

Kol Nidre Talk, 2025

When I wrote *Haven of Liberty*, a history of the Jews of New York City from 1654 to the Civil War, I sought to uncover the political behavior of this community as it grew from a few hundred to 40,000. I found that Jews in early America abandoned their allegiance to the Hamiltonians because of their support of Jeffersonian egalitarianism and the French Revolution. I discovered that by the 1850s, the city's Jewish population, economically tied to the southern trade, had become deeply conservative, twice voting against Lincoln. The 1920s found Jews still loyal to the Democratic Party, then a conservative coalition partial to immigrants and white Southerners.

Then came the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt, and political revolution. Republicans became the more conservative party, and Democrats the party of modern liberalism in which the government was an advocate for those in economic distress. Along with other minorities, American Jews became intensely loyal to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, a party that they saw as championing the civil rights and civil liberties of all, including opposition to housing restrictions, quotas, and anti-Semitism. This allegiance continues to this day; Jews have been supportive of civil rights for all minorities because they know how important it was to their success. Significantly, this vision of social

acceptance was far easier in a nation of diverse minorities than in an ethno-national state such as France, Germany, or Italy.

In the years since Roosevelt American Jews succeeded in every avenue, including the arts, business, politics, and science. It is one of the most remarkable chapters of American history. Unsurprisingly, they remained loyal to the Democratic Party.

With the rise of the state of Israel in 1948, a country whose birth was directly aided by a Democratic president, Jews, perhaps to their surprise, found that they were able to both support the new state and remain patriotic Americans. Their support for Israel was enhanced by the new state's liberal domestic government, in harmony with the New Deal. The Palestinian issue seemed remote.

How different is the world of 2025. Today the two countries that matter most to American Jews are governed by people and parties that have defiantly rejected every aspect of the liberal state, forcing American Jews into a political wilderness, a wilderness from which we are struggling to find a way out.

Let us turn first to Israel. As many of you know, a few months ago Zohran Mamdani triggered a political earthquake by winning the Democratic nomination for and almost certainly the election to the office of Mayor of New York City.

New York City's population includes 2 million Jews, the largest Jewish population of any city in the world. Mamdani could not have won without a sizable Jewish vote. Why would so many New York City Jews vote for a 33-year-old South Asian State Senator from Queens, knowing that while he is decidedly not anti-Semitic, he is not a Zionist, and strongly opposes the policies of the present government in Israel?

An important reason relates to the question of an ethno-state. David Ben-Gurion believed that the integration of Jews and Palestinians was impossible and determined that 80% of the citizens had to be Jewish. 750,000 Palestinian Arabs were expelled in 1948. While American Jews celebrated their "multiethnic democracy in which the rights and security of political minorities are protected," Israel rejected this framework, perhaps of necessity, for sure out of ideology.

At first American Jews in the 1940s ignored the fact that that Israel rejected the diversity that had been critical to their success. After the Holocaust Jews deserved and needed a homeland of their own. However, after the Six Day War and the ensuing occupation of land housing two and a half million Palestinians, all taking place during the civil rights movement, became a concern of a significant number of American Jews, as worldwide Palestinian cause became a rallying point for oppressed or formerly oppressed minorities.

By itself, the Palestinian issue could not alienate American Jews from Israel, a land that over the years became the core of their Jewish identity. A powerful emotional bond grew between American Jews and Israel that is nearly unbreakable. Yet, what is threatening this powerful tie is the challenge created by the election of the most extremist government in the history of Israel. Shockwaves roiled the American Jewish community when major cabinet positions were given to Itamar Ben Gvir, a follower of Meir Kahane, who was so extreme that the Israeli army refused to admit him, and to Bezalel Smotrich who openly sought to rid the West Bank and then Gaza of all Palestinians.

Problems began with the attempt by the government to eliminate Israel's independent judiciary and then exploded following the tragedy of October 7. The outrage over the murder and other barbaric atrocities committed by Hamas at first united world opinion, especially the European democracies, behind Israel. We all believed that Israel was fighting a just war and held hope that in the aftermath of hostilities Israeli leadership might look to the conflict as a step toward not just eliminating the radical Islamist movement but to a reconciliation with the Palestinians.

Nothing like that has happened. As the people around the world watched on television, they saw that the response to Hamas produced

massive loss of life in which over 50 Palestinians were killed for every Israeli who had died during the Hamas massacre. They saw so many women and children in white body bags, mourned by their mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. They saw the destruction of the infrastructure of the entire society. And they saw Israel break a truce that might have led to a settlement that included key Arab and European states and the Palestinian Authority.

