

The American Zionist Left  
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1. Here's a secret, the kind we hardly acknowledge to ourselves.

But first: You may be wondering who the "we" is. In truth, I am not sure. Maybe it is the Jews. But the problem with "Jews" is – well, not all Jews are in on the secret. Or maybe it is the Zionists. But the problem with "Zionists" is that the word has come to seem musty, at best, and these last several decades has been appropriated by exclusivist fanatics, as if a run of the mill quiz show were now exploring "enhanced interrogation techniques." So let me spell it out: The "we" here mean old-fashioned liberal Zionists, people who intuitively endorse the idea of a Jewish state, people who acknowledge that to secure the safety of that state and to ennoble its character are the compelling Jewish projects of our time, hence people who these days suffer considerable anxiety, are not strangers to disappointment. Things are not going very well. Or even just average well.

The secret? We are all for a two-state solution, we are eager to call a halt to Israel's expansion, to put an end to the settlement movement, to restore Israel's good name, to make almost any compromise consistent with the preservation of Israel's character as a Jewish state and its commitment to democracy. We are, in a word, "doves." But: We don't trust the Palestinians, we worry about Iran, we haven't a clue about how you get from here to peace, we don't take America's support for granted and even if we did, we are not exactly proud to have to depend on that support. We worry that Israel has taken multiple wrong turns, and not only in its policy on the big question, its peace policy, but on a range of domestic issues as well – most notably, its increasingly inegalitarian economy (where it now runs right up there with the United States on disparities in income distribution), in its corrupting entanglement of religion and state, in the decline in quality of its educational system, in its manner of dealing with the 20 percent of its citizens who are Palestinian. We are dismayed by the extent of public corruption. In short, we fear that Israel is at risk both domestically and internationally.

Now, none of all that is secret. Psychic dissonance is hardly an unknown phenomenon. The secret is that because we are apprehensive, we are not entirely upset that "out there," in the public square, those who speak authoritatively on Israel's behalf – meaning, principally, AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations – are considerably more rigid, more hawkish, if you will, than we.

Which brings me, of course, to the curious case of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, who make a repeated point in their controversial book, "The Israel Lobby," of the discrepancy between "official" Jewish pronouncements regarding American policy towards Israel and the consistent finding of public opinion surveys that show that American Jews are considerably more dovish than those who speak in their name.

Mearsheimer and Walt don't know the secret, meaning they don't know the Jews. They look at Israel and see the strongest military power in the region, a prosperous hi-tech

economy, and they conclude that all the talk of Israel's vulnerability is merely hokum, clever propaganda intended to keep American aid at its (allegedly) wildly disproportionate levels. Explanation? The Lobby. "The Lobby," in their view, is a theoretical scientist's dream; it explains not only America's unconditional support for Israel, it explains everything. Two words, three syllables, and you have the key to the whole of the special relationship, you know why America invaded Iraq, you know why Camp David II failed, you know why both Congress and the Administration are without spine in dealing with the chronic conflict between Israel and its neighbors. It's the lies our leaders have told and continue to tell us.

What Mearsheimer and Walt miss (among many other things) is any understanding of the depths of apprehension currently experienced by the Zionist left. On any given day, in connection with any given episode, Israeli officials and much (but not all) of the pro-Israel activist community in the United States may, indeed, seek to exploit the situation, to repeat the tired slogans, the inflated claims, the whole of the familiar litany of rationalization and justification: Israel is the only democratic state in the region, it faces implacable enemies, it is America's ally in the war on terrorism, its values and America's are the same, its response to threats on its security is measured – all dismissed by Mearsheimer and Walt as false pleadings. That may be true, but it is essentially irrelevant. Whether true or false (and most likely at least somewhat true), these claims do not speak to the Jewish apprehensions, shared fully by liberal Zionists. Our leaders may inflate, exaggerate, even lie; the lies of Israel's enemies are vastly larger. But neither lies nor truths are assessed by a dispassionate lie-detecting machine. They are assessed by people riddled with apprehension, and if there is any one word that captures the substance of the apprehension that word is "abandonment."

For Jews, abandonment is an old, old story. The world may abandon Israel; Israel may abandon the Zionist dream. The project may fail.

Look around, the portents are everywhere. There's a rush to disinvestment, a palpable abandonment. There are mainstream claims that Israel's own policies are the necessary and the sufficient explanation of the conflict, that Israel is therefore the villain of the piece. And, for liberal Zionists especially, there's the growing fashion of Left alienation from Israel, sometimes (though not always) combined with romanticization of the Palestinians. Nathaniel Popper, a young journalist who works for the Forward, writes that when he reported to his friends on his recent visit to Israel, "they seized on my skepticism – of both the Palestinians and the Israelis – to rail against Zionism. Something snapped; I whipped to Israel's defense, summoning arguments I had heard at pro-Israel conferences I attend for work." He does not add, but might well, that part of what snapped was his comfort with those friends, his ability to take for granted a roughly similar weltanschauung. Whiplash, and suddenly we are Israel's embattled defenders, perceived as imposters on the Left, insufficiently dismissive of the parochial claims of the Jews. Where, then, do we belong?

