

A Jewish centrist manifesto

JUNE 6, 2016



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Today is the 49th anniversary of the beginning of the Six Day War – and according to the Hebrew calendar, Yom Yerushalayim, Jerusalem Reunification Day. We are approaching the jubilee year of the Six Day War. Like many of you I recall those terrifying weeks – before the victory – of dread and aloneness that Jews around the world shared with Israelis. Our contemporary Jewish world has been shaped by the victory of June 1967, but we remain haunted by the vulnerability of May 1967.

For all its turbulence, the Jewish world of 1967 was blessed with clarity. Israel had just warded off a genocidal threat. The international movement to save Soviet Jewry was about to begin in earnest. And it seemed, in those years, that nothing could be clearer, simpler, than our struggle for Jewish survival.

Today we face an immeasurably more complicated reality. On the one hand, physical threats to our well-being persist – from a rising imperial Iranian regime to the growing open question of whether the brave post-Holocaust experiment of renewing Jewish life in Europe is still viable. But we also know that survivalism as the basis for Jewish identity is no longer enough to sustain us.

We face vexing challenges we could not have imagined in 1967. How can Israel safely extricate itself from the wrenching dilemma of ruling another people? A majority of Israelis know we must end that occupation – now approaching its 50th year – but fear the absence of a credible partner for a durable peace. Much of the international community trivializes our dilemma by insisting that Israel's choice is between occupation and peace – ignoring the history of Palestinian rejectionism and a poisoned

educational system that teaches Palestinian children to hate Israel and deny any Jewish connection to the land. Israel's critics all but ignore the terrorist groups on our borders – Hezbollah and Hamas and Islamic State and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards – and speak of solving the Palestinian conflict as though Israel were an island in the South Pacific.

Israel and the Jewish people confront two foreign policy challenges that will define our generation. The first is the assault on the legitimacy of the Jewish narrative. The second is our relationship with the Muslim world.

The assault on the Jewish story

Our task in the 21st century is to defend the integrity of the Jewish story of the 20th century – the return of the Jewish people home. That story is under assault from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, or BDS, whose goal is not to end the occupation of 1967 but of 1948 – that is, ending Jewish sovereignty in any borders.

The most insidious threat of BDS is not economic but ideological. On campuses around the world the very name “Zionism” is becoming tainted. Maddeningly, the more re-rooted we become as a people in our land, the more our indigenosity is being challenged. The growing counter-narrative to Zionism is that a Jewish state was forced on the Arab world by a guilty Europe – ignoring 4,000 years of Jewish connection to the land. Increasingly, then, the Holocaust is no longer a compelling argument for Jewish statehood but the opposite, an essential part of the anti-Zionist assault that defines Israel as a white European colonialist entity.

We have been slow to respond to this historic shift. Books and films produced by Israeli and Diaspora Jews still tell the old story – let's call it “Holocaust Zionism” – that no longer resonates for much of the world.

We need to begin telling a story that is rooted not only in the European Jewish experience but in the Middle East – and more than half of Israel's Jews trace their origins to its ancient, uprooted Jewish communities. We need to tell the story of the forgotten refugees – the effective expulsion of the Jews of the Middle East. Theodor Herzl set out to save the Jews of Europe but for the most part failed. Yet the state he imagined into being did save the Jews of the Middle East – who are the region's only minority to attain sovereignty and self-defense. Who can imagine what the fate of the Middle East's Jewish communities would be today without the existence of a Jewish state?

The assault on our story must be treated as a threat to our very being. There is no Jewish people, no Judaism, without the Jewish story. Who are the Jews? A story we tell ourselves about who we think we are.

We need to tell a more compelling Jewish story. Classical Zionism was the meeting point between need and longing. We have told the story of the Zionism of need, of refuge. But we have largely forgotten the Zionism of longing. What is our aspirational Zion, our vision of a Jewish state? What are our dreams, not only our fears, for Israel?

