



Essay

# Reclaiming the Covenant of Fate

As American Jewry's  
Zionist consensus  
crumbles, we must learn  
to address one another  
across  
communal divides.

Peter Beinart

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The broken window of a  
synagogue in Cottbus,  
Germany, that was vandalized  
in November, 2015. Photo:  
Patrick Pleul/dpa via AP

**THIS SPRING AND SUMMER**, as violence engulfed



Print

Israel-Palestine and antisemitic attacks in the US made media headlines, some hawkish Jewish commentators began using an arresting phrase to describe Jews who oppose the Jewish state. In a [tweet](#) in May, UCLA professor Judea Pearl proposed that just as Jewish leaders in the 17th century excommunicated the followers of the false messiah, Shabtai Tzvi, it was now time “to proclaim Jewish-born Zionophobes: ‘Ex-Jews.’” That same month, in an [article](#) in the Orthodox publication *Cross-Currents*, Yitzchok Adlerstein, director of Interfaith Affairs for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, scrolled through his own roster of historic turncoats—“the Pablo Christianis and Johannes Pfefferkorns who reinvented themselves as Christians to find fame and money”—before declaring that Bernie Sanders, who “devotes his energies to undermining the largest Jewish community in the world,” is an “ex-Jew.” In [June in Tablet](#), historian Gil Troy and former Soviet dissident and Israeli cabinet minister Natan Sharansky improvised on the theme: They labeled Jewish anti-Zionists “Un-Jews.”

The assumption behind these arguments is that to be considered a Jew, you must demonstrate

communal solidarity. You must show a special devotion to other Jews. As more and more left-leaning Jews abandon political Zionism—the belief in a state that favors Jews over Palestinians—there’s a mounting sense on the Jewish right that Jewish critics of Israel are failing that test, that opposing a state and an army devoted specifically to Jewish self-protection means abandoning one’s people. Most Jews on the left will find such sentiments offensive and absurd. But they have real-world consequences. Since right-leaning Jews control American Jewry’s most powerful institutions—from AIPAC, to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, to the Federations that direct Jewish philanthropy, to the Hillels that serve Jewish students on campus—the collapse of American Jewry’s Zionist consensus will leave more and more American Jews outside the boundaries of legitimate disagreement, as defined by their communal leaders. More and more people will be treated as “ex” or “un” Jews.

The Zionist litmus test means that establishment Jewish institutions will become even less representative of American Jewish political opinion

than they are now. That's dangerous, because with even less progressive input, the American Jewish establishment's response to antisemitism will continue trending in its current, misconceived direction, focusing even more heavily on suppressing pro-Palestinian speech rather than combatting anti-Jewish violence. It's also worrying because American Jews have things to learn from one another across our ideological and religious divides. American Jewish progressives can learn from the right-leaning Orthodox community's commitment to Jewish education, and American Jewish conservatives would benefit from being challenged to confront events like the Nakba, which illustrate the magnitude of Palestinian dispossession. American Jews of all ideological stripes need shared spaces, based on mutual respect, which encourage the kinds of conversations that aren't possible on Twitter.

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# **shared spaces, based on mutual respect, which encourage the kinds of conversations that aren't possible on Twitter.**

Creating such spaces will require a new compact, in which the American Jewish establishment opens its doors to anti-Zionists, and anti-Zionists affirm that Jews have special obligations to one another. For both sides, this bargain will be difficult. Many Zionists don't believe it's possible to oppose Jewish statehood yet still care about Jewish welfare. But unless they accept that anti-Zionists can hold both convictions in good faith, they will render the institutions they control less and less reflective of the population they claim to represent. For their part, many anti-Zionists struggle with the idea that an abstract notion of peoplehood compels them to share space with Jews whose views about Palestinians they often find racist. But unless anti-Zionists affirm that Jews have a bond with one

another, irrespective of their politics, they will never gain the access they need to change the American Jewish establishment from the inside. For Jews on both sides of the widening communal divide, the challenge is to protect and learn from each other while remaining true to our respective principles.

**ON ISRAELI INDEPENDENCE DAY**, 1956, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, arguably the most influential American Modern Orthodox rabbi of the 20th century, gave a lecture at Yeshiva University called "[Listen, My Beloved Knocks](#)," a title drawn from a verse in Song of Songs. Soloveitchik's topic was Jewish suffering and division, but the division to which he responded was different from our own. His audience was composed of Orthodox Jews who felt distant from both their less observant American Jewish counterparts and the State of Israel, with its secular government. Soloveitchik offered them a language for understanding what they and their fellow Jews did and did not share.

