent of all Jews married since 2005. As the majority of Jews integrated further into American society, the religious, cultural, and social distinctiveness that once defined their Jewish identity often weakened or disappeared. It turned out that the real threat to the American Jewish future, as Irving Kristol quipped decades ago, “is not that Christians want to persecute them but that Christians want to marry them.” And this problem—the crisis of Jewish continuity—has only gotten worse.

As Jews ascended and assimilated within American life, American liberalism morphed into the new progressivism: less hospitable to traditional religion, more committed to sexual and cultural liberation, less confident in America's leadership role in the world, and more tolerant of those who would see the homeland of the once-powerless, once-stateless Jewish people as a colonial oppressor. Even as many Jews were becoming increasingly *post-Jewish*—treating their heritage as a weak form of multicultural affiliation, not a life-shaping web of attachments, traditions, and values—their commitment to American liberalism persisted. While the partisan balance of the Jewish vote remained fairly steady from Woodrow Wilson to Barack Obama, with a supermajority of Jews supporting the more liberal candidate, the *meaning* of the Jewish vote gradually changed. Many Jews once voted for liberals out of a deep conviction that liberalism served real Jewish interests, both at home and abroad. Today's Jewish liberals are typically progressives first, and Jews very much second.

In a 2015 speech celebrating Jewish Heritage Month, President Obama praised American Jews for their leadership in the great liberal struggles of the modern era. From “women's rights to gay rights to workers' rights,” Obama declared, “Jews took to heart the biblical edict that we must not oppress a stranger, having been strangers once ourselves.” He then proceeded to explain that supporting the Iran nuclear deal

and making territorial concessions to the Palestinians served true Israeli interests, and he strongly implied that opposition to this agenda would only undermine the Jewish people's proud claim to be at the vanguard of progressive values. And the Jews in the audience at the Adas Israel Synagogue applauded.

But many Jews did not cheer.

A distinct part of the Jewish community in the United States opposes the progressive agenda, in whole or in part, both culturally and politically. Roughly 22 percent of American Jews voted against Obama in 2008; 30 percent voted against Obama in 2012; 24 percent voted for Donald Trump in 2016. This more conservative bloc now makes up a significant minority, and its numbers are likely to grow in the years ahead, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of self-identified American Jews.

TWO

Who Are We?

The most identifiable and most rapidly expanding group of Jewish conservatives are Haredi, Hasidic, and right-leaning Modern Orthodox. These traditionalists believe that the progressive worldview is a threat to “Torah values.” At present, roughly 10 percent of all American Jewish adults are Orthodox, while an estimated 27 percent of all Jewish children are being raised in Orthodox homes. According to the 2013 Pew report, the Orthodox community (especially the Haredi) has virtually no intermarriage, as compared with a 72 percent intermarriage rate among non-Orthodox Jews since 2000. They have a high birth rate: 4.1 children per couple vs. 1.7 for non-Orthodox Jews. And they have a high retention rate of preserving serious Jewish commitment in their children. In short: Orthodox Jewry is growing, while non-Orthodox Jewry is shrinking.

Pew's research also found that Orthodox Jews lean 57 percent Republican and 54 percent conservative, compared with 18 percent and 16 percent among non-Orthodox Jews. In certain major Orthodox centers—from Brooklyn's Borough Park to Wickliffe, Ohio, from Lakewood, New Jersey, to Monsey, New York—the Jewish vote is even more heavily skewed toward Republicans in national elections. According to Pew, Orthodox Jews resemble white Evangelical Christians on several key cultural and political indicators. All in all, the most committed and fastest growing sector of American Jewry is now among the most conservative voting blocs in the country.

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These religious Jewish conservatives are joined by other conservative-leaning Jewish subgroups. Jewish émigrés from the former Soviet Union and their American-born children—a population now numbering roughly 750,000 people—tend to be anti-statist, free-market, and staunchly Zionist. Seventy-seven percent of Russian Jews in New York voted for George W. Bush in 2004, and 65 percent voted for John McCain in 2008. Per Samuel Kliger, Director of Russian Affairs at the American Jewish Committee, a pilot study suggested that the Russian Jewish community voted about 70 percent for Donald Trump in 2016, a notable counter-trend to the general American Jewish community.

Many American Zionists—religious and secular alike—now believe that American progressivism in general and the Democratic Party in particular are bad for Israel, and that American military and political leadership is essential for preserving stability in the Middle East. Pro-free-market Jews, who celebrate the idea of American meritocracy, reject how progressivism stigmatizes economic success, and they oppose the high levels of taxation that are necessary to sustain the progressive welfare state.

In short, while the vast majority of self-identified Jews today are still politically liberal, the “Judaism vote” (i.e., those most committed to Jewish practice and Jewish continuity) and the “Zionism vote” (i.e., those most committed to Israeli national sovereignty) are increasingly conservative. And while many secular Jewish conservatives may not affiliate strongly with their own Jewish heritage, their conservative persuasion, if cultivated, could lead some of them to deepen their bond with more traditionalist Jews who share many of their political ideas and values. For while a progressive worldview leads many (if not all) Jews beyond Judaism, conservative ideas may offer a natural pathway back toward Jewish commitment. Like Judaism itself, conservatism still honors the importance of fidelity to tradition, communal obligation, and the role of religion in sustaining a moral society.

Taken together, Torah conservatives, Zionist conservatives, and free-market Jewish conservatives could create a formidable new coalition of American Jews who stand athwart progressivism yelling stop in a unified Jewish voice and for distinctly Jewish reasons.

In building this coalition, Jews might learn something from the evolution of American conservatism itself. Like many other great political movements in history, postwar conservatism began by clarifying what it opposed: statism at home, Communism abroad, and the radical culture of the 1960s that was beginning its long march through America’s institutions. Yet out of this opposition movement, American conservatism developed, over time, a positive governing agenda, and it expanded the moral and political imaginations of those involved. Many religious conservatives came to recognize the importance of economic liberty; many libertarian conservatives came to see the value of traditional communities; and many conservatives who appreciated small-town American life came to understand the necessity of American power in trying to preserve a civilized world order.

In a similar spirit, one could imagine a new Jewish conservative movement that unites various existing Jewish sub-groups around a positive agenda: pro-religious liberty, supportive of the traditional family, in favor of school choice, allied with Israel in a dangerous world, and tough-minded in the global fight against anti-Semitism. Such a movement would seek to advance ideas and policies aimed at strengthening Jewish continuity in the United States. And it would aim to contribute the best Jewish thinking, with the full weight of the Hebraic tradition behind it, to the revitalization of American conservatism itself. So far, very little work has been done to articulate this broader Jewish conservative agenda, to bring these disparate Jewish factions together, and to create a new set of institutions that speak for Jewish conservatives in a serious way. This is the challenge—and opportunity—that Jews face in the current era.

