

## WEEKEND

# When Israel's existence is the issue

The rise in antisemitism American Jews currently face is likely to slow down, but anti-Israel sentiment will not, says a distinguished U.S. rabbi and educator. What impact will these trends have on Jewish life, and how should we prepare for a dramatic shift in attitudes to Israel?

**Michael J. Brody**

Jewish life in North America is in flux and we face much uncertainty. Between the war in Israel and the rise in antisemitism that has followed here, much of what many of us once thought was stable no longer is.

If one can anticipate the storms that are approaching, one has a better chance of blunting their impact, or even avoiding them altogether. In that spirit, I would like to offer some observations about what the future might bode, and some suggestions about how we as a community can address the changes that are lying in wait.

Two basic assumptions underlie my observations. First, that the rise in antisemitism will slow, and, second, that the rise in anti-Israelism will not.

Although there has been a notable spike in antisemitism, both on college campuses and in public communal life, during the past half-year, there are five reasons to think that the trend will be temporary. First, almost all of the antisemitic activity we are seeing is prohibited by law here, and authorities in the United States tend to take hate crimes seriously. Second, there is an ingrained American revulsion to antisemitism. It has a long history and runs deep and wide, and it can be said that there is only a very minor public tradition of antisemitism here. Third, Americans have developed and internalized a resistance to any culture that judges people based on external characteristics.

Fourth, to continue this line of thinking, a great deal of energy and effort – educational, legislative, social, communal and even interfaith-driven – is being directed toward combating antisemitism. Finally, and most important, the people who would like to see Israel cease to exist realize that conflating “Israel hatred” with “Jew hatred” is bad for their cause. As Wassim Kanaan, chair of American Muslims for Palestine-New Jersey, said to *The New York Times* recently, “[t]his has nothing to do with the Jewish faith; it has everything to do with the policies of the State of Israel and its treatment of Palestinians. But there’s a weaponization of antisemitism allegations to silence advocates for Palestine.”

No one wants to be labeled an antisemite today – not even the chair of an organization called “American Muslims for Palestine.”

So far, the blessings. Now, the curses.

While antisemitism will decline, it is clear that hatred of Israel will not. In almost all public settings in America, Israel’s very existence has become a matter of controversy. The era when television could produce and air a show called “The Stars Salute Israel at 30” without opposition is over. Between the claim that Israel is a settler-colonial state, the growing strength of America’s Muslim and Palestinian communities, the problems (real and imagined) of the post-1967 conquered territories, the fact that, generally, we are living in an extraordinarily partisan time, and the deep protections granted to almost all political speech in America – it is unlikely that the current surge in anti-Israel activism will substantially diminish in public life or on campus. Of course, the federal government will work (successfully, one suspects) to suppress anti-Israel violence,

such as the recent riot at the University of California, Berkeley, but Israel will remain a source of greater controversy than Judaism and Jewishness.

Of course, none of this is to imply that the supporters of Israel will lose the battle for the hearts and minds of the American public. Rather, it suggests only that the fight will go on, without resolution. In other words, the nearly uniform pro-Israel sentiment that characterized Americans during the past 50 years ago is over. Being Jewish may not be greeted with significant public animus (even as antisemitism will be ever-present, if latent), but being a supporter of Israel will remain controversial. Even with universities and colleges, which have unusually broad legal protections for speech, one can predict that they will find a way for people to express their Israel-hatred so long as it does not come across as palpable Jew-hatred or turn violent.

Of course, some readers might take issue with the distinction that I draw between being anti-Israel or anti-Zionist, and being antisemitic, arguing that they are actually one and the same thing. Indeed, most Jews hold that view. One suspects, however, that this perspective will not triumph in American public discourse or in terms of American law. We should not confuse what we want to happen with what we think will happen.

Of course, either or both of my above predictions could be wrong. Maybe antisemitism will thrive and we are heading into a period in which all Jews – pro-Israel or not – will feel the violent weight of their religion every day. Or maybe peace could break out in the Middle East, leading to a cessation of violence. There are of course also many other possibilities. Predicting the outcome of the current war in Israel is complex; indeed, few predicted that the Yom Kippur War would lead to peace between Israel and Egypt. Nonetheless, if nothing changes radically, one can easily imagine an America where antisemitism continues to be suppressed readily while anti-Israelism – with all its consequences and permutations – persists unabated.

What does all this mean for the wider Jewish community, religious and secular? If we are living in a Western democracy where Judaism is not subject to significant hostility, but the State of Israel is a matter of public controversy, much will be different, and Jewish life can be expected to face big changes. One can anticipate at least five such changes.

First, an Israel that remains controversial will lead many conflict-averse American Jews to distance themselves from it. As a recent article noted, many Jewish community centers are already – without controversy – diminishing the role Israel plays in their programming and everyday life. To some extent this phenomenon is grounded in a desire to make JCCs protest-free spaces, but to some extent it is grounded in the fact that even within the Jewish community, Israel is controversial.

