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Israel-Gaza: two years on Judaism

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The Zionist consensus among US Jews has collapsed. Something new is emerging

Shaul Magid

Two years after the 7 October massacre and the onset of Israel's slaughter in Gaza, American Jewry has been profoundly transformed

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📷 People pray on the ground at an intersection on Yom Kippur as part of an act of civil disobedience organized by Jewish groups calling for a ceasefire in Israel's war in Gaza in Brooklyn, New York, on Thursday. Illustration: Guardian Design/Photos by Julius Constantine Motal/The Guardian, Pacific Press/Getty Images

It has been two years since the mass murder on 7 October 2023, an event that shook world Jewry more than any event since the creation of the state of [Israel](#).

For Jews it was shocking. For the state of Israel, it was deeply humiliating. The entire Zionist project was founded on the presumption that the Jewish state would prevent things like this from ever happening again.

A response was inevitable. But the response Israel pursued - the obliteration of Gaza, the killing and maiming of tens of thousands of civilians - was a choice. And this choice complicated how many American Jews processed the attack that set it in motion, and it now complicates the

community's commemoration of the day. How does one mourn and commemorate an atrocity against your people in the midst of an atrocity done to another people in your name?

The complexity of mourning lies in the fact that there is no consensus as to what any of this means. In fact, for the American Jewish community, the last two years have seen the collapse of a half-century-old consensus on Zionism itself.



📷 People tear fabric as part of a mourning ritual known as kriah during a Yizkor prayer service on Thursday. Photograph: Julius Constantine Motal/The Guardian

The beginnings of a Zionist consensus among American Jewry extends as far back as a [1915 essay](#) by the lawyer and then future supreme court justice Louis Brandeis titled “The Jewish Problem; How to Solve It”. But the consensus really takes hold after the six-day war in 1967. Before then, American Jewry housed a fragile but stable coexistence

between groups that had a range of views about the necessity of a Jewish state – Zionists, non-Zionists and anti-Zionists.

That coexistence persisted through the 1950s and 60s, in remnants of Jewish socialism, in the non-Zionist American Jewish Committee, in the anti-Zionist American Council for [Judaism](#) and other organizations. For Louis Finkelstein, the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Zionism was more spiritual than political, and he did not permit singing Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem, at JTS ordinations in the early 1960s. Nor were Zionism and pro-Israelism the centerpiece of Modern Orthodoxy until after the six-day war. Jewish identitarian alternatives coexisted.

But after Israel routed its neighbors in the six-day war in 1967, occupying territories including the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and East Jerusalem, the American Jewish relationship to the country changed dramatically. Israel's victory, along with longstanding fears of a “second Holocaust”, resulted in a growing belief in the country's critical importance to the Jewish people, and a source of pride in its resilience. Rhetoric about the “miraculous” nature of the victory and the “liberation” of land gave the Zionist project a religious, even messianic, significance. In those heady years, much of the remaining ambivalence about Zionism disappeared. In the early 1970s, the Commentary magazine editor, Norman Podhoretz, memorably proclaimed: “We are all Zionists now.”



📷 Pro-Israel protesters hold up placards and Israeli flags in Lafayette Park near the White House in Washington DC on 8 June 1967. Photograph: Bettmann/Getty Images

The Zionist consensus excluded the ultra-Orthodox - who largely believed a Jewish state should only be ushered in by a traditional rendering of the messiah - but united Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox and most non-affiliated Jews. The most popular form of the consensus, what became known as liberal Zionism, was founded on a belief in Israel as a liberal and democratic - albeit ethnocentric - state. Many American Jews saw the occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Egyptian lands after 1967 as temporary, believing that a solution was forthcoming that would ensure a Jewish majority in pre-1967 Israel and regional acceptance of the state.

Two generations of American Jews were thus brought up with Zionism as a core part of their Jewish identity. Israel became a central part of Jewish education. Israel's

Independence Day became a Jewish holiday. Israeli flags adorned most synagogues. Summer camps became infused with Israeli songs and the study of modern Hebrew, with Israelis visiting and teaching American youth Israeli culture. Visits to Israel increased and reached new heights with Birthright Israel in 1999, when a free trip to Israel was offered to young American Jews. Israel permeated almost the entirety of the American Jewish experience.



📷 Supporters of Israel march in a parade to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the founding of Israel in New York on 7 May 1978. Photograph: Peter Keegan/Keystone/Hulton Archive via Getty Images

Ironically, in these decades after 1967, American Jewry became adept at religious pluralism. Tolerance and dialogue between Jewish denominations increased.

Except when it came to Zionism and Israel - that's where pluralism reached its limit. You could be a rightwing Zionist

or a leftwing Zionist, but support for Israel as a Jewish state was a given, and questioning that narrative placed you outside the consensus - an “Un-Jew”, as Tablet magazine termed it in [an essay](#) in 2021.

But now, under the weight of the destruction of Gaza, famine, dead and orphaned children, and anger over the denial of many fellow Jews who refuse to recognize their complicity, that consensus has collapsed. The liberal Zionist “center” has lost its hegemonic hold on American Jewry.