THREE

The Jewish Defense of Religious Freedom

The American Jewish agenda rightly begins with the defense of religious freedom, an idea that unites lovers of liberty and traditional communities of faith into a common political cause. And if there is a place where the sacred texts of the American founding and the political history of the Jewish people most vividly come together, it is in George Washington's famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

In America, Jews were free to create and sustain religious communities of their own distinct sort—"to sit in safety under [their] own vine and fig tree," as Washington put it—while still possessing the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of American citizenship in full. To be sure, the Jewish experience in America was filled with frustrations, hardships, and long periods of social discrimination. American Christians have not, in their hearts or in their private institutions, always welcomed their Jewish neighbors. And yet from the beginning, the American polity has almost always preserved an inviolable sphere of Jewish liberty. (General Ulysses S. Grant's infamous Order

11, expelling Jews from certain areas of the embattled American South, is a remarkable and very brief exception, almost immediately overturned by Abraham Lincoln.) The powers of government were not used to prohibit the practice of Jewish life; and Jews were not asked to sacrifice their beliefs or identity to participate in the civic life of the nation.

While Jews are still the religious minority most victimized by hate crimes, they are, astonishingly, also the most beloved religious group in America, outranking Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Buddhists, and Muslims, according to a 2017 Pew survey. Many Americans admire Jewish success and creativity; and the overwhelming majority of religious Christians see modern Jews as a sacred remnant of God's chosen people, worthy of respect (and even reverence) for who we are as Jews. Yet many Jews remain concerned that America is still one misstep away from becoming a "Christian nation." The ideological syndrome Milton Himmelfarb described in 1966, when he observed that "Jews are probably more devoted than anyone else in America to the separation of church and state," persists in the liberal Jewish mind as if Christian power were the greatest threat to Jewish flourishing. This wasn't true half a century ago, as Himmelfarb explained, and it is even less true today.

In reality, traditional Jews, Christians, and other faith communities now face a shared cultural and political threat: a transformed understanding of "the separation of church and state," which seeks to impose the acceptance of progressive mores (such as same-sex marriage, gender fluidity, and sexual liberation) by force of law. Until recently, a broad majority of Americans maintained a basic respect for religious liberty. Progressives sought the freedom to live in accordance with their own values (they demanded "choice") and they sought recognition and support for those values from the state (they demanded "equality"). In many arenas—such as abortion and more recently same-sex marriage—the progressives won the legal battle. But they were also willing, at least in their understanding



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of America's political and civic order, to respect the private freedom of religious communities to live in accordance with their own traditional values. Back in 1993, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which sought to prevent the courts from allowing undue restrictions on the free exercise of religion, passed Congress by a near-unanimous vote. Today, most progressives see the RFRA and its state analogs as archaic, and they see the religious freedom that these laws were enacted to protect as "code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, [and] Christian supremacy," as Martin R. Castro, the chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, wrote in 2016.

For many progressive activists, it is no longer enough to normalize progressive values within the culture, and it is no longer enough to legalize progressive social practices. The ultimate aim, as Jonathan Last explained in a 2015 *Weekly Standard* essay, is *assimilation*: to demand that every American institution adopt the new morality as its own, and to treat any opposition to post-traditional norms and lifestyles as a form of religious backwardness so dangerous to the public good that it requires activist legal intervention to eradicate it.

The issue here is not only or ultimately about same-sex marriage, transgender rights, or other current controversies. It is about defending the freedom of religious communities to live religious lives, and the need to oppose the idea that the progressive state should have the power to decide which communities have a place (or no place) in American society. Same-sex marriage has been one of the legal clubs used to advance this larger agenda, and the progressive strategy is both sophisticated and incrementalist: First, use the courts to establish that same-sex marriage is a national right (this has already been achieved). Then require private companies to participate in the commerce of these ceremonies—this is being done now, through lawsuits such as those trying to force Christian bakers to write congratulatory notes on cakes for gay weddings. Then require churches and synagogues to permit same-sex marriage or else lose their tax-exempt status—this is already being promoted by myriad progressive activists and was explicitly mentioned as a possibility in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the case in which the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage. When asked during oral arguments whether such a ruling could allow the administration to strip tax-exempt status from religious institutions, Solicitor General Donald Verrilli confessed that "it's certainly going to be an issue."

From here, one can imagine the next possible steps. Require ministers and rabbis to perform same-

sex marriages or else lose their license to perform weddings at all; then treat the teaching of traditional morality itself as an offense to public conscience, and use this principle as the basis to prohibit religious groups from gaining official recognition at public universities and to restrict the accreditation of religious schools that teach "unenlightened" values. Along the way, the idea is to empower the state—and especially the courts—to act as the ultimate judge of religious practice and principle, and to decide whether it should be indulged, marginalized, or outlawed entirely. This includes Jewish practices, such as circumcision and the ritual slaughter of animals, that have already been targeted in certain American cities and outlawed in parts of Europe.

Recent legal cases affecting specifically Jewish concerns should only heighten Jewish awareness of the perils. New York City has sued ultra-Orthodox Jewish business owners for requiring dress codes to enter their stores, and has also attempted to shut down women-only separate swimming hours in community facilities, a reasonable accommodation made to Orthodox sensibilities in a heavily Hasidic neighborhood of Brooklyn. In *Abeles v. Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority* (2017), the Fourth Circuit upheld the suspension of a government employee after she took time off on Passover, ruling on such weak grounds that the plaintiff's counsel has cautioned that such a precedent could mean that "no employee with a bona fide religious duty is safe from arbitrary after-the-fact punishment for religious observance." And in *Ben Levi v. Brown* (2016), the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear a claim of discrimination by a Jewish inmate who had been denied religious study time in prison, allegedly because the warden believed his request contradicted the demands of Jewish tradition. As Justice Samuel Alito explained in his dissent, this refusal inappropriately ceded to the state the power to evaluate the legitimacy of a particular Jewish religious practice:

Even assuming that [the warden] accurately identified the requirements for a group Torah study under Jewish doctrine—and that is not at all clear—federal courts have no warrant to evaluate "the validity of [Ben-Levi's] interpretations."... The State has no apparent reason for discriminating against Jewish inmates in this way. ... [T]he Court's indifference to this discriminatory infringement of religious liberty is disappointing.

Of course, Jews are not the main target in the new progressive campaign to redefine religious freedom.

Evangelicals and Catholics are the big game, and we have already seen the lengths to which progressive activists are willing to go to impose their will on Christian florists, Catholic nuns, and Evangelical student groups. But traditional Jews are in the same cultural and political situation as traditional Christians—and perhaps even more vulnerable because of our diminutive size and our communal failure to recognize the threat. And Jews can uniquely contribute to the public debate on religious freedom by speaking with the moral authority of a small but proud people who once suffered under the oppressive weight of Old-World establishments that treated Jewish life as “unenlightened” and “backward,” and who thus have a special appreciation for the blessings of true religious freedom.

It is a mistake to believe that the Republican victory in 2016 will automatically reverse these efforts to refine and shrink the scope of religious liberty in America. Activist judges are still in power in many lower courts across the country, and troubling precedents in recent religious-liberty cases may yet prevail at the state and local levels. A secularist ideology still dominates in our crucial cultural institutions, including schools and universities, museums and the media, entertainment, and now in many large public corporations. And even many Republicans are not eager to confront a progressive elite that threatens all cultural opposition with the charge of backwardness and bigotry. America thus stands at a critical moment in the religious-freedom debate—a timeout, and yet still a tipping point. And Jews should play their part in “proclaiming liberty throughout all the land” (to borrow a phrase from Leviticus, inscribed as a precious reminder on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia).