Soloveitchik argued that God had forged two covenants with the Jewish people. The first, the

Covenant of Fate, was born in slavery in Egypt, when Jews were bound together by a common threat. Since antisemitism remained, Soloveitchik urged his fellow Orthodox Jews to recognize that they shared a Covenant of Fate with their more secular coreligionists. "A Jew who is observant but does not feel the hurt of the nation, and who attempts to distance himself from Jewish fate," Soloveitchik wrote, "desecrates his Jewishness." He encouraged his followers to obey the Talmud's instruction that "all Jews are sureties for one another."

But Soloveitchik claimed there was also a second covenant, born at Sinai, which he called the Covenant of Destiny. It stemmed not from a common threat but from a common vision. For Soloveitchik, that vision was "a life of Torah and mitzvot"—a life that most contemporary Jews did not lead.

By distinguishing between the Covenant of Destiny, the common vision that binds some Jews, and the Covenant of Fate, the common danger that binds all Jews, Soloveitchik offered a vocabulary for Jewish

solidarity in the face of deep division. He hoped that division would end, and all Jews would one day observe Jewish law. But in the meantime, he provided a justification for cooperation between Jews of all stripes. In the same year that he delivered “Listen, My Beloved Knocks,” Soloveitchik [offered](#) a set of principles for Orthodox engagement with the wider Jewish community. On religious questions—standards for conversion, criteria for sacred literature—he insisted that the Orthodox remain apart. But on non-religious issues—antisemitism, economic welfare, relationships with diaspora governments, and support for the state of Israel—he urged his Orthodox followers to work with their fellow Jews.

Today, few American Modern Orthodox rabbis would worry that their followers might refuse to join more secular Jews in defending Israel. America’s most powerful Jewish institutions bring Jews together from across the religious spectrum to do exactly that. For today’s American Jewish establishment, the Covenant of Destiny is not Torah and mitzvot. It’s political Zionism. You don’t need to keep kosher, observe Shabbat, or even believe in

God to join AIPAC, be appointed to a Federation board, or speak at a Hillel. You simply need to believe in a Jewish state.

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But that common vision—which has been the bedrock of organized American Jewish life since at least the 1967 War—is fraying, because of both trends in Israel-Palestine and trends in the United

States. Already, according to a July Jewish Electorate Institute [poll](#), 20% of American Jews support a single, equal, non-Jewish state in Israel-Palestine. And as Jewish settlement growth in the West Bank renders the prospect of a viable Palestinian state ever more remote, that figure is likely to grow. In a 2018 [survey](#), University of Maryland professor Shibley Telhami found that if a two-state solution were no longer possible, 64% of Americans—and 78% of Democrats—would support “a single democratic state in which Arabs and Jews are equal even if that means Israel would no longer be a politically Jewish state.” In an email, Telhami told me that while it’s hard to get a statistically valid sample of Jews in a poll of the general public, in his surveys Jews “have not varied much from the rest of the population on these issues.”

Demographic changes in the US are also shattering the American Jewish consensus over Zionism. American Jewry’s religious center—the Reform and Conservative movements—is collapsing: According to the Pew Research Center’s [survey](#) last year, only 37% of American Jews between the ages of 18 and 30 identify with either of these movements, while

the religious poles, Orthodox Jews and Jews who do not affiliate with any religious stream, together comprise almost 60%. (Among American Jews ages 65 and older, by contrast, they account for only one-quarter.) As American Jewry's religious center crumbles, so does its political center: two-state Zionism. Rising in its place are the political extremes. Although the Pew survey did not ask about Zionism, it asked about support for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction of Israel, which offers a crude proxy. Unaffiliated Jews, the segment of American Jewry least committed to Jewish statehood, oppose BDS by a margin of only ten points (though a majority don't know enough to have an opinion). Orthodox Jews, by contrast, oppose it by 64 points, the largest margin of any Jewish group. Most American Orthodox Jews are comfortable with a Jewish state that denies millions of Palestinians basic rights. Most unaffiliated American Jews are disconnected from Zionism and, to the extent they care, open to an egalitarian alternative.

These two ascendant American Jewish populations don't just approach Israel in radically different ways.