It is no longer enough to defend Israel with facts and figures. We need to devote the best minds in the Jewish world to reinvigorating our narrative. We need an intellectual and spiritual conversation about the meaning of Israel for our time. Why is Israel still essential – to the Jewish people, to the world? At a time of growing despair for humanity, what is the message of the Jewish people – a people that not only survived the abyss but managed at its most broken moment to actualize its most redemptive vision?

A new Muslim-Jewish conversation

Our second great foreign policy challenge is developing relations with the Muslim world. To a large extent the well-being and even physical safety of Jewish communities around the world will be determined by the quality of our relations with Islam. Even as the Christian world is ceasing to be the main address for theologically generated anti-Semitism, large parts of the Muslim world are increasingly taking its place.

And yet, there are signs of hope. The rise of an imperial Iranian regime is creating unprecedented openings for Israel in the Sunni Arab world. Along with a growing security dialogue we need to probe for openings for religious and cultural conversations. We need to explain who we are to the wider Muslim world – that we aren't just a religion, as Muslims tend to assume, but a people with a particular religious identity, with an essential attachment to the land of Israel and Jerusalem, and for whom the restoration of sovereignty is the heart of our religious and national dream.

Our approach to the Muslim world needs to be guided by two principles. The first is not to underestimate the threat of radical Islamism. Despite a tendency in the West to define Islamic State as the primary danger, that group is only the most pathological expression of a broader threat that includes the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah and Hamas – and the Iranian regime, which isn't part of the solution to Mid-East turmoil but the heart of the problem.

The second principle is not to overestimate the threat – which is radical Islamism, not Islam. We need to challenge those loud voices within the Jewish community that seek to reduce one of the essential faiths of humanity into a caricature based on selective scriptural quotes, that seek to turn 1.7 billion believers into enemies of the Jewish people and the West, and all Muslim Americans into a fifth column. Those voices are a danger to the Jewish people; they are false defenders that need to be rejected and refuted.

The American Jewish community needs to be at the forefront of efforts to protect the physical and emotional safety of American Muslims.

American Jewry has opportunities to create a model for Jewish-Muslim relations that may not exist elsewhere. Confronted with growing hatred and physical threat, Muslim Americans are in search of allies. This is the moment to initiate a new Muslim-Jewish conversation. What I've learned from working with young Muslim American leaders through the [Shalom Hartman Institute's Muslim Leadership Initiative](#) in recent years is that there is a keen interest in engaging the American Jewish community – and a willingness to hear the Jewish story.

How can we help create a new conversation between American Muslims and Jews? First, by suspending litmus tests for our potential partners. I don't care what you've said in the past or even what your positions are now; if you are willing to sit with me and hear my story, I am willing to do the same. We need to nurture a conversation that leaves room for growth and change.

Second, my goal is not to convince Muslim partners of the rightness of Israeli policies. We will continue to disagree, sometimes strongly. The goal is to increase understanding among Muslims of why Israel is essential to contemporary Jewish identity. The natural Jewish partners for the American Muslim community aren't on the far left anti-Zionist fringes but within the mainstream American Jewish community. And the same principle applies for Jews: Our Muslim partners shouldn't be those who repudiate Islam but mainstream American Muslims.

Toward a deeper Israel-Diaspora partnership

Internally, our great threat and temptation has always been schism, dividing into mutually unintelligible camps that can no longer even understand each other's commitments and concerns. And the pressures – political and cultural – that encourage schism are growing.

Concern for Israel was once our great unifier. But today Jews are increasingly divided over their anxieties for Israel. We are divided between those who believe that creating a Palestinian state will be an existential threat, and those who believe that failure to create a Palestinian state is the greater threat. We are divided between those who fear primarily for Israel's physical well-being in a disintegrating and radicalizing region, and those who fear for Israel's Jewish and democratic soul.

These strains threaten to weaken the relationship between Israel and American Jewry. Our geographical circumstances are leading us in opposite directions. Israelis live in the most dangerous and inhospitable region on the planet and so must be tough. American Jews live in the most benign and welcoming environment Jews have ever known, and so must be flexible.