Concretely, Jewish conservatives should encourage the judiciary to restore the American tradition of religious freedom and roll back the progressive overreach of the Obama years. They should help pass laws, at the federal and state level, that protect the freedom of religious institutions—schools, synagogues, and seminaries—to determine their own educational, ritual, and communal lives without the threat of litigation and without fear of losing their tax-exempt status. They should create a multi-denominational Jewish version of organizations like the Alliance Defending Freedom and the Becket Fund, leading defenders of those whose religious rights have been challenged, standing ready to defend any potential breach of Jewish liberty. And they should develop a training program to educate communal leaders so that if and when judicial and political progressivism goes back on the march, they are prepared to protect their Jewish interests and values as effectively as possible.

Orthodox Jews surely have the greatest stake in this debate, and their crucial allies will be religious Christians and other traditional faith communities. But regardless of their political or cultural orientation, all Jews have good reasons to support this religious-freedom agenda. No Jewish friend of liberty—secular or religious—should tolerate the establishment of a progressive state that restricts the free self-determination of religious communities. And no Jewish friends of Jewish unity should stand idly by as their fellow Jews are treated as illegitimate, and as the Jewish schools and synagogues down the block are potentially threatened by a punitive progressive state simply for believing what Jews have believed for millennia.

FOUR

The Jewish Defense of the Family

Important as it is, the preservation of religious freedom is simply the political precondition for creating and sustaining strong Jewish communities. As Yuval Levin argued last year in *First Things*, it is in “the institutions and relationships in which we learn to make virtuous choices—in the family, the school, the synagogue and church, the civic enterprise, the charitable venture, the association of workers or merchants or neighbors or friends—that the fate of our experiment in moral freedom will be decided.” The defensive task of protecting our religious institutions from new legal infringements cannot replace the deeper work of building and sustaining a vibrant Jewish culture. And this cultural undertaking necessarily begins, for Jews and for everyone, in the family.

The original Jewish story is a tale of a founding family, summoned to establish a righteous way of life as a corrective to the pre-Abrahamic world of disorder, decadence, despair, and destruction. In the Hebraic worldview, the gift of a child is the Creator’s greatest gift; honor thy father and mother is one of the Bible’s central commandments; educating one’s own children is a sacred parental duty. Abraham and his descendants believe they have an important mission to fulfill, and that mission is carried out by transmitting a covenantal way of life to their children.

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from Nachmanides to Leon Kass have explained, the stories of Genesis show us the fragility of family life by illustrating how it goes wrong. The Jewish tradition that codifies the moral guidelines for forming and sustaining families—including the elevation of monogamous marriage and the preservation of certain sexual taboos—is designed to moderate the passions of bodily existence and to awaken us to the difficult responsibilities and transcendent joys of fulfilling our roles within the drama of the generations as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons.

In the current cultural environment, this traditional understanding of the family has been severely weakened. Out-of-wedlock births in America have skyrocketed to over 40 percent; only 46 percent of American children grow up in a traditional family; and 34 percent of children today are living with an unmarried parent. In 2010, Pew research found that only 30 percent of Millennials included a successful marriage as one of their most important life goals, while 39 percent of Americans overall believed marriage was obsolete. A 2011 Pew study found that only 57 percent of Generation Xers and 53 percent of Millennials believed that children needed a mother and a father to grow up happily—an opinion that cuts against all serious sociological research, which demonstrates that children reared in intact two-parent families are happier, more successful, and more civically responsible. The rising generation has grown up in a culture that promotes sexual freedom and devalues the unique significance of marriage, and, as Charles Murray and others have discussed, the dark consequences of family breakdown have hit America's lower classes the hardest. Most American Jews, alas, seem to have accepted or embraced the new morality. A 2016 Gallup poll reveals that 25 percent of Mormons, 47 percent of Evangelical Protestants, and 59 percent of Catholics believe that having a child out of wedlock is “morally acceptable,” while a remarkable 68 percent of American Jews be-

lieve this to be the case. In other words: The majority of American Jews have rejected the Jewish idea of the family, at least in their moral-cultural outlook if not necessarily in their own private family lives.

This devaluation of the traditional family has also contributed to a decline in birthrates throughout the modern West. The only advanced democracy in the world with a birthrate far above replacement is Israel. The Jewish state still believes in the family because Israel still believes it has a purpose: to serve as the national homeland of the Jewish people and the spiritual center of Jewish civilization. The rest of the West—with America as a partial exception—is ensuring its own decline by choosing, person by person, lifestyle by lifestyle, not to have children. In so doing, entire nations and civilizations are gradually declaring that they have no enduring legacy to preserve or distinct heritage to transmit. And tragically, non-Orthodox American Jews have among the lowest birthrates of any sub-sector within American society, well below the levels necessary to maintain their communities into the future.

This two-headed crisis—family breakdown leading to social dysfunction, and demographic decline leading to civilizational suicide—has the same cultural root: the elevation of the “sovereign self,” as Simone de Beauvoir put it, who pursues a life without duties, sacrifices, or the cultural pressure to accept the supreme adult responsibility of rearing the young. Yet very few of our political and religious leaders, including most mainstream American conservatives, seem willing to speak about or confront this crisis. The hesitancy of our leaders is understandable. Ministers and politicians alike fear offending those who have been unable to form families of their own, those who have chosen against family life in the name of personal freedom or professional ambition, those whose families are scarred by divorce, those of differing sexual orientations. Others believe that the moral transformation of

mainstream culture is now so deep that nothing can really be done to restore traditional family life within society at large. And so the majority of America's leaders remain largely silent about America's greatest problem. Even those who recognize the crisis are often too reticent, too intimidated, or too defeatist to confront it.

Yet this capitulation to the decline of the family is a grave mistake—for Americans and for Jews alike. The strength of American society rests on the integrity of its families. And the only way to preserve and strengthen Jewish life is to restore the idea of the Jewish family—large, thriving, immersed in Jewish traditions—as a cultural norm that reaches beyond the Orthodox community alone. The first step is regaining the moral self-confidence to defend traditional family life against those cultural forces that reject it: to celebrate monogamous marriage as a moral ideal, to celebrate large families as the heroic nurseries of our national and religious heritage, to celebrate mothers and fathers who sacrifice their own freedom to raise up their own replacements, and to dispute the notion that being “inclusive” requires accepting every lifestyle as equally praiseworthy.

In the effort to reinvigorate a family-centered conservatism, Jewish thinking and Jewish activism have much to contribute. At a deeper cultural level, Jews can explain how the life-cycle family rituals—*brit* (circumcision), bar mitzvah, chuppah (wedding), and Kaddish (mourning)—embody a deeper teaching about intergenerational responsibility that is relevant to every American in search of meaning and purpose in life. At a communal level, Jews can provide a model for support of family life. They can show how married couples in crisis are actively helped by congregants and rabbis; how large families are supported with tuition breaks at religious schools; how aging parents are cared for at or close to home rather than hidden out of sight and out of mind. And at a policy level, Jews should advocate for pro-family social policies, including targeted tax cuts that ease the burden on parents;

child-care policies that respect rather than penalize parents who reduce their work hours to care for their children; and opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide, which devalues the elderly and the sick in the false name of compassion. In becoming public voices for strengthening the American family, Jews may find a moral purpose that would only strengthen their commitment to Judaism itself. And by standing together with the nation's strongest communities of faith—Catholics, Evangelicals, Mormons, and others—they can help renew and reform America's cultural fabric.