They approach life in radically different ways. According to Pew, Orthodox Jews are among the most religious groups in the US, more likely even than Black Protestants and white evangelicals to say religion is very important in their lives. Unaffiliated Jews are among the groups least likely to say so. Which helps explain why these two rising Jewish populations feel little connection to one another. Unaffiliated Jews are more likely to say they feel some affinity with mainline Protestants or American Muslims than with Orthodox Jews. Pew did not gather data on how Orthodox Jews feel about the unaffiliated, but given that half of Orthodox Jews feel they have “little” or “nothing” in common with even Reform Jews, the alienation is likely reciprocated.

**AS AMERICAN JEWRY’S CONTEMPORARY COVENANT OF DESTINY,** political Zionism, collapses, American Jews will find it harder to join together in what Soloveitchik called a Covenant of Fate, a common commitment to protect Jews against external threats. American Jews today disagree

deeply about the nature of those threats—in large measure because they disagree about if and when criticisms of Israel and Zionism constitute antisemitism. But even if one adopts a narrow definition of antisemitism—which centers on attacks upon Jews simply for being Jews—there is ample evidence that the threat remains, and may grow in the years to come as white nationalism becomes a more potent political force.

In 2019 in Pittsburgh, a white nationalist committed the [deadliest antisemitic attack in US history](#). Two years later, the Republican Party remains saturated with white nationalist ideology and largely beholden to Donald Trump, who made [cruder public antisemitic statements](#) than any US president in generations. Moreover, the fears that produced Trump and the Pittsburgh massacre—that demographic and cultural changes threaten white male Christian hegemony—are unlikely to abate. As the political scientists Eitan Hersh and Laura Royden recently [detailed](#), the Americans with the most antisemitic attitudes are not merely right-wing, they are also young. According to the [Public Religion Research Institute](#), young right-wing Americans are

also more likely than their elders to endorse the views of QAnon, a movement whose adherents are [disproportionately likely](#) to believe antisemitic conspiracy theories.

But white nationalism is not the only threat American Jews face. Research suggests that violence in Israel-Palestine may also generate antisemitism against diaspora Jews. In a 2020 [article](#) in the journal *Politics and Religion*, the political scientist Ayal Feinberg compiled a list of every Israeli military operation between 2001 and 2014 that produced one hundred or more casualties, as recorded by the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem. He found that in weeks in which those operations occurred, state authorities in the US reported a 35% increase in violent antisemitic hate crimes to the FBI, as compared with other weeks. (As Mari Cohen [has noted](#), FBI hate crime data is far from perfect. But its limitations are steady over time, and Feinberg notes a consistent spike during Israeli military offensives, one that parallels findings in [Belgium](#) and [Australia](#).)

Although there's no way to be certain, there's reason

to believe that in the coming years, violence in Israel-Palestine will increase. Since the end of the Second Intifada in 2005, all-out warfare between Palestinians and Israeli Jews has been comparatively rare. The single biggest reason for this is that under Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has worked closely with the Israeli military to prevent attacks against Israeli Jews. But as a political strategy, this security cooperation—which Abbas hoped would convince Israel to allow a Palestinian state—has failed. Abbas is now 85 years old, and [deeply unpopular](#). His successor may continue his efforts. But sooner or later, it's likely either that Palestinian leaders will conclude that helping Israel maintain the occupation does not serve Palestinian interests, or that ordinary Palestinians will launch an uprising that the delegitimized Palestinian Authority cannot contain. If either of those shifts transpire, violence against Israeli Jews will likely rise, and Israel will almost certainly respond by inflicting even more violence upon Palestinians. Research like Feinberg's suggests this will probably spark more antisemitism in the US.

But rising antisemitism, whether it derives from white nationalism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or other causes, will not menace all American Jews equally. While antisemitism threatens liberal and secular Jews—the Pittsburgh shooter attacked a [progressive, egalitarian](#) synagogue—it threatens Orthodox Jews more because they are more visible and spend more time in Jewish spaces like synagogues and Jewish schools. According to Pew, the Orthodox are three times as likely as unaffiliated Jews to say they have been made to feel unwelcome because they are Jews, and almost three times as likely to say they have been called offensive names. They are also 29% more likely than unaffiliated Jews to say they feel less safe than they did five years ago. American Jews need a new communal compact that allows us to think together, across the Zionist divide, about how best to protect each other, and Jews around the world. Like Soloveitchik's bargain 65 years ago, such a compact will not bridge the most profound communal divides. But it could identify common initiatives that American Jews can take despite them. And where divisions cannot be bridged, creating shared spaces based on mutual respect may make those divisions less toxic.