As if empathy for the Israelis precludes sympathy for the Palestinians. As if this is all a zero-sum game, as if Mr. Bush's gross "you are either with us or you are against us" were

a sober appraisal not only of the battle with terrorism but also of the war, the persistent war, between Israel and its neighbors – as if there’s no place for qualification, for ambiguity, for nuance. As if there’s no appreciation for tragedy.

Nadav Safran was a distinguished professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard. Born in Egypt, he’d lived in Israel (and fought in its War of Independence) before coming to the U.S. His first major book, published in 1963, was “The United States and Israel.” In the Author’s Preface to that book, Safran wrote, “I believe that fundamentally both Arabs and Jews have an unassailable moral argument. A person who cannot see how this is possible does not understand the essence of tragedy; much less does he realize that his position serves only to assure that the Palestine tragedy should have another sequel, and yet another.”

That was, of course, prescient. Exclusivists on both sides of the conflict have indeed brought on sequel after sequel, by now an ongoing calamity.

It matters not at all which set of exclusivists is the more to blame, which less. What matters is that together they’ve come to own the stage, the crowded stage.

There’s Hamas, of course, in a class by itself. There are the settlers and their avid defenders. There are a handful of hard-line American Jewish organizations like the ZOA (Zionist Organization of America). And there are Nathaniel Popper’s friends – presumably (I don’t know Popper) people of the Left – who have neither use for nor patience with the Jewish state. It’s racist, don’t you know? It’s militaristic, and it’s devious, and it’s an anachronism. Nationalism was never a good thing, and the Jews were supposed to know that.

AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents are at most unwitting support personnel for the tedious drama. Nominally, they support a two-state solution, which – by definition – the exclusivists do not, and which by now has become the litmus test of a pro-peace (which means pro-Israel *and* pro-Palestine) stance. True, there are times when they and some right-leaning others set the bar so high that their endorsement of a two-state solution seems little more than lip service. But it is not helpful at all – or accurate – to lump them together as part of the exclusivist camp.

There’s a dynamic here, worth attending: Where the Left has closed the door to Israel, gone beyond tough criticism all the way to demonization, we are left out in the cold; we will have no truck with exclusivists, whether of the Right or the Left. But while we cannot, do not, will not dance with Israel’s dependable apologists, those who believe that pro-Zionist passion requires the suspension of critical judgment, we prefer the company of those who wish Israel well to the company of those who wish it ill, even though the course endorsed by those who wish it well seems to us too often mistaken.

2. The Left has a hard time with nationalism, and is particularly irritated by Jewish nationalism. “Tribalism,” they call it, and tribalism it sometimes is. Somehow, it is

supposed that the Jews should know better, whether because we have so often in the past been nationalism's victims or because there's something awkward about people traditionally comfortable (or at least at) living at the margins suddenly insisting that they have a fixed address and a fire in the fireplace or because nouveau powerful is no more attractive than nouveau riche or because statecraft is not a particular strength of a people of artists, scholars, merchants, a people with so pacific a history as ours. And look, they say, at what a mess the Jewish nationalists, the Zionists, have made of things. Pacific? Only so long as they were not allowed to carry guns. Now, with guns, they become hunters.

Well, look: Though pocked with imperfections, some quite deep, some no cosmetics can mask, the record's hardly one of unrelieved bungling. There are grace notes galore and much to admire. Freedom of speech, the rule of law, distinguished science, and, withal, an ongoing effort to balance the twin imperatives of the Jewish understanding.

Those imperatives have been with us from the earliest times – on the one hand, the claims of the tribe, on the other the claims of the whole world; one the one hand, the particular; on the other, the universal. On the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, we read the Book of Jonah, wherein the prophet is sent to preach in Nineveh (that is, to non-Jews), to preach but not to proselytize. Our God is not the totem of the tribe, but the One, for all.

And yet we know there's an urgency to the boundaries; Esperanto doesn't work. Again and again, heard simultaneously but not sequentially, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me," and "If I am only for myself, what am I?" Others may find contradiction here; we find enduring and productive tension.

Some of us get it wrong all the time, opting either for radical universalism or for stultifying particularism. And all of us get it wrong some of the time. But: We are held together not only by memory of triumphs and tribulations past; we are held together (when we are) by memories of the dreams we have dreamed, of what it can be like one day, of what it is supposed to be like: the swords into plowshares, the spears into pruning hooks, each under his own fig tree and none shall make them afraid.