At the same time, Jews need to address head-on the greatest threats to the modern *Jewish* family: the normalization of intermarriage and the high costs of Jewish education. There is obviously no easy answer to the communal challenge of intermarriage, which concerned Jewish leaders have lamented for decades. Among the Orthodox, intermarriage is still prohibited and roundly criticized, since in their view only united Jewish families can sustain, model, and transmit a Jewish way of life to their children. And this taboo, while sometimes painful in particular cases, has largely preserved a culture of Jewish in-marriage. Among more liberal denominations, the increasing rates of intermarriage have opened up a more welcoming approach toward intermarried couples. Some progressive Jews are now embarrassed by the very idea of opposing intermarriage at all, seeing it as a form of discrimination no different from opposing interracial marriage; others aim to keep intermarried families within the Jewish fold by embracing them; and still others seek a middle ground, by promoting conversion of the non-Jewish spouse before or after marriage, and speaking honestly to young Jews in love about the tensions that often arise within intermarried families.

Yet for Jews who have little knowledge of their majestic Jewish heritage, intermarriage is not a revolt or a heresy; it is simply a natural extension of their normal American upbringing. Various educational and outreach efforts—such as Birthright programs, Chabad on Campus, and Jewish camping—have unquestion-



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ably had some positive effects on Jewish identity and commitment. But it is too much to expect that such initiatives will reverse the cultural assumptions about love and marriage that young, non-observant Jews have internalized from birth to college. Ultimately, the only enduring answer to the crisis of Jewish continuity is acculturation to Jewish life at an early age. And part of the genius of traditional Jewish culture is getting young adults to behave with more wisdom in forming families than their limited age and experience could ever allow them to have acquired on their own. The crucial question, therefore, is whether a growing percentage of non-observant Jews might become inspired to give their young children a serious Jewish education, and whether any substantial portion of American Jews can afford to do so. Fortunately, for the economic dimension of the problem, there may be a political answer.

FIVE

A Jewish Education Agenda

In his classic story “Eli the Fanatic,” Philip Roth recounts the clash of two cultures: that of an Old-World yeshiva with 18 orphans from the Holocaust, and that of the highly assimilated suburban Jews and non-Jews who conspire to shut down the yeshiva, because it threatens their sense of enlightened, refined, and successful modern life.

“Someday, Eli, it’s going to be a hundred little kids with little *yamakhs* chanting their Hebrew lessons on Coach House Road, and then it’s not going to strike you as funny?”

“Eli, what goes on up there—my kids hear strange sounds.”

“Eli, this is a modern community.”

“Eli, we pay taxes.”

Well, in communities across America, we now have hundreds of thousands of little kids chanting Hebrew lessons in Jewish day schools of myriad shapes and sizes. And according to every serious study, the most reliable guarantor of Jewish perpetuation in America is providing young Jews with such an intensive Jewish education. Yet at present, close to 90 percent of Jewish day-school kids come from Orthodox families. While those affiliated with the Conservative and Reform movements still constitute the majority

of American Jewry, about 18 percent and 35 percent respectively, non-Orthodox schools account for only 13 percent of all day-school enrollment, and that number continues to drop. The Solomon Schechter schools connected to the Conservative movement are closing at an unfortunately rapid rate, and Reform students make up a mere 1.5 percent of all those enrolled in day schools. All in all, of the more than 1 million non-Orthodox school-age children, it is estimated that merely around 3 percent are enrolled in full-time Jewish schools. So how did we get here, and what can we do?

Like nearly every other immigrant group, most Jews came to America in search of economic opportunity, and the key to Jewish self-improvement was education. In the early decades of the republic, schooling was more communal, less centralized, less formal, and more sectarian. As the historian Jonathan Sarna explains:

In the colonial and early national periods of American Jewish history, most Jews—their numbers never exceeded a few thousand—studied in either common pay (private) schools that assumed the religious identity of their headmaster; or in charity (free) schools supported by religious bodies with financial support from the State. In 1803, New York’s only Jewish congregation, Shearith Israel, established a charity school under its own auspices named Polonies Talmud Torah. The school enjoyed equal footing with Protestant and Catholic schools in the city and received state aid—a reminder that American Jews understood the relationship of religion and state differently in those days than we do today.

During the 1800s, the American model—and the Jewish-American model—changed dramatically. As immigrants from around the world poured into the country—especially Catholics, but also Jews—the more established (and predominantly Protestant) elements of American society worried about the threat of rival subcultures to American civil society. A growing public-school movement sought to “Americanize” these new ethnic communities, and thus to assimilate the children of immigrants into the language, mores, and opportunities of America. In reality, many of these public schools initially sought to advance a Protestant agenda, with Catholics as their main target. Many Catholic communities resisted, creating a network of private religious schools supported by communal charity and run by the diocese system. Most Jews embraced the public-school model, seeing it as a gateway to the upper ranks of American society in the

merit-based professions long prohibited to them in the Old World. Various efforts were made, at the Jewish communal level, to supplement public schooling with Hebrew school in the evenings and on the weekends. But in aggregate, and especially over the past many decades, this supplementary model proved to be a weak instrument of Jewish continuity.

Over time, many Jews came to see support for public schools as itself a Jewish cause. With gratitude, Jews appreciated the opportunity that public schooling had provided their working-class ancestors, and, like hawks, they stood guard to ensure that every hint of religion—such as prayer in schools—was removed from the once-Protestant and now thoroughly secular culture of public schools. At the same time, the small but more traditional sector of the Jewish community came to fear that American Jews were quickly losing their Jewish identity; that they lacked any real knowledge of Jewish history, ritual, and culture; and that they felt no obligation to marry fellow Jews and hand down a Jewish way of life to their future children. This sense of crisis deepened after the Holocaust, and the drive to do something different—to create a new model of Jewish schooling—received an infusion of energy from Old-World survivors who came to America to rebuild traditional Jewish life. And so, while day schools had previously existed as minor institutions in the Jewish community, the modern Jewish day-school movement gained steam in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today's Jewish day schools come in a variety of forms, ranging from Haredi yeshivas that spend most of their educational time on Talmudic learning, to modern Orthodox day schools that combine traditional Jewish literacy with modern secular education, to pluralistic and nondenominational Jewish academies that add Jewish culture and modern Hebrew to a curriculum and social environment that otherwise try to replicate America's suburban public schools.

The day-school movement is remarkable, fragile, and disappointing all at once. Through entirely private communal initiative, dozens of day schools are now thriving across the country, and the Jewish families enrolled in such schools often organize their whole lives to send their kids there. Yet the high cost of paying for Jewish schooling is now straining many committed Jewish families. (Dark Jewish humor treats day-school costs as the most effective form of birth control for observant Jews.) The average annual cost of a day-school education, K–12, is about \$15,000 per child; in certain areas (especially New York and Los Angeles) high-school tuitions can approach \$40,000 annually. And as Aryeh Klapper argued in a provocative essay in *Jewish Ideas Daily* a few years

ago, the two-parent/all-hours work life that is often required to finance such an education means that mothers and fathers often have less energy and less time to engage (Jewishly or otherwise) with their own children. Within the schools themselves, the challenge of trying to balance Jewish studies and secular studies, all at an affordable cost, often results in accepting middling academic standards in both.

