

“As a Proud American Jew & Zionist, Do I Have ‘Dual Loyalties?’”

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When I was in high school, I had a very good friend named Nick. Nick and I shared a common fascination with current events, as well as discussing historical issues. If there was a debate in our AP U.S. History class about Hamiltonian versus Jeffersonian Democracy, you could pretty much count on Nick and me being the students selected by the teacher to argue each side. I only remember going to a handful of parties in my high school career, but I remember many, many nights sitting outside on my back patio wrangling with Nick about some current event or another. When I was 16, during the summer between 10th and 11th grade, I went to Israel for the very first time. Now if I was only a ‘de facto Zionist’ before that trip, I was a *‘Fabrente~~I~~II* Zionist’ when I came back! Our debates and discussions became more and more about the Arab-Israeli conflict, U.S. loan guarantees to Israel during the first Bush administration, and the importance of the U.S.-Israel alliance in the midst of the first Intifada. My friend Nick, Catholic by religion and Italian by ethnicity, was a very sharp, very articulate guy. He went on to become a JAG, a Judge Advocate General in the U.S. Air Force, and, well, you know what became of me! I recall that if Nick really wanted to get my goat, he would pose the following question:

“So if the United States and Israel got into a war with each other, who would you support?” Or “If the United States and Israel got into a war and there was a mandatory draft, would you fight against Israel?” Now to tell you the truth, I hadn’t thought about those late night debates in a long time...but it all came back to me when newly elected Congresswoman Ilhan Omar’s tweets dredged up the question of American Jews’ alleged dual loyalty “a foreign country,” that unnamed country of course being the State of Israel. When Nick used to challenge me about hypothetical wars between the U.S. and Israel, I would often say, “Nick, it is inconceivable that these two countries, who are the closest of allies, who share the same values, who promote liberal democracy and the rule of law would go to war against each other!” But that would never silence my sparring partner. He’d say something like, “Could you ever imagine that the U.S. and Britain would fight a war against each other? Well, 200 years ago tens of thousands of Americans and Brits slaughtered each other on the battlefield, and today we’re the best of friends!” My answer would go something like, “Something would have to change so radically, so fundamentally in either America, Israel, or both that these countries could ever find themselves on the opposite sides of a war. Either the America or the Israel we know of today would be so altered that we would practically be speaking of different countries than the ones who currently go by those names.” Don’t get me wrong, the debate would go on and on from there, but I think you get a sense of our banter.

To Nick, especially after my summer in Israel, I became something of a curiosity. My Italian, Catholic buddy; a tall, handsome guy with olive skin, surely appreciated in his mother’s cooking and his Sicilian heritage, but I never heard him say anything about a political allegiance to his family’s native Italy. I, on the other hand, professed not only cultural affinity for Israel, but a patriotism toward Israel that probably seemed strange to him. My uncommonly intelligent friend Nick might actually have been able to identify *Il Canto Degli Italiani* as the Italian national

anthem, but I bet most Italian Americans wouldn't have a clue. The symbols of the modern state of Israel, though, the flag, the national anthem, the coat of arms featuring the seven-branched menorah, which is first described in this week's parasha, are not only intimately familiar to me, they tug on my heartstrings.

The idea of Jewish peoplehood, of Jewish nationalism has been confounding people for time immemorial. Here we are just weeks from Purim, when we will read one of the most diabolical perversions of Jewish nationalism. Haman says to King Ahasuerus: "*There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws...*" That process of "othering," to use a 21st Century word, led to the inevitable next line in the megillah: "*It is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction...*" (Esther 3:8-9) This was among the first, but certainly not the last accusations of compromised Jewish loyalty. This was one of the first, but certainly not the last threat of eviction, eradication, or genocide, to address the purported sin of diluted national allegiances.

I am always astonished, really just flabbergasted when people question the loyalty of American Jews to this country. American Jews **love** America. Think about this...Only about 53% of Americans bother to vote in U.S. elections. But 85% of American Jews come out to the polls on election day! Jews have had a love affair with this country since they sailed into Ellis Island and saw the words of an American Jewish woman engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty welcoming them to their new home. Jews came to this country because it was, at least until recently, a refuge, a haven for people escaping persecution and poverty and seeking to rebuild lives in a free, open society; a nation where item number one of the Bill of Rights guarantees and protects the freedom of religion; a nation that has grappled with home-grown anti-Semitism, but instead of being allowed to fester, is repudiated by civil society, by acts of Congress, by leaders of all political persuasions. My own American pride derives in part because I am the descendant of great grandparents who fled Russian pogroms to start a new life, right here in Maryland; of another great grandfather who fought in the US Army during World War I, when he sustained a mustard gas attack and eventually died from its poisonous effects; and yet another grandfather who wore the American uniform and survived the European theater in the Second World War. I was raised with deep sense of patriotism in my blood, and I consider myself a proud American.

