

**Zionism, Liberalism, and Young American Jews: How Redefining the American Zionist
Could Help Bring Peace to the Middle East**

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Abstract

American Jews as a group have been defined, politically and historically, by both their commitment to American liberal values and their affinity for the State of Israel. However, recent studies suggest that younger American Jews are becoming increasingly alienated from the Jewish state. This paper seeks to explain this trend in the context of the historical and political experience of the American Jewish community. More specifically, the analysis presented shows that young American Jews are disillusioned by Israeli policies that belie their liberal values. Furthermore, the mainstream Israel lobby in the United States does not represent the views of these American Jews. The paper concludes that younger American Jews have the potential to influence the United States' policy toward Israel in a way that would benefit the long-term security and integrity of Israel.

Genesis of the Essay

During the fall of 2010, we both participated in the same study abroad program in Nantes, France. There, we took a course titled the “Palestinian Question” which offered a survey of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Largely because the class was in French, only offered once per week, and taught in a very top-down style, we ended the semester feeling that our knowledge on the subject was very incomplete. At the same time, the fact that our professor in France approached the conflict from a very different angle than our educators in the United States left us with a desire to articulate our own position. We thus decided to write this paper as an excuse to educate ourselves about the conflict and ultimately create our own narrative. Grounded in our own personal experiences, this paper has no connection to any work previously done for a class. Rather, it reflects two questions we initially asked ourselves: where do our experiences and opinions stand in regards to the larger American Jewish community and what role can American Jews such as us play in helping to achieve peace in the Middle East?

I grew up in a Jewish family. Every Friday night we celebrated the Jewish Sabbath with a few brief prayers and a nice meal together. However, for a brief period when my brother and I were younger, we would also read a short passage from *The Book of Jewish Values*, written by a well-known rabbi. My parents hoped that reading and discussing these excerpts would both acclimate our family to Jewish values and teach my brother and me to appreciate critical thinking as we debated the meaning of the text. I was never particularly fond of this mundane tradition, but I do remember one short chapter entitled “Find Excuses for Behavior That Seems Unkind.” The chapter reminds us of the biblical commandment “In justice you shall judge your neighbor,” (Leviticus 19:15), and contends that it is right to actively search for “possible exonerating excuses” for unkind actions.¹ The author states that the act of searching in itself is a good deed; he emphasizes the importance of viewing issues from multiple perspectives, not just your own, but that of your proverbial neighbor.

–Michael Goldfien

I also grew up in a Jewish family. One evening I was chatting with some family members who are several years older than I am when I casually brought up some of the frustrations I had with current Israeli policy. I was surprised when the discussion suddenly turned very tense with my family insinuating that they were questioning my very commitment to Israel. I felt unable to clearly explain that such frustrations did not mean I did not support Israel’s existence. I eventually left the room confused and upset.

–Erica Seltzer-Schultz

As young American Jews who care deeply for the State of Israel, our own experiences have led us to fear that the Jewish values of empathy, critical thinking, and healthy debate are often missing from public discourse on Israel, especially within the American Jewish

community. While it is easy to understand why many American Jews consider the Palestinians, whose terrorist attacks have cost many Israeli lives, an “unkind neighbor,” a significant portion of the American Jewish community does not sufficiently empathize with the plight of Palestinians living in the occupied territories (the Gaza strip and the West Bank). Those who do voice their concerns frequently find themselves silenced by fellow Jews and larger political organizations that question their commitment to Israel or even their very Jewishness. We fear that this trend is pushing young American Jews away from the Hebrew state, and as a consequence, is making it less likely that the United States can help facilitate a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

With our own experiences in mind, we sought to place ourselves within the context of the larger Jewish community. We found that while American Jews as a group have shown a very strong commitment to both liberal democratic ideals and the State of Israel, they have struggled to reconcile these values. This struggle is particularly apparent when comparing the different generations. The lived historical events of older American Jews have led them to feel, as a whole, a strong need for a Jewish state and concern for its continued survival. Such a sense of vulnerability and deep attachment for the State of Israel has made it difficult for these Jews to voice criticisms of Israel’s policies for fear that any criticism would undermine the country’s legitimacy. In contrast, younger American Jews tend to view the existence of Israel as a given and generally feel less attachment to the country. From this position, they have the ability to look at the current political climate in Israel through a critical lens and express concern about how the government’s policies threaten its own democratic principles.