Is it necessarily the case that the moment you tie a rag to a branch and call it a flag you say "no" to empathy, you become obsessed with your own narrowly defined interests and to hell with others? There is that risk, as ample precedent makes all too clear. And Israel's destiny, in the end, may be to be a nation like all the other nations rather than the light unto the nations the Utopians imagined. In the Jewish tradition, there are two Jerusalems. In the heavenly Jerusalem, Moses teaches, David sings, Solomon dispenses wisdom; in the earthly Jerusalem, there are curses alongside the blessings, people shove in line and cheat on their income taxes, they laugh and hug and hate, grandeur and pettiness cohabit. The haunting question is how the two Jerusalems, the idyllic one of our fervent imagining and the quotidian one that knows both honey and thorn, can be brought closer together.

And maybe they cannot be, neither here nor anywhere. Or maybe they can be, but we are still off-course somewhere in the desert. All we have learned so far is that being Jewish does not immunize against the baser appetites and the evil inclinations. And that hurts; we were taught to expect more and better. We had it figured out, what Max Weber called “the theodicy of disprivilege”: How does an oppressed people explain its persecuted status? By imagining that it is morally advantaged. That is what we were taught, quite often explicitly: the oppression, the advantage. Now both seem remote. And though we still proclaim our unbending commitment to justice, we also whine a lot.

Some of us have given up, dream dreams derived from other stories; others of us feel betrayed, thereby embittered; and there are those who take their cue from Anthony Burgess in his retelling of the Exodus story, when the people complained to Aaron: “And one said: ‘I don't like this sort of talk at all. It's all blown up, like a sheep's stomach full of wind. Life is...life is what we see, smell, feel – the taste of a bit of bread, a mouthful of water, sitting at the door, watching the evening come on with the circling of the bats. The things you talk of are only in the mind. We are too old, I tell you, for this talk of common goals and purposes and journeys.’” But life is no longer just the taste of a bit of bread or a mouthful of water; these days they have pastries and fine wines. These days, busy meeting with senior officials of the Defense Department to talk about Israel's pressing needs for this new weapons system or that, meeting over at State to make sure that Israel is not pressed too hard, meeting with Members of Congress to trade support for support – who has time or disposition for talk of purposes and journeys?

3. The Israel lobby, meaning those who because they take neither Israel nor America's support for Israel for granted, because they remain haunted, prowl the corridors of American power to press the case for “the special relationship.” And yes, they are powerful, albeit not nearly so powerful as their critics contend. And yes, power, as Acton taught, tends to corrupt. But we know as well that impotence is even more corrupting. And the strange truth is that we – and here by “we” I mean pretty nearly all Jews of Jewish sensibility – feel both powerful and powerless at the same time. That is how we see ourselves and that is how we see the Jewish state – and that is also how the Israelis see themselves and their nation. We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt and we have known Pharaohs ever since; underneath our designer costumes we wear a shroud.

For some of us, that means that even with the Land, we still remain in Exile, Exile as an existential condition rather than a geographic space. All the pastries and the fine wines cannot erase our tortured wisdom; though rich, we are not comfortable. We are imprisoned both by our memories and by the world's disorder. Our only remedy is to remain prisoners of hope as well, to remember not only yesterday but also tomorrow, the promised tomorrow.

The world of the lobbyists, by and large, is less fragmented. They have learned to work the system; in some ways, they have become the system. If that were a crime, they would be guilty. But it is not a crime. The argument cannot be whether there should be a lobby or whether, once there is a lobby, it is entitled to be powerful. Those are the givens of the system.

So the argument is really about the means by which the lobby maintains its power and the ends to which it devotes that power. The broadest statement of the lobby's purpose is that it seeks to preserve and enhance the special relationship between Israel and the United States. That relationship has deep and diverse cultural and historical roots; it is not an artifact of which the lobby is the author. That is the hospitable context within which AIPAC (and the others) work; the engine of its power is, for all the reasons I have here discussed, a vast and devoted grass roots constituency,.

And the liberal Zionists? Chiefly Americans for Peace Now, the Israel Policy Forum, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom – they also lobby, and just as energetically, albeit with considerably more limited resources. Pound for pound, they may even be as effective – as powerful one might say – as the others, but they are welterweights. They do what they can to promote a genuine two-state solution and to reverse those policies of the Israeli government – settlements especially though not exclusively – that stand in its way, thereby evoking rebuke and sometimes condemnation from the mainstream. They insist that “pro-Israel” has many shades of meaning, cannot be a term reserved for the most hawkish of Israel's supporters. They persist in their love of Zion, thereby evoking rebuke and sometimes contempt from erstwhile and natural allies on the Left. They believe, with Seamus Heaney, that one day hope and history will rhyme.