The first step in forging such a compact is for the American Jewish establishment to reconsider its assumption that anti-Zionism is incompatible with a concern for Jewish safety. An anti-Zionist speaker wishing to argue the point would not be granted a platform at their local Hillel, their local Jewish Federation, or even, in most cases, their local synagogue. The reason is that the American Jewish establishment sees its Covenant of Destiny, political Zionism, as inseparable from the Jewish people's Covenant of Fate. It defines Jewish statehood and Jewish self-protection as one and the same.

For most establishment Jewish leaders, the claim that Israeli Jews—and, indeed, all Jews—might ultimately be safer without a Jewish state sounds absurd. But it's not: As I have [argued](#), political science research [suggests](#) that divided societies are generally more peaceful when all groups have access to state power. Establishment Jewish leaders need not agree with such arguments. They need merely accept that anti-Zionist Jews can make them in good faith, that they represent a different strategy for ensuring the safety of Israeli Jews—a strategy

that links Jewish safety to Palestinian equality and freedom—not a denial that Israeli Jews deserve to be safe. To declare such a position illegitimate because most Israeli Jews support Jewish statehood is unfair. Privileged groups usually think it's in their self-interest to maintain that privilege. Yet from South Africa to Northern Ireland to the Jim Crow South, history often proves them wrong.

What would it mean to create spaces where Jews who disagree about Zionism—who don't share a Covenant of Destiny—can still affirm a Covenant of Fate, a shared concern for Jewish lives? It would mean allowing anti-Zionist Jews to present their case in communal forums. It would mean pressing the Israeli government to stop barring them from entering the country so they can participate in debates there, too. It would mean that when Jews are threatened, in Israel, the US, or anywhere else, umbrella organizations that claim to speak for all American Jews would create events in which all Jews can express their anguish—without making Zionism a requirement for entry. It would mean that if antisemites desecrate an Orthodox synagogue, many of whose members admire Benjamin

Netanyahu and Donald Trump, and the local chapter of the anti-Zionist group Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) wants to help clean up the broken glass, the synagogue's rabbi would welcome them, and tell his flock to temporarily put aside its political disagreements.

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All this would be deeply uncomfortable for the American Jewish establishment. But it would be

uncomfortable for anti-Zionist Jews too, many of whom find the perspectives of America's dominant Jewish institutions just as offensive as those institutions find theirs. After decades of marginalization, many anti-Zionist Jews have grown accustomed to their separate, oppositional realms. As Rabbi Alissa Wise, JVP's former deputy director, explained to me, "Mainstream Jewish organizations have created formal policies to exclude us anti-Zionist Jews, and so we exclude ourselves, [instead] prioritizing building new kinds of Jewish formations."

If anti-Zionist Jews want the American Jewish establishment to stop excluding them—and to open Jewish communal spaces to their critique of Zionism—they must accept, ironically, that there are times and places to put that critique aside. If Jews are killed, whether in Pittsburgh, Paris, or Ashdod, and the local Jewish federation invites anti-Zionist Jewish groups to mourn alongside the rest of the Jewish community, anti-Zionist Jews must recognize that they are being asked to help create a space that is neither Zionist nor anti-Zionist—a space where Jews set aside their feelings about the Israeli

government to affirm a shared concern for Jewish lives. If the rabbi of the Trump and Netanyahu-loving Orthodox synagogue asks his congregants to let members of the JVP chapter help clean up the broken glass, those members should leave their denunciations of Trump and Netanyahu—valid as they are—for another day.

American Jewry's most powerful institutions operate on the premise that Jews constitute a people—an imagined extended family—with special obligations to one another. This notion has deep roots in Jewish tradition. The term “Jew” comes from Judah—the fourth son of Jacob, later renamed Israel—who in the Book of Genesis offers to sacrifice his own freedom for the sake of his brother Benjamin. And even when Judah's family becomes a people, in the Book of Exodus, the Torah still calls its members *b'nai Yisrael*, children of Israel.