As the war continues for two years now, it has lost support everywhere. In Israel only 25% back it. There are huge demonstrations every Saturday night. Many European democracies last week declared their recognition of a Palestinian state, a state that doesn't exist, as an act of protest. When Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke at the United Nations, he spoke to an empty hall. In a poll released a few days ago, only 49% of Americans agreed that it is in America's interest to support Israel while 50% of Americans believes Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

While many American Jews still believe the war remains a struggle for survival against an inveterate enemy, many others believe that the conduct of what was a just war has deteriorated into a revengeful vendetta causing massive deaths, severe malnutrition, and the destruction of almost all Gazan infrastructure. Israel still holds their

allegiance, but it is telling and unsettling that most Jews under 35 feel little or no connection to Israel. We have a divided Jewish community with one generation unable to speak to the next, children unable to communicate with their parents.

Brooklyn Rabbi Rachel Timoner describes the dilemma: “it’s a place of so much pain for the Jewish people right now portions of the Jewish community are distraught over conditions in Gaza, over the behavior of the government and are in pain over the pull of loyalty and family and humanitarian commitments. Another portion feels that we here in America cannot know what it is like to live as Israelis do, surrounded by people trying to kill them. They feel that Jews must stand with other Jews in their danger and existential need to be safe.”

This situation is made all the worse because the war in Gaza is a major factor in the rise of anti-Semitism. The widespread coverage of the conflict, with its pictures of amputees and emaciated children, has exacerbated anti-Semitism here and abroad, given anti-Semites a weapon, isolating Israel among the family of nations.

Understanding this, we can understand why Mamdani has so much support among younger Jews of New York. When a former Israeli Prime Minister states that “what we are doing now in Gaza is a war of devastation: indiscriminate, limitless, cruel and criminal killing of

civilians,” his words send a chill through the hearts of many American Jews, including those sitting here tonight. Those who are moved by these words of Ehud Olmert face a disquieting dilemma. We have deeply loved and supported Israel as have our parents and grandparents, but this government is sharply at odds with our ideas of democracy and our values, and many of us feel that this war is taking Israel further and further away from us.

Today, there is a real possibility that the agreement, brokered by the United States, European states, and several Arab states, could end the war. We pray that that will happen. If it does the process of healing, a process central to Yom Kippur, can begin as the Jewish communities come to grips with what has happened the last two years. This will take time, but there is the possibility that there will be reconciliation within the American Jewish community, within the Israeli Jewish community and even between the Israeli and American Jewish communities. Perhaps, though it seems far out of reach right now, there could even be the beginning of reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. One can only hope.

And then there is our second dilemma: that our American government, dominated by extreme right-wing populists, has repudiated almost everything we believe in. We know that a country in which the rights

and security of minorities are protected is the bedrock of our safety. We know that diversity has provided us the opportunity to excel and prosper. Yet we have a government that is doing everything it can to destroy American diversity whether within universities, schools, corporations, and culture. We know that we are the children and grandchildren of immigrants, and that immigration has also been a bedrock of our success. None of us would be here, few of us would be alive without it. Yet we have a government that wants to deport millions of immigrants, many of whom have been here for years and has virtually ended the acceptance of refugees. Jews have prospered under the First Amendment and yet we have a government increasingly intent on censorship. Jews have prospered in science, winning many Nobel prizes, and we have a government that could care less about scientific research, cutting off its funding and mocking its conclusions.

We are witnessing the implementation of the authoritarian playbook page by page by page and at unimaginable speed. This includes the elimination, intimidation or total capture of our great institutions including our universities, our corporations, our television and radio stations, our public schools, and our government. Just this week we saw the weaponization of the Department of Justice with instructions to indict the political enemy even when there is no evidence, spreading fear among the population. Sending troops into communities that don't

want them. Have we ever had a greater political crisis since the Civil War? No. We have a five-alarm fire.

These dilemmas have created some of the greatest anguish and anxiety in my life and, I'm sure, in many of yours. But on this most sacred day, what does our tradition say to us? As we become aware of the dilemmas we face, the difficult and dangerous situation we are in, it tells us that we must look to our friends and family for comfort and support. Yom Kippur is a time of healing, not of despair, and so we must not allow ourselves to fall into depression. That only leads to a desperate sense of loneliness and helplessness. Instead, look to Moses' words to the Israelites shortly before he died: "Justice, justice you shall pursue." We must speak out, have the courage of our convictions. If you believe like I do that the two countries we care most about are abandoning justice and rejecting our core values, we must not be silent or afraid. History moves in cycles. Think of the McCarthy era, a time when America was overtaken by fear, repression, and conspiracy theories; people fought back and ultimately it was soundly rejected, McCarthyism became a dreaded word. As we hope that on this day we will experience tshuva, and return to our better selves, so too, we trust that the two nations we love will find their better angels. This will not happen overnight or without much effort and heartbreak. But in the Jewish tradition of Tikun Olam, healing the world, we will not falter. On

Yom Kippur we say that the book is sealed, but for those of us privileged to live on into 5786, the book reopens. Will the new year see at least the beginning of the change we desire? We must resolve to make it so. We have no choice.

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