Yet this “younger generation,” among which we place ourselves, has been-hard pressed to find a political voice for their concerns. The major pro-Israel groups such as AIPAC who draw

overwhelmingly from the “older generations” maintain unconditional support of Israel and hold steadfast to their vision of Israel as a model democracy. Moreover, they have worked to quell criticism of Israel within the US government and the larger American community with charges that those who criticize Israel are anti-Zionist or even anti-Semitic. Such is their political and economic clout that they have succeeded in removing virtually all discussion about Israel’s policies from government circles which in turn impacts the type of conversations held among the general public. We ourselves have found that it can be challenging to have open discussions about Israel at synagogue and among friends and family.

Yet one recently formed group, J Street, offers a potential new channel through which American Jews, particularly the “younger generation,” can express their concerns about Israel and work to influence American foreign policy in a direction that would help create conditions for peace in the Middle East. While its early years have been marked by promising growth, for J Street to have a real impact, the larger Jewish community must reconcile its liberal democratic values with its commitment to the State of Israel. American Jews need to redefine a Zionist as someone who, in their steadfast support of Israel, pushes the country to change those policies that undermine its present and future. Such a change would not only offer a voice for American Jews, particularly those of “the younger generation” who have concerns about the current political climate, it could also have a real impact on Israel’s future and the prospects for peace in the Middle East.

Tenets of the American Jewish Political Identity: Liberalism and Support for Israel

The American Jewish community has been defined, politically and historically, by both its support for the Democratic Party and its support for the State of Israel. The liberal leanings of

the American Jewish population are well documented and the subject of several books. Of course, it is important to note that when we use the term “liberal,” we do so in the American sense of the word. This form of liberalism combines progressivism, support for social programs, and a more mixed economy than that championed by classical liberalism.

It is not a coincidence that American Jewish support for the Democratic Party started with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His “New Deal” program represented much that is identified with American liberalism, such as increased government regulation of the economy and far reaching social welfare programs. In 1932, Roosevelt won 82% of the Jewish vote. That percentage increased in the 1936 election, and then again in 1940, when Roosevelt received 90% of the Jewish vote.ⁱⁱ In only one instance since Roosevelt’s election in 1932 has a Democratic candidate failed to get a majority of the Jewish vote (Jimmy Carter received 45% in 1980, which was nonetheless a plurality).ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, between 1932 and 2008, the Democratic candidate has received more than 75% of the Jewish vote on 13 occasions.^{iv} This longstanding support of the blue party shows no signs of dissipating any time soon. In the 2006 congressional elections, American Jews gave Democratic candidates 87 percent of their votes,^v while in 2008, 78 percent of Jews voted for Barack Obama.^{vi}

The tremendous amount of support that American Jews have thrown at Democratic candidates over the past 80 years raises the question as to why Jews have been so liberal. The strong relationship between the American Jewish population and the Democratic Party is paradoxical. While immigrant groups have shown a tendency to move rightward on the political spectrum as they become more integrated into American society, American Jews have stayed firmly to the left of the American political scene. The first large wave of Jewish immigration to the United States occurred between 1881 and 1914, when over two million Jews came to

America from Eastern Europe.^{vii} Despite the nearly 100 years since this period of immigration ended and the existence of an American Jewish community that is well integrated into American society, Jews still prefer the liberal politics of the Democratic Party.

Furthermore, as ethno-religious groups or racial groups experience upward mobility, they become, generally speaking, more conservative politically. Yet while American Jews are among the wealthiest ethno-religious groups in America, they continue to vote Democrat.^{viii} Indeed, as the sociographer Milton Himmelfarb's aphorism goes, "Jews earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans."^{ix} While this phrase may not be the most politically correct way of describing the voting habits of American Jews, it does highlight the anomalous nature of their political preferences. Though liberal policies are not always in their economic interest, American Jews consistently vote for Democratic candidates who call for higher taxes and bigger social welfare programs.