As *Jewish Currents* editor-in-chief [Arielle Angel](#) and scholar [Yair Wallach](#) have recently pointed out, Jewish peoplehood is neither a simple nor an uncontested notion. And, perhaps because the claim that Jews should feel a kinship to one another has

become so intertwined with the claim that Jews should support the state of Israel, polling suggests that some Jewish anti-Zionists struggle with the idea of Jewish peoplehood itself. When the Pew Research Center, at my request, crunched their survey data to compare Jews who support BDS to those who don't, it found that Jewish BDS supporters were less than half as likely to say they feel a "great deal" of belonging to the Jewish people, to say they feel a responsibility to help Jews in need around the world, and to have donated to a Jewish charity. (Jews who had not heard enough about the BDS movement to hold an opinion gave similar answers to BDS supporters.)

Finding the right balance between one's obligation to other Jews and one's obligation to all people is not an easy task. And when it comes to Palestinians, the American Jewish establishment often uses the former as an excuse to ignore the latter. But the more willing anti-Zionist Jews are to affirm the bonds of Jewish peoplehood, the more likely they are to gain the access they require to change the American Jewish establishment from the inside. Anti-Zionist Jews will not enter AIPAC. But they

need and deserve a seat at the table when Hillels invite speakers; when Jewish Community Centers organize events for Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Nakba Day, or some combination of the two; or when Jewish day schools and synagogue schools teach about Israel-Palestine. Anti-Zionist Jews are more likely to gain seats at those tables if they distinguish Jewish peoplehood from Jewish statehood than if they reject both.

Creating shared spaces—which both open a debate about Zionism and at times put it aside so Jews can focus on what we share—would help American Jews protect each other. Jewish communal institutions will be more effective in combating violence against Jews if they stop wasting resources by trying to criminalize nonviolent efforts to boycott Israel. And they will be better able to protect Haredi Jews, who often live in neighborhoods where they experience friction with communities of color, if those institutions can draw on the insights of leftist Jews who work closely with activists from those communities.

These shared spaces would also help American Jews

learn from each other. I believe this because I myself have learned so much from Jews whose politics fundamentally differ from mine. I have spent my adult life in Orthodox synagogues, where I have adhered to a tacit bargain. I ask the community to tolerate my views on Israel, not endorse them. I recognize that there are places and times—during moments of prayer and study, for example—to put aside political debate and focus on what my fellow worshippers and I share.

Some might consider this cowardly. To me, it feels prudent. By living inside the Orthodox community, I benefit from its deep commitment to Jewish education and Jewish practice, which hopefully makes me a more knowledgeable and committed Jew. And, in the process, I develop a more intimate and empathic understanding of people whose political views I oppose—which hopefully makes me a better political critic, and supporter of Palestinian freedom.

I'm not suggesting that Jewish critics of Israel embrace Orthodox Judaism. I'm suggesting that Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews create their own

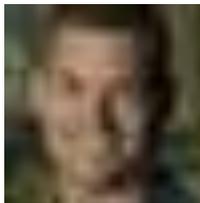
sanctuaries from the Israel debate, places where Jews, across religious and ideological divides, can affirm our mutual obligations and learn from each other. That could mean studying Jewish texts together. It could mean working together to help the Jewish elderly or the Jewish poor. The goal would not be to forestall a debate over Israel. It would be to create relationships that make that debate—which must enter the major institutions of Jewish communal life—less toxic. If you know a Jewish anti-Zionist personally, it's harder to label them an "ex-Jew."

We need Jewish leaders to do in our time what Soloveitchik did in his: Help Jews reach across religious and ideological divides. On Kol Nidre, 2019, Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari gave a [D'var Torah](#) at Kol Tzedek, a reconstructionist congregation in Philadelphia whose [website](#) features a Black Lives Matter logo, a rainbow logo, and an acknowledgement that the synagogue sits "on the traditional lands of the Lenape and Delaware tribes," but no Israeli flag. In his sermon, Fornari warned of a "deep chasm in the Jewish community." He urged his congregants "to extend beyond our comfort

zones, to vouch for each other across our differences . . . because even though we are wildly different, we are still ultimately one.” And, with a slightly different translation, he quoted the same Talmudic passage that Soloveitchik cited 65 years ago: “all Jews are guarantors for one another.”

I hope we can be. The effort won’t only make us safer. It will make us better, too. **JC**

Read 1 letter to the editor about “Reclaiming the Covenant of Fate”



**Peter Beinart** is the editor-at-large of *Jewish Currents*.

 **PETERBEINART**