At the same time, the high cost of Jewish day schools is an impediment to attracting less observant Jews. While the overall day-school population has grown over the past few decades, due largely to the natural growth of the Orthodox community, the percentage of non-Orthodox students in day schools has fallen, as noted above, even as graduates of outreach programs like Birthright have now entered their child-rearing years. In facing these high tuition costs, many committed Jews still find a way to make it work. Yet the broader Jewish community—including that subset of American Jews that might be open to Jewish schooling, if it were available, affordable, and comparable in quality to a normal American suburban school—never really considers it.

Various communal organizations have tried to address the affordability problem. They have founded low-cost “blended schools” that use more technology and hire fewer teachers, they have capped tuition at a fixed percentage of family income, and they have sought larger contributions from private philanthropy. These efforts are all noble. But ultimately, the costs are just too high to change the basic equation. Most Jewish parents will simply not pay twice—first in obligatory real-estate taxes that support the public-school system and then in optional private tuitions to send their children to Jewish schools. So they send their children to public schools. And as the strain on existing day-school families continues to grow, the downward pressure on birthrates and on educational quality will only intensify.

The best strategic answer to the “tuition crisis” is to reestablish the principle that public dollars should be available to parents who wish to send their children to religious schools. Even suggesting this idea gives many progressive Jews a nervous breakdown. One writer in the *Forward* recently suggested that school-choice programs are part of a larger agenda

to re-Christianize America and to replace the melting pot or gorgeous mosaic of our current secular society with an imagined America of a hundred years ago: white-dominated, Christian-dominated, traditional in values and orientation.... Of course, some foolish Ortho-

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dox Jewish organizations have signed on to “school choice” initiatives, since they promise a short-term financial windfall for Orthodox Jewish schools—as if a few dollars thrown to them will not be drowned out by a thousand times as many poured into Christian schools. These fools are modern-day Esaus, exchanging the birthright of American democracy for a bowl of voucher porridge.

The Orthodox Union and Agudath Israel—our “modern-day Esaus”—have indeed become strong advocates for seeking public dollars to help defray the costs of religious schooling. So far, these lobbying efforts have focused primarily on seeking the funds that Jewish schools are *already* entitled to by law, which means relatively small amounts of public money for ancillary services like security, technology, and busing, and somewhat larger amounts of money for special-education services. Such advocacy should continue, and it has helped existing day schools in a real way. But these small victories should not distract Jews from waging a broader political campaign for educational choice. As a matter of social justice, religious taxpayers are entitled to some portion of the public purse to support the education of children in their own religious communities. And at a deeper cultural level, American civil society would become only further impoverished if its communal web of religious schools weakened, withered, and closed down.

In his satiric caricature, Philip Roth presents two diametrically opposed cultural alternatives: an Old-World Judaism, alien to American society, and an assimilated Jewry that sheds its Jewish heritage in the name of American convention. But in truth, as conservatives understand, the flourishing of the American project depends on the “little platoons”—families, traditional communities, and religious schools—that are best equipped to educate young men and women in the moral virtues necessary for citizenship. They are, as Edmund Burke put it, the “first link in the series by which

we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind.” In the 1800s, one could understand the powerful case for the public-school movement as the best way to create a shared American culture. Yet today, American civil society needs religious schools as a cultural counterweight and living alternative to secular America. The Jewish case for educational liberty should be advanced in these large civilizational terms: not merely as a matter of economic necessity or economic justice, but as a battle for the future of American democracy itself. And it should be combined with a reinvigoration of the case for American federalism—the idea that different states and localities should have maximal freedom to craft their own distinctive social contracts, including a variety of funding models for public, private, and religious schools. This would allow true American diversity to flourish.

For many years now, the school-choice battle has been waged primarily as a means of liberating underprivileged minorities from failing public schools, and of introducing much-needed competition into a public-school system that often functions as a failed and self-protective monopoly. These are powerful arguments, and this effort has so far achieved some real but limited successes in certain cities and states across the country. But the school-choice movement should no longer remain simply a rescue mission for impoverished and neglected children. It should be advanced, too, as a rescue mission for America’s essential communities of faith. In practical terms, this will involve policy changes at both the state and federal levels—including education tax credits, which allow families to allocate a portion of their taxes toward private- or religious-school scholarships; state funding for secular studies at religious schools; public charter schools (including Hebrew-language schools) that could work in sync with private religious education; and school vouchers for families living in areas where the public-school system is failing. The ultimate aim should be to get the same per child allocation for religious schools as for public schools, creating a truly competitive and diverse market for educating the young.

Jews have much to *gain* if this educational revolution advances in a serious way. But Jews also have much to *give* in explaining why this revolution matters, for we know firsthand how different our communal fate looks when our children receive a serious religious education versus when they do not. American Christians now face the same challenge—the problem of cultural continuity—that Jewish communities have struggled with for decades. And in this case, what is “good for the Jews” is also good for American society as a whole. The future of American civilization depends on whether our society can marry together the renewal of traditional communities and the reinvigoration of American patriotism. Religious schools play an essential role in performing this civilizational work, and only the public purse can ensure that these citizen-forming institutions have a long-term future.

SIX

Israel and America

Throughout the modern era, enemies of the Jewish people have accused them of possessing a dual identity and often treated them as disloyal outsiders to the nations in which they lived. In response, some Jews cast away their Jewish heritage in pursuit of acceptance by the dominant culture. They sought to be “normal” and willingly shed or reformed their Jewish identity in an effort to become true patriots of other nations. Other Jews fiercely rejected the various national cultures that rejected them. They sustained, often under duress, a distinctly Jewish way of life. They believed, often in spite of their inferior material conditions, in the moral, theological, and civilizational exceptionalism of the Jews. And some clung to the dream of national restoration in their own ancestral homeland: Zion.

Modern Zionism, the late-19th-century movement advocating the political reestablishment of the

Jewish nation, gathered support only slowly in the American Jewish community. Most establishment Jewish leaders of the early 20th century saw Zionism as a challenge to their identity as Americans, and most Jews were focused on realizing for themselves the blessings of American liberty. They had no reason—and little desire—to flee to Palestine. The Zionist movement only gained greater sympathy among American Jews when Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis—arguably the most prominent American Jew of his generation and one of the leading figures of the progressive movement—agreed to lead it in 1914. Less than a decade earlier, Brandeis had declared that there was “no place” in our nation for “hyphenated Americans . . . [including] Jewish-Americans.” But over time, he changed his mind:

My approach to Zionism was through Americanism. In time, practical experience and observation convinced me that Jews were, by reason of their traditions and their character, peculiarly fitted for the attainment of American ideals. Gradually it became clear to me that to be good Americans, we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews, we must become Zionists.

American Jews do indeed possess two intertwining identities, and they should not shy away from or apologize for it. We are the carriers of two remarkable stories—the Jewish story and the American story. We are the inheritors of two great civilizations—one ancient and one modern. And we should take pride in the fact that many of the American Founders found moral and political inspiration in the Hebrew Bible—and especially the Exodus story of founding a new nation, delivered from tyranny and devoted to the ideals of liberty and justice.