Second, an Israel with contested support will alter the nature of Conservative and Reform synagogue life. For several decades now, support of Israel (together with Holocaust remembrance) was the one thing that all members of both denominations could agree on. That kind of unity will now be far more challenging to achieve. In conversations I have had with a few rabbis from these denominations, all expressed an aware-



Jewish demonstrators calling for a cease-fire in Gaza, at New York's Rockefeller Center this past February.

Eduardo Munoz/Reuters

ness of this issue.

If Israel is not a unifying factor, what might take its place? There is a distinct possibility that these movements will return to the *mitzvot* (religious observance) as a common denominator for what it means to be Jewish. As a Reform rabbi told me recently, “to many in my community, *tikkun olam* means protesting against Israel.” That rabbi will no longer be talking about *tikkun olam* in his sermons.

Third, non-Zionist and anti-Zionist Orthodoxy might resurge. Historically, American Hasidism (with the exception of Chabad) has never been particularly Zionist, with its support of Israel tepid and non-ideological at best. Some sects (including Satmar and Popov) are explicitly anti-Zionist. It would not surprise me, then, if some in the Orthodox community now adopted such an ideology. Indeed, the rise of “neo-Hasidism” in the modern-Orthodox community could lead to the integration of even non-Zionist or anti-Zionist into its ideology.

Fourth, this trend will give rise to Jewish anti-Israel communities of the type that were present in America 75 years ago. One worries that such secular groups (similar to the Neturei Karta on the Orthodox side) will make denouncing Israel the focus of their Jewish life. Their “Judaism” is (extremely distastefully, in this author’s view) focused on demonstrating to the world that the conduct of the State of Israel – or even belief in the necessity of its very existence – is not a Jewish value. Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine seem to be such groups. Unlike non-Zionist Orthodoxy, which focuses on the technical performance of the commandments and not on Zionism, these groups will make what is wrong with Israel the calling card of their “religion.”

Finally, the non-Hasidic Orthodox community, with its three-sided com-

mitment to secular education for its young people, support of Israel and the observance of mitzvot, is going to suffer, one suspects. Orthodox Jews, who pride themselves in their presence at America’s leading universities, are likely to feel increasingly uncomfortable on campus, where Israel will remain a source of controversy. This could make those Jews rethink their public ideology, since being part of the Orthodox and Zionist community while attending or working at an elite university may prove to be more trouble than many want. If this community is going to resist the secular anti-Israel trend, it is going to have to train its young people to live in this new reality.

I will add one more prediction, one that extends beyond the Jewish community exclusively: The groups of Jews that remain Zionists will grow closer to the evangelical Christian community and even more distant from the liberal or progressive communities, with all the general changes that this entails.

We need to plan for life in a society in which antisemitism is mostly sub-rosa but anti-Israelism is a normal phenomenon. If we are heading in that direction, we need to consider how we – the broader Jewish community that still backs Israel – can continue to prosper in such a place, while maintaining our values. After all, an anti-Israeli but not overtly antisemitic society is not the one we in America have inhabited until now. Adapting to the new reality will demand devising different educational, religious, pastoral and communal approaches.

(Let me briefly contrast what America could look like with what is the norm in Europe, where antisemitism is robustly present along with anti-Israelism: European Jews are afraid to be Jewish in public and they are similarly afraid to engage in Is-

rael activism. Exactly because of the deep antisemitic traditions of Europe, anti-Israelism feeds into antisemitism in ways that it need not in America.)

Support of Israel will no longer be a unifying idea even within our community and certainly not in America generally. We will have to “reformulate” our community, examining our current policies and ideologies to see

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if they will work in the United States when Israel is a source of controversy. This is not a simple task, and requires a great deal of thought and planning.

Furthermore, to effectively address issues around a controversial Israel in a society that does draw a line when it comes to antisemitism, the Jewish community must embrace a mindset of complex and ongoing engagement on many fronts, looking at government, community and religious norms – and not just in the Jewish faith – in a place where support of Israel is contested. Quick fixes are unlikely – the focus must be on building a community with endurance. We will need to

bolster collective strength if we are to face what will be a novel challenge. Indeed, this might be a moment where the denominational competition that has been standard fare in American Jewish life will have to be reduced, so as to create vibrant pro-Israel spaces where all Jews who seek to support Israel can meet.

The purpose of meteorology is to be prepared for both bad weather and for being able to make hay while the sun is shining. Subgroups within society that do not see the trends gathering around them, will not prosper. My goal is to encourage our community to plan for the future that seems likely.

Some readers of earlier versions of this paper have suggested that because of the grim and sad, even demoralizing, picture it presents, I would do better not to publish it. In the spirit of both the criticism by the talmudic sages of Zecharya ben Avkulas, who was silent in the face of the impending threat to the Second Temple, out of a sense of modesty that his suggestions were not of value, and the disturbing story of Billy Mitchell, “father of the U.S. Air Force,” whose predictions about the centrality air power would have in future warfare were ignored in the 1920s, we need to resist this approach. The picture is sad and grim, no doubt. Realizing that, and planning for such a future, can be tough emotionally draining. The alternative – not planning for the future – however, is worse. The first step to a good plan is to appreciate what the future has in store.

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