Scholars have offered several explanations for the affinity American Jews seem to have for the brand liberalism championed by the Democratic Party. One explanation asserts that liberalism fits with American Jews' interpretation of Jewish values. Two prominent Jewish values, *Tikkun Olam* and *Tzedakah*, can be used to explain American Jews' commitment to liberalism in its American form.^x *Tikkun Olam* can be translated as the act of "repairing the world," whereas *Tzedakah* represents the obligation of performing charity and philanthropy. Perhaps American Jews see social welfare programs as a form of *Tikkun Olam*, and the higher taxes that they pay to help fund them as *Tzedakah*. In fact, in many American Jews' eyes, a good "Jew" is someone committed to social equality and progressive values, not necessarily someone observant of religious traditions.^{xi}

A second explanation contends that historical factors have led an overwhelming majority of Jews to support the Democratic Party and its liberal values. Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe were often escaping discrimination, a position which may have made them more sympathetic to leftist politics. Poor immigrants were likely attracted to New Deal values that promoted societal change and possibilities for social mobility.^{xii} Furthermore, the American Jewish community likely took note of the role Harry Truman played in the creation of Israel and the support Lyndon B. Johnson gave Israel before, during and after the Six Day War in 1967.

A third explanation is that, contrary to popular belief, voting Democratic is in the self-interest of American Jews. While such a stand may not benefit them economically, the equality and civil rights liberals promote give American Jews the best chance to better themselves.^{xiii} In the past, laws against discrimination meant the end to quotas for admitting Jews to the nation's best schools and a better chance of getting good jobs. The spread of liberalism allowed American Jews to integrate into American society and become accepted by their non-Jewish neighbors. In this view, Jewish voting is still driven by self-interest; it is just that their primary interest is not monetary gain. All that taken into account, some combination of these explanations has resulted in the adoption of liberalism into the American Jewish value system.

The political views held by the American Jewish population are further marked by its commitment to the State of Israel. Understanding the American Jewish community's strong connection with the State of Israel requires historical context as American Jews were not always so politically involved with, and emotionally attached to, the Hebrew state. When Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948 as a Jewish state in a portion of what was previously known as the British Mandate of Palestine, American Jews were not nearly as connected to Israel as

they are today. Rather, the turning point in the American Jewish community's relationship with Israel occurred in 1967.

Between June 5 and June 10, 1967, Israel fought the Six Day War against its Arab neighbors, with the principal Arab belligerents being Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Though the Six Day War resulted from several diplomatic disagreements between Israel and its neighbors, the existential threats against Israel concerned American Jews. While Israel certainly contributed to the pre-war agitations, threats by Arab politicians to annihilate the Hebrew state and, more tangibly, the massing of Egyptian troops on their border with Israel had a profound effect on the psychology of the American Jewish community. These threats evoked memories of Jewish persecution and, in particular, the Holocaust, in which the Jewish population truly was pushed to the brink of annihilation. Thus regardless of whether the Arab forces, much inferior to Israel's military, represented a legitimate threat to Israel's security, American Jews developed a sense of solidarity with the Israelis.

The war itself was short, but the effect of the outcome cannot be overstated. On June 5 Israel launched a preemptive surprise attack against Egypt and, in just six days, Israel scored a decisive victory. Easily defeating the Arab militaries, Israel took the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. For American Jews, Israel's victory turned fear into a sense of agency, a sense that after 2000 years Jews could finally protect themselves. Both the anxiety American Jews felt before the Six Day War and the pride they felt in the aftermath led Israel to become an important part of American Jewish identity and politics.

The commitment of American Jews to the State of Israel remains high today. In the 2009 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion, 28 percent of respondents said that they felt "very close" to Israel and 41 percent said that they feel "fairly close."^{xiv} Furthermore, 75 percent of

respondents in a