Yet the Zionist project does present American Jews with a serious political challenge: What does it mean to be a Jewish-American patriot living outside of Israel? Do American Jews have any special respon-

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sibility for the Jewish state? What are the terms of the larger America–Israel relationship, and what are the legitimate aims of the American pro-Israel movement?

Over the years, the meaning of Israel in American political life—and the practical geopolitical relationship between the two nations—has seen a series of dramatic changes, upheavals, redefinitions, and reassessments. In the era between World War II and the 1967 war, the American debate over Israel was shaped by two basic paradigms: the “moral” and the “realist.” The “moralists” treated American support for Israel as an ethical obligation of the highest order. Jews had been destroyed and displaced in the Holocaust and deserved a homeland; the Israeli founders were scrappy rebels fighting for a noble cause, just like the American Founders; Jews were God’s chosen people; the Jewish return to Zion was divinely ordained. The Christian Zionist movement, with roots that go back to before the American founding, was essential in advancing this worldview.

The “realists,” by contrast, weighed America’s posture toward Israel like any other geopolitical relationship: Given the socialist leanings of many Israeli founders, would Israel sympathize with the Soviet Union in the Cold War? Given the ongoing conflict with its Arab neighbors, would American support for Israel undermine our access to Arab oil? Would the Arab–Israeli conflict create instability in the Middle East that would burden American power? From Truman to Eisenhower to Kennedy to Johnson, the relative weight of the pro-Israel moralists and the generally Arab-leaning realists oscillated. And the question of Israel was not yet a conventional left–right issue in American politics: The moral defenders of Israel came from both the secular left and the Christian right, and the realist skeptics about Israel came in both Democratic and Republican forms.

In the 1967 war, Israel demonstrated its strength to the world in the face of another looming assault by its annihilationist enemies and took possession of greater Israel for the first time—including the Old City of Jerusalem. After that, the America–Israel relationship took on two additional dimensions. On the one hand, America had clearly become Israel’s crucial and most committed superpower ally, defending the Jewish state on the international stage and supplying Israel with the weapons and resources it needed to defend itself. At the same time, a new ideological movement began to take shape—one that intensified after the Israel–Lebanon War in 1982—that denounced Israel in moralistic terms as an occupier, a fascist state, and a denier of Palestinian rights. This way of thinking found its ideological home largely on the American left and had its first prominent

sympathizer in President Jimmy Carter. It also began to gain traction among certain American Jews, who now believed that Israel itself was the main impediment to their dreams of peace in the Middle East, and that Israeli nationalism (embodied in the right-wing Prime Minister Menachem Begin) was an affront to their own more cosmopolitan values.

For decades, the aim of the mainstream pro-Israel movement in America has been to preserve the bipartisan consensus on American support for Israel. In this view, success is measured primarily by the continuation and expansion of virtually unanimous congressional support for military aid to the Jewish state and by the shared rhetorical support of Democrats and Republicans for the special U.S.–Israel relationship. There were obviously clear differences between Carter’s Israel policy and that of Reagan, George H.W. Bush’s Israel policy and that of Clinton, George W. Bush’s policy and that of Obama. But despite these policy differences, the focus on maintaining a bipartisan consensus has largely prevailed. Congressional support for Israel funding remained a joint effort; stump speeches and state addresses referred easily to the uniqueness of the U.S.–Israel relationship; leaders in both parties pledged their support for a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; and Israel enjoyed remarkably high popularity among the American public.

Beneath the bipartisan surface, however, a deeper rift was taking shape. The left-wing assault on Israel became both more vehement and more influential within the Democratic Party, while the political right became more unified in believing that America and Israel have the same values, the same interests, and the same enemies. While President Obama worked assiduously to put “daylight” between his White House and Israel, his administration benefitted greatly from the prevailing myth that there was still little actual difference between Republican friends of Israel and Democratic friends of Israel. Administration actions were often rationalized rather than publicly opposed by many Jewish leaders. These rationalizations persisted even after President Obama had engineered a deal that effectively legalized Iranian nuclear development and funneled billions of dollars in cash to a nation that sponsors terrorism around the world and pledges to wipe Israel off the map. And in the perfect anti-Israel send-off, the Obama administration took the unprecedented step of refusing to veto UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which declared Judea, Samaria, and East Jerusalem as illegally occupied and thus left Israel vulnerable to international sanctions and boycotts.

The struggle within the Democratic Party over Israel seems to have two basic camps. On one side, a

shrinking establishment still celebrates its friendship for Israel, still decries the most egregious anti-Israel actions such as UN Resolution 2334, and yet displays little willingness to fight for Israel's interests against enemies within its own party. On the other side, there are progressives, who are now openly hostile to Israeli sovereignty and sharply critical of Israeli behavior. At the grassroots level, the progressives seem to be winning. Shortly before passage of the 2016 UN Resolution, a Brookings poll found that 60 percent of Democrats supported penalizing Israeli construction in East Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria through economic sanctions "or more serious actions," while 55 percent of Democrats believed that Israeli influence on American foreign policy was too high, and that Israel was a "burden" to the United States.

As Democratic sympathy for Israel weakens, Republican support for Israel only strengthens. A February 2017 Gallup poll found that 81 percent of Republicans have a "totally favorable" view of Israel (compared with only 61 percent of Democrats), and 82 percent of Republicans sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinians, with only 6 percent claiming more affinity for the Palestinian cause. The Republican platform, already deeply supportive of Israel, became even stronger in 2016, with additional provisions that "reject the false notion that Israel is an occupier," oppose boycott efforts against all Israeli-controlled territories, and reject any imposition of terms by outside parties regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For Jewish conservatives, the current political moment is an opportunity to redefine the policy aims and guiding strategy of pro-Israel activism. They should continue to press hard against the Iran nuclear deal, advocating for American withdrawal if possible, swift action at any sign of Iranian intransigence, and strong American opposition to counter Iranian aggression and subversion across the Middle East. Jewish conservatives should call on America and Israel to revisit the "memorandum of understanding" that now defines American military aid to the Jewish state, seeking to expand Israeli autonomy in developing its own military capabilities, so long as it does not transfer American military technology to American enemies. They should make the case for anti-boycott measures that counteract the recent UN resolution, and they should push America to demand fundamental changes in the governance structure of the UN or else withdraw American funding and support.

They should applaud any measures to defund the corrupt Palestinian Authority, whose school curricula teach Jew-hatred and promote terrorism, and whose

government continues to reward and celebrate the murder of Israeli innocents. They should advocate for the official recognition of Jerusalem as the eternal capital of the Jewish state. They should push to strengthen a new regional alliance between America, Israel, and those Arab states that seek real political stability and economic cooperation, which might create a new and more favorable environment for negotiating a practical political arrangement with the Palestinians. And at the deepest level, they should explain why the America-Israel relationship is a mutually beneficial partnership of two sovereign nations, not a client-state relationship in which American generosity serves a needy Jewish state. Israel is an important strategic ally: a counterweight to Iran's hegemonic ambitions, a warrior against destabilizing terror, a leader in developing invaluable new technologies, and a nation that has never asked or needed American soldiers to die on its behalf.

