

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
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### Loyalty

On April 25, 1915, Louis D. Brandeis spoke to the Conference of the Eastern Council of Reform Rabbis in an address (bizarrely?) entitled, “The Jewish Problem: How to Solve It.”<sup>1</sup>

Brandeis, a completely secular Jew, had in 1914 become the chair of the American Provisional Executive Committee for General Zionist Affairs, a kind of umbrella American Zionist organization. But at this speech, eight months before he was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Woodrow Wilson, Brandeis was speaking to Reform rabbis about the issue of Zionism. The Reform movement was not Zionist, at this point. That is to say, they did not support creating a Jewish homeland in the land of Israel. (It wasn’t until 1948 that they officially endorsed Zionism.) Reform Jewish leaders in America in the nineteen teens were concerned, still, with tenuousness of Jewish citizenship throughout the diaspora, including in the United States. They didn’t want to undermine Jewish citizenship in the United States with Jewish nationalism.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, they were worried about accusations of dual loyalty.

Brandeis countered these concerns directly. First, he explained that multiple loyalties, as long as they do not conflict, enhance, and do not detract, from America. “Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with Patriotism. Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent. A man is a better citizen of the United States for being also a loyal citizen of his state, and of his city; for being loyal to his family, and to his profession or trade; for being loyal to his college or his lodge.... Every American Jew who aids in advancing the Jewish settlement in Palestine, though he feels that neither he nor his descendants will ever live there, will likewise be a better man and a better American for doing so....”

But why, to Brandeis, does Zionism enhance American patriotism? He explains: “There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry. The Jewish spirit, the product of our religion and experiences, is essentially modern and essentially American. Not since the destruction of the Temple have the Jews in spirit and in ideals been so fully in harmony with the noblest aspirations of the country in which they lived. America’s fundamental law seeks to make real the brotherhood of man. That brotherhood became the Jewish fundamental law more than twenty-five hundred years ago. America’s insistent demand in the twentieth century is for social justice. That also has been the Jews’ striving for ages.... Indeed, loyalty to America demands rather that each American Jew become a Zionist.”

There’s a fundamental assumption though that undergirds Brandeis’s argument. For Brandeis, loyalty is owed to America and to Zionism because they represent the same values—values of justice, and righteousness, freedom and democracy. When we look deeper,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://louisville.edu/law/library/special-collections/the-louis-d.-brandeis-collection/the-jewish-problem-how-to-solve-it-by-louis-d.-brandeis>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2015/12/31/zionism-louis-d-brandeis-versus-american-reform-judaism>

Brandeis's true loyalty is not to nation, or nationalism, or even to Jews and Judaism. Rather, Brandeis is loyal to principles, to values.

He may not have been a religious Jew, but Brandeis internalized what is arguably the essence of the book of Deuteronomy, and through one frame, the fundamental demand of Judaism.

**דברים פרק י, כ-כא**

(כ) אֶת־יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִירָא אֹתוֹ תַעֲבֹד וְבוֹ תִדְבָּק וּבְשִׁמּוֹ תִשָּׁבַע: (כא) הוּא תְהִלָּתְךָ וְהוּא אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה אִתְּךָ אֶת־הַגְּדֹלֹת וְאֶת־הַגְּוֹרָאֹת הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ:

“Adonai your God, you are to hold-in-awe, God you are to serve, to God you are to cling, by God’s name you are to swear. God is your praise, and God is your God, who did for you these great and awe-inspiring (acts) that your (own) eyes saw” (trans. Everett Fox). Here, in Deuteronomy 10:20-21, right from our parasha, Ekev, Moses lays out God’s claim of loyalty to us. It’s the language of covenant, as is the language that comes in chapter 11, where Moses informs us of the rewards—abundance—God will give us if we remain loyal to God, as well as the punishments—drought and famine—that will befall us if we are disloyal, words with which we are well familiar as they form the second paragraph of the Shema.

Covenant, partnership, love—these are relationships that demand loyalty. One way of understanding the loyalty God asks of us is based on God’s identity as God. But a more modern but I think perfectly reasonable reading of Torah is that God is asking us to be loyal to the values and the teachings, to the Torah of God, even more than to God Godself. As Rabbi Shafrin quoted in his e-mail yesterday, “God shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing them with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Dt. 10:17-19).

God stands for kindness, and justice, and being loyal to God means being loyal to what God stands for.

One way of understanding the essence, core and mission of Judaism is as reorienting us to be loyal to the right things—based on their values. We’re loyal to our parents, except when they ask us to break Shabbat, or worse. Jonathan is loyal to his father King Saul, until Saul, crazed, wants to kill Jonathan’s best friend, David. We’re loyal to our family, and leaders and towns, except when they become false prophets or become disloyal to the values God represents, as we’ll read about next week in Deuteronomy 13.

Jews are, or at least should be, proudly disloyal to all forms of idolatry. As my friend and teacher Rabbi Shai Held wrote this week:

*Jews: Disloyal to idols since the days of Abraham.*

*Disloyal to tyrants since Pharaoh.*

*Disloyal to little men who wish they were God since Haman.*

*Disloyalty to evil is a form of loyalty to God.*

We love this, because there’s something so fun, so energizing, so righteous, about righteous disloyalty. Jews, counter-culturalists, leftists, and liberals of many stripes are much better at being disloyal than loyal. Disloyalty can almost become a fetish. But let us not relinquish the language and value concept of loyalty to those who use it to demand unthinking,

unquestioned fealty. Rather, let us speak of loyalty too. Let us speak honestly, openly and proudly of the values, the history, the holiness, and the hope, to which we are loyal.

Rabbi Irwin Keller, a rabbi in California, wrote the following poem, I assume this week:

### ***Disloyal Jew***

I am a disloyal Jew.  
I am not loyal to a political party.  
Nor will I be loyal to dictators and mad kings.  
I am not loyal to walls or cages.  
I am not loyal to taunts or tweets.  
I am not loyal to hatred, to Jew-baiting, to the gloating connivings of white supremacy.

I am a disloyal Jew.  
I am not loyal to any foreign power.  
Nor to abuse of power at home.  
I am not loyal to a legacy of conquest, erasure and exploitation.  
I am not loyal to stories that tell me who I should hate.

I am a loyal Jew.  
I am loyal to the inconveniences of kindness.  
I am loyal to dream of justice.  
I am loyal to this suffering Earth  
And to all life.  
I am not loyal to any founding fathers.  
But I am loyal to the children who will come  
And to the quality of world we leave them.  
I am not loyal to what America has become.  
But to what America could be.  
I am loyal to Emma Lazarus. To huddled masses.  
To freedom and welcome,  
Holiness, hope and love.

So what would our friend, Justice Louis Brandeis say, if he were faced with an America and/or an Israel whose values he didn't recognize, whose values he could not be loyal to? I want to believe that he would, to the full extent of the law, be disloyal to the nation and its institutions, and instead would be loyal to the ideals and values that he and we understand are the foundation of the best of Judaism, and the best of America. Loving the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor, loving peace and pursuing peace, and not resting until justice is done.

Shabbat shalom.