And, not 'but,' **AND**, I am simultaneously an unapologetic Zionist. I really don't think that Ilhan Omar understands Zionism or Jewish identity at all. She tweeted back in 2012, when she was a campaign manager for a Minnesota state senator, that "Israel has hypnotized the world. May Allah awaken the people and help them see the evil doings of Israel."^[2] I would submit that it is Ilhan Omar who is under the spell of hypnosis; that same spell that benighted so many who came before her who trafficked in similar stereotypes, libels, and hoaxes about global Jewish power and influence. I am confident that *she* has been hypnotized, or else she would know that while \$5 million was spent in 2018 to lobby on behalf of Israel in this country, the pro-Israel lobby is actually only the 147th highest spending lobby in America! Philip Morris spends exponentially more to lobby Congress on behalf of the tobacco industry; Pfizer, Facebook, Amazon, Native American Casino Owners...Even Toyota Motor Company spends millions more than AIPAC or other pro-Israel groups in their lobbying efforts. And if Ms. Omar is really worried about being

“expected to have allegiance/pledge support to a foreign country in order to serve [my] country in Congress or serve on committee,” she should probably focus her attention on South Korea, which spends a staggering \$52 million in lobbying efforts in this country—more than 10 times what Israel spends! You can add Japan, Germany, China, the United Arab Emirates, even Canada to that list of countries who spend substantially more in lobbying Washington than Israel does.^[3] What is remarkable is that while Israel spends so much less in lobbying efforts than at least 146 other entities, it is profoundly effective and influential. It has to be...It is a matter of survival.

I wish that Representative Omar could really understand why Jews, who are citizens of other countries like this one, care so much about the fate of the State of Israel. I wish that Representative Omar could understand why Labor Zionist writer A.D. Gordon once described Israel as the place that attracts “all the scattered cells of the [Jewish] people to unite into one living organism.” That what Israel represents to us is “the rehabilitation of a people that has been uprooted and scattered to the winds...”^[4]

I personally believe that the modern State of Israel is the single greatest Jewish experiment in history. It is where the Jewish people, sovereign and in the majority in one and only one place in the entire world, have created a Hebrew republic, a democracy founded upon and infused with Jewish values, and on the very real estate where our temples stood, our prophets prophesied, our kings ruled, our tribes settled and cultivated the land, and our modern-day heroes have fight to preserve and protect it for any Jew from anywhere in the world seeking safe haven in a hostile world. Am I loyal to those ideas? You bet I am. Do I have allegiance to that narrative? From the very depths of my heart. Does it make me less of a patriotic American? Not one bit.

Louis Brandeis, a great American and Zionist leader once said “Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with [American] Patriotism.” Now listen to these next words: “Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent.”^[5] These are the words of a United States Supreme Court Justice! Do I have “dual loyalties?” Yes, I suppose I do. But I do not believe for one minute that those loyalties are inconsistent. As the legendary Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky once wrote: “The discovery of my identity, my community, my people, gave me the strength to fight for my rights, for the rights of other Jews, and for the rights of others, allying me with dissidents fighting communist tyranny. I discovered that this synthesis of the universal, the democratic, with the particularist, the nationalist is central to the Zionist idea.”^[6] And, I would add, it is central to the *American* idea as well. Do I possess dual loyalties? Absolutely...It is one of the greatest sources of meaning, identity, and pride in my life.

[1] Yiddish for “fiery,” or “burning”

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/opinion/ilhan-omar-anti-semitism.html>

[3] <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/281477/how-influential-is-aipac>

[4] Aaron David Gordon, “Our Tasks Ahead” (1920), *The Zionist Ideas*, p. 53

[5] Brandeis, Louis D. “Zionism is Consistent with American Patriotism,” June 1915. *The Jew in the Modern World*, p. 496.

[6] Sharansky, Natan. Forward to *The Zionist Ideas*, p. xix