In the political fights over Israel, the Jewish left—led by organizations such as J Street and even more radical groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace—has adopted a very different approach, arguing that Israel should embody the loftiest progressive ideals, both in its social policies at home and in its relations with its neighbors. In this view, to be "pro-Israel" means demanding that the Jewish State "take risks for peace," plead guilty to an allegedly aggressive and illegitimate "occupation," and cede territory to an oppressed Palestinian population. And it means using American power to pressure Israel in this progressive direction. The Israel they love—their version of a light unto the nations—is an Israel that acts like a lamb in a world of wolves and that sheds its national past in favor of a new Hebrew-speaking universalism.

Jewish conservatives should offer a very different vision. In the current political environment, it is easy to forget that in the 1950s, when *National Review* was founded, many American conservatives looked upon Israel—and the Jews—with skepticism and even hostility. Leo Strauss, the great political philosopher, was so annoyed by this conservative animus that he wrote a letter to the editor in 1957 suggesting a rather different understanding of the new Jewish state:

Israel is a country which is surrounded by mortal enemies of overwhelming numerical superiority, and in which a single book absolutely predominates in the instruction given in elementary schools and in high schools: the Hebrew Bible. Whatever the failings of individuals may be, the spirit of the country as a whole can justly be described in these terms: heroic austerity supported by the nearness of biblical

Jewish conservatives should defend the Jewish nation as a heroic enterprise, one that resurrected Jewish civilization in the ancient homeland of the Jewish people and created the most modern, most democratic, most civilized state in the Middle East.



antiquity. A conservative, I take it, is a man who believes that “everything good is heritage.” I know of no country today in which this belief is stronger and less lethargic than in Israel...

[T]he founder of Zionism, Herzl, was fundamentally a conservative man, guided in his Zionism by conservative considerations. The moral spine of the Jews was in danger of being broken by the so-called emancipation, which in many cases had alienated them from their heritage, and yet not given them anything more than merely formal equality; it had brought about a condition which has been called “external freedom and inner servitude”; political Zionism was the attempt to restore that inner freedom, that simple dignity, of which only people who remember their heritage and are loyal to their fate are capable.... It helped to stem the tide of “progressive” leveling of venerable, ancestral differences; it fulfilled a conservative function.

In this spirit, Jewish conservatives should defend the Jewish nation as a heroic enterprise, one that resurrected Jewish civilization in the ancient homeland of the Jewish people and created the most modern, most democratic, most civilized state in the Middle East. In an era when conservatism in general is trying to reinvigorate the moral case for *nations*, the Jewish state should be advanced as a model to emulate—a country that all true friends of the democratic West should appreciate.

For over the long term, American support for Israel will depend on whether a majority of Americans—and hopefully a majority of Jews—see Israel as an exceptional nation, with a significance in the American moral imagination far greater than the small, contested piece of land it occupies in a bloody region that many Americans would often rather ignore. In the American

mind, Israel should symbolize the founding city of their own biblical heritage, and it should remind Americans of the moral, spiritual, and physical toughness that is necessary to defend American civilization against its most determined enemies. Norman Podhoretz, in his classic 1982 COMMENTARY essay “J’Accuse,” said it best: “The Bible tells us that God commanded the ancient Israelites to ‘choose life,’ and it also suggests that for a nation, the choice of life often involves choosing the sacrifices and horrors of war. The people of contemporary Israel are still guided by that commandment and its accompanying demands. This is why Israel is a light unto other people who have come to believe that nothing is worth fighting or dying for.”

SEVEN

The Jewish Fight Against Anti-Semitism

The Podhoretz essay was written in the aftermath of the Lebanon War, in direct response to a torrent of ideological assaults on the modern Jewish state in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and elsewhere. He borrowed the title of Emile Zola’s famous broadside about the Dreyfus affair in late-19th-century France—*J’Accuse*—to make a clear and powerful point: The new attacks on Israel were so vehement, so willing to abuse and distort the facts, and so apologetic toward Israel’s death-seeking enemies, that the political disease of anti-Semitism had clearly taken root. Anti-Zionism had become the new anti-Semitism of the enlightened elite. And its home was now on the American and European left.

The perverse hatred of the Jews has taken many forms throughout history. Christians once despised the Jews for theological reasons; ethnic supremacists blamed the Jews for allegedly defiling their national

purity; socialists attacked the Jews for supposedly controlling all wealth; capitalists vilified the Jews for their involvement with socialism; agrarians scapegoated the Jews for supposedly destroying their economic and cultural way of life; and on and on it goes. In general, what binds these disparate hatreds together is the use of “the Jews” as fuel for ideological passions that have nothing to do with us at all. When reason fails, and when reality fails to satisfy, the Jews are always there as props to mobilize the masses and explain away the misery. In this way, as Jean-Paul Sartre explained in his classic essay “Anti-Semite and Jew,” hating Jews becomes a positive morality: a way of healing the world by assaulting and removing the Jews who infect it.

In general, America has never succumbed to the vilest forms of anti-Semitism, and the American Jewish experience has been far more welcoming than that of any other diaspora in history. Yet social discrimination against American Jews existed in earlier eras, and the persistent fear of anti-Semitism has long played a significant role in shaping the mindset of the American Jewish community. Many American Jews—or their forebears—had fled varying forms of state and popular persecution, whether in 19th-century Germany, 20th-century Eastern Europe, or in the dark days leading up to the Holocaust. Shaped in the fires of anti-Semitism, Jewish political and cultural ambitions in America focused on achieving civic equality and physical security. Fighting anti-Semitism became a central aim of many communal organizations, first among them the Anti-Defamation League. And believing that anti-Semitism was predominantly associated with a majority-Christian society—which it had been in Europe, Russia, and in a far more limited fashion in the United States—many Jews sought to protect themselves by adopting various secularist ideas. These included the rejection of cultural particularism, the “separation of church and state,” and the expansion of government power in the struggle against discrimination.

To this day, many American Jews reflexively associate anti-Semitism with the “Right.” And with-

out question, the “neo-Nazi” and white-supremacist strains of anti-Semitism exist in America, and occasionally their sick adherents act out against the Jews. But these perverse philosophies have no broad institutional base and no representatives in American political office. They are fringe movements.

Leftist anti-Zionism, by contrast, has permeated every corner of academia and now has powerful adherents in high political office. The ideological preconceptions of our self-proclaimed sentinels against anti-Semitism, always looking for right-wing monsters to decry, often blind them to the far more dangerous ideological threat now facing the Jews: the simultaneous rise of progressive Israel-bashing and Islamic Jew-hatred.

The vanguard of this new political assault is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. BDS is a global effort, linked to radical Islamic terror groups, that pressures churches, companies, trade associations, and universities to divest from Israel and from companies that do business with Israel. In the European Union, there is now a requirement to label goods imported from Judea and Samaria in order to deter their sale. In early 2016, the Obama administration suddenly issued guidelines for enforcing a never-enforced Oslo-era trade directive mandating the special labelling of goods made in the West Bank. And while the economic effects of the BDS movement have thus far been dubious, the false narrative on which this campaign is based has been toxic for young American Jews, especially during college.