For some, that has meant a move to the right; after 7 October many American Jews defended Israel’s actions as necessary and justifiable. Witnessing Israel’s response prompted others to move to the left and question the Zionist project entirely. That is especially true for young American Jews on the left, for whom anti-Zionism has as much to do with redefining their own Jewish identity as it does with their critique of the country.

Recently, Arielle Angel, the editor-in-chief of Jewish Currents, wrote a piece titled: “[We need new Jewish institutions](#)”. They have arrived, in many forms: new and growing non- or anti-Zionist congregations and *minyanim* (Jewish prayer groups); the precipitous rise in membership in non-Zionist Jewish organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace or IfNotNow; the founding of at least one non-Zionist Jewish day school in Somerville, Massachusetts; a revival of interest in Yiddish language and culture; non-Zionist Jewish student groups (there are three at Harvard where I teach); the rise in popularity of Jewish Currents; and a new organization called The Jewish Left out of Boston University. (The Jewish Left’s 2025 conference had about 800 attenders; in 2024 there were about 300.) These are just a few examples.



📷 Jews and supporters hold a Passover Seder to protest against the war in Gaza in Brooklyn, New York, on 23 April 2024. Photograph: Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images

Liberal Zionism remains on the scene in many synagogues and institutional Jewish life - but increasingly finds itself on the defensive, against both the right and the left. Its message - that Israel can return to some sort of “Jewish and democratic” path that arguably never existed - has become almost inchoate. Meanwhile, Israel becomes more and more illiberal, a two-state solution seems almost absurdly utopian, and a one-state reality - where Israel controls all of the territory and dominion of all its people between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea - becomes entrenched.

We find ourselves at a moment where the compatibility of “liberalism” and “Zionism” feels increasingly untenable. How can a state that privileges its Jewish citizens while so egregiously devaluing the lives of the Palestinians under its control ever be called liberal? Basic principles of liberalism

that include equality and the protection of individual rights for all do not cohere with present-day Israel even on a generous reading. The permanent occupation, to say nothing of the destruction of Gaza, has undermined any plausible claim to Israel as a “liberal” country.

This rift has caused significant damage in American Jewry. It has spurred family feuds, broken friendships, attempts to ostracize those who oppose Israel, and even cases of people being denied or fired from jobs in Jewish communal life.

Over the last two years, I have heard liberal Zionists say that this disaffection is probably temporary, assuming young Jews will return to the fold when the war ends. I think that is a mistake. For many of these talented and energetic young Jews, the liberal Zionist narrative is in their rearview mirror. They are building a new Jewish future and new institutions where Israel may or may not play a role - but it will not be at the center.

Is this schism good for American Jewry? Not only do I think it is, I think it is essential to the health of Jewish life. Hannah Arendt reminds us that ideological hegemony is never good for any collective; hegemony yields laziness and overconfidence and is ultimately self-destructive. In her 1948 essay, *To Save the Jewish Homeland*, she writes:

■ *Unanimity of opinion is a very ominous phenomenon, and one characteristic of our modern mass age. It destroys social and personal life, which is based on the fact that we are different by nature and by conviction. To hold different opinions and to be aware that other people think differently on the same issue shields us from that Godlike certainty which*

stops all discussion and reduces social relationships to those of an ant heap.

In *Origins of Totalitarianism* she wrote that such hegemony can be a first stage of totalitarianism in a polity with power. Jews in America do not have the kind of power she was referring to, but they do have responsibility for the health of their collective. Ideological hegemony is not healthy.



📷 Israeli troops search the scene of a rocket attack in the Israeli kibbutz of Kfar Aza on the border with the Gaza Strip on 11 October 2023. Photograph: Gil Cohen-Magen/AFP via Getty Images

Zionism in America will continue, and it may even thrive. But it will no longer serve as a gatekeeper to Jewish life. If American Zionists continue to deny a place at the table for those who are not Zionists, they will fade into increasing irrelevance as young Jews build institutions of their own. And they will soon attain considerable resources and power.

The first anniversary of any tragedy is focused on the proximate past. In Judaism, the first anniversary is ritualized in some communities as an “unveiling” of the tombstone. The second anniversary has no unique ritual - perhaps because it heralds a turn from the past to the future. That does not mean the time for commemoration is over. But the distance allows for a view of the consequences and repercussions of the tragedy.



📷 People embrace each other during a Yizkor prayer service on Yom Kippur on Thursday. Photograph: Julius Constantine Motal/The Guardian

More than 2,000 years ago, when Jewish leaders knew the Jerusalem Temple would fall, they left it behind and constructed a new Jewish future. What they created is what we understand as Judaism. In our time we can construct a more pluralistic vision of Judaism that includes both Zionists and diasporists - those Jews outside Israel who de-emphasize the role of the state in their Jewish identity.

New growth always sprouts from such precarious moments. Part of our job is to cultivate a productive future rather than only lament what has fallen. For Jews, 7 October and the destruction of Gaza are the tragedies of our time. The death and destruction of innocents can never be rectified, and can never be justified, but we still must build a future from the wreckage. Friedrich Nietzsche stated it plainly: “If a temple is to be erected a temple must be destroyed; that is the law.”

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