We may well be living in the most extraordinary time in Jewish history. Our generation has inherited unimagined opportunity: the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty along with the near simultaneous emergence of the most powerful Diaspora community in our history. Either of those events would have been enough to redefine Jewish life for generations to come.

But the relationship between us urgently requires reexamination. In 1950, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and AJC President Jacob Blaustein defined the relationship between the new state of Israel and American Jewry. Israel would make no claims on the political loyalties of American Jews, while American Jews would support Israel's material needs. The Blaustein-Ben-Gurion agreement effectively defined a relationship of non-interference in each other's basic identities. That model worked well enough for two generations. But no longer. Our relationship can only be sustained if it is deepened.

We need to reimagine a Blaustein-Ben-Gurion Agreement for the 21st century. We need to reconceive the relationship in all its forms – political, cultural, religious, spiritual.

I need American Jews to be actively involved in my society. The life and death questions of war and peace will be determined by Israel's citizens. Still, if we are serious about defining Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people, then every Jew not only has the right but the responsibility to critique Israeli policies. My plea to Israel's Jewish critics is: Don't underestimate the severity of Israel's dilemmas, the terrible choices we face in the Middle East between one form of vulnerability and another.

Most of all I need American Jews as partners in defending the achievements of Israeli democracy. Those achievements are miraculous. There is no other example of the persistence of vigorous democratic institutions in a country under relentless existential threat since its birth, and populated by waves of immigrants from countries without democratic traditions. And yet I speak of the miracle of Israeli democracy not only with pride but anxiety. A miracle is a defiance of the laws of nature, and so cannot be taken for granted. The miracle of Israeli democracy, under growing strain, needs to be nurtured and protected.

I need the wisdom of American Jews in civil rights and minority relations. Israel needs to broaden its *Israeli* identity to embrace Arabs who are its citizens, even as it deepens its *Jewish* identity to include vigorous relationships with Diaspora Jews who are not its citizens.

I need your help in fulfilling Zionism's promise: to create a national identity that reflects the diversity of the Jewish people. Denying official recognition to entire Jewish denominations, while entrusting Judaism to a spiritually decadent rabbinic establishment, is a violation of the ethos of Jewish peoplehood – a profoundly anti-Zionist act.

I need your help in holding the Israeli center against the easy solutions of left and right, the purity of the extremes. I need partners in anguish, who share the two nightmares of centrist Israelis. The first nightmare is that there won't be a Palestinian state, and the status quo will continue indefinitely; the second nightmare is that there will be a Palestinian state, and we may not be able to adequately defend ourselves from the borders of June 4, 1967.

I believe that, despite the growing strength of the anti-democratic right in Israel and the rising disaffected leftwing voices among American Jews, a majority of both communities still hold centrist instincts. But the ethos of the center needs to be clearly defined – transformed from a mood into a worldview.

The worldview of the Jewish center is commitment to *klal Yisrael*, the entirety of the Jewish people, transcending the interests and ideologies of any of its constituent groups. Centrists know that a vital Jewish identity must express the uneasy interplay between our particularist Jewish commitments and our universalist human longings. Centrists are committed to an Israel that is alert to both security and morality; at once Jewish and democratic, the state of the Jewish people and the state of all its citizens; modern and traditional, a secular state in a holy land. Indeed centrists embrace those paradoxes as the defining elements of our peoplehood and the animating force of Israeliness, transforming Israel into a laboratory for humanity's challenges in the 21st century.

Only a vital center can protect us from the utopian fantasies of the Jews – whether it is “peace now” in a burning Middle East or “messiah now” on the incendiary Temple Mount.

The unity of June 1967 was necessarily ephemeral. No people can – or should – sustain that level of intense solidarity. Still, something of the spirit of 67 – an unconditional commitment to the primacy of Jewish peoplehood above our sectarian Jewish identities – is essential for Jewish existence. Our challenge is to accept the inevitability of our divisions over core issues and values, while refusing to allow those divisions to define our collective identity and turn into historic schisms. And to live our Jewish lives with gratitude and awe at the wondrous strangeness of the Jewish story, with the determination to be worthy of the opportunities it presents us.

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