That universities are the main setting of this anti-Israel campaign should hardly come as a shock. In both the United States and Europe, many Middle East studies departments have long been funded by multimillion-dollar donations from the Arab world, which takes advantage of the existing academic culture of identity politics to advance anti-Zionist and often anti-Western ideas. And despite various efforts to promote “Israel studies” as a more even-handed alternative, the intellectual balance of power remains firmly on the anti-Israel side. The rising prominence of



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“intersectionality”—a doctrine linking together all perceived injustices against recognized victim classes—is expanding the perverse alliance between progressive “social justice” activists and radical Islamic groups. The irony here, given the record of many Islamic political organizations when it comes to the treatment of minorities, women, and homosexuals, seems entirely lost on the progressive activists themselves.

In 2015 and 2016, the AMCHA Initiative conducted surveys of more than 100 campuses in the United States and found strong correlations between BDS activity and anti-Semitic attacks, including the destruction of Jewish property, the suppression of speech, and the physical assault of Jewish students. A 2016 Brandeis study on “Hotspots of Antisemitism and Anti-Israel Hostility on Campus” similarly found that the presence of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), a BDS advocacy group, was one of the strongest predictors of “perceiving a hostile climate toward Israel and Jews.” While many within the mainstream American Jewish community have mobilized against BDS, a number of prominent Jewish groups are still unwilling to confront its Islamic roots, and many progressives remain blind, accommodating, or actively supportive of the anti-Israel agenda.

In the face of this progressive confusion and complicity, Jewish conservatives should develop a more hard-headed approach to anti-Semitism animated by Jewish self-respect. For as Ruth Wisse has explained, anti-Semitism is almost always about something else, some other political sickness, some ideological project in which the Jews are just a prop. Islamic radicals use the Jews as fuel for their jihadist project; European progressives use the Jews as a distraction from the obvious failure of UN-style internationalism; Euro-fascists use the Jews as scapegoats for the tragic decline of European culture. And the only way for Jews to combat this political assault, Wisse argues, is to “go on offense,” attacking the attackers rather than simply defending ourselves.

While anti-Semites are a clear and present danger to Jews, the Jewish battle against anti-Semitism presents its own moral perils. In the progressive mind, the struggle against anti-Semitism is often universalized into a campaign against all hatreds, all prejudice, and all forms of discrimination. Rather than focusing on the concrete threats to modern-day Jews and how to confront them in the real world, they pursue a utopian goal that paradoxically tarnishes all forms of ethnic, national, and cultural particularism, since loving one’s own too much is the first step toward diminishing “the other.”

In positioning the fight against Jew-hatred within

this oppressor-oppressed paradigm, Jews risk turning themselves into just another member of the victimhood choir, and they risk putting victimization itself—rather than the spiritual, intellectual, and moral riches of the Jewish tradition—at the center of Jewish identity. Indeed, Holocaust remembrance is already considered the most personally significant aspect of “Jewishness” for the majority of American Jews, far outweighing Jewish literacy, support for Israel, or ritual observance. And when the psychic strain of standing up for Jewish interests and Jewish values becomes too much, some Jews come to blame themselves for other people’s hatreds; they apologize for Jewish “misdeeds” and Israeli “aggressions”; or they sever any outward signs or inward connection to Jewish identity at all. In the end, the result is the same: When Jews come to see themselves as simply *victims* or simply *aggressors*, they are no longer able to stand up for themselves as Jews.

Without question, Jews should continue to mobilize on campus against those who attack them and against administrators who mistreat them. They should encourage the continued struggle against the BDS movement. They should prepare to absorb European Jews, in America or Israel, who are fleeing anti-Semitism in ever larger numbers. They should cultivate their philo-Semitic allies worldwide. And they should decry right-wing anti-Semites and left-wing anti-Semites with equal vigor. But in the end, the only real answer to the permanent plague of anti-Semitism is Jewish pride: the enduring belief that Jews have a special purpose in the world, a sacred heritage to preserve, and a heroic history to continue. Without this moral self-confidence, the Jews will diminish themselves, and the anti-Semites will win without even firing a shot.

EIGHT

A Call to Action

In weighing their political and moral condition, American Jews should not overestimate their own importance. We remain a small people, and American political and cultural life hardly depends on which road American Jews choose for themselves, whether conservative or liberal, religious or secular. And while America remains the second-largest Jewish community in the world, the primary center is Israel, which is the fullest realization of Jewish national aspirations, and now the demographic, cultural, and intellectual heart of world Jewry. And while Jews and Israel are frequently at the center of world events, we would

make a grave error if we believe that the current clash of civilizations—and the struggle among world powers—will turn on our actions alone. It will not.

Yet while Jews will not dictate the future of the West, the fate of the West may mirror the fate of the Jews. If the American Jewish community assimilates out of existence—or is forced to embrace an extreme version of Rod Dreher’s “Benedict option,” isolating itself entirely from American culture and society—then there is good reason to fear that all traditional communities of faith in America will suffer a similar fate. If Israel is severely attacked by a nuclear-armed Iran—or one of its terrorist proxies—then there is good reason to fear that the West will have failed to contain the broader threat of nuclear proliferation among radical groups. If anti-Semitism continues to poison so many progressive and Islamic minds—and to bring them together in common cause—then there is good reason to believe that Western culture as we know it is truly over. As go the Jews, so goes the West. And while Jews cannot save the West, they serve Western civilization best when they stand up for themselves.

The primary Jewish responsibility today—and the greatest gift that Jews can offer the world—is to defend Jewish civilization against its many detractors, at home and abroad. American Jews have a crucial role to play in this great project, both in sustaining vibrant Jewish communities in the United States and in strengthening American support for the Jewish state. To succeed, Jews will need to reform their political philosophy. For far too long, the “political stupidity of the Jews,” as Irving Kristol provocatively put it, has undermined Jewish interests, Jewish values, and Jewish continuity. The progressive worldview has long since turned against Israel, turned against traditional religion, turned against the very idea of national pride—and so Jews should oppose

progressivism itself, even if they identify with certain specific positions within the liberal worldview.

Fortunately, there is some reason for hope that a new coalition of Jewish conservatives can redefine the political and cultural direction of American Jewry in the years ahead. Orthodox Jews of various stripes—Modern, Haredi, Hasidic,—are growing rapidly in number, supporting many conservative causes, and becoming more prominent in the broader Jewish community. Russian Jews, hardened by their memory of life under Soviet totalitarianism, are generally strong Jewish nationalists and vigorous opponents of American statism. The Obama legacy has further clarified that conservatives, not progressives, are now the true friends of the Jewish state, and hopefully this reality will one day set in among centrist Jews who are passionate Israel activists. And for some Jewish conservatives with little connection to or knowledge of Judaism, conservative ideas may be a pathway back to their forgotten Jewish heritage, at least for those who seek a deeper grounding for their conservative worldview and a sane cultural alternative in which to raise their children.

What Jewish conservatives need, if they ever hope to unite as a group and expand their influence, is a positive agenda: a set of ideas and arguments about how best to strengthen Jewish resolve against both our internal weaknesses and our external enemies. Such a worldview—a new Jewish conservatism, animated by a genuine love and concern for the whole Jewish people—is waiting to be born out of the sources of the Jewish tradition itself, out of the hard-won experiences of Jewish history, and out of the wisdom of conservative thinking that most Jews have for too long neglected. And today, more than ever, such an agenda is both urgently needed and may actually have the political chance to be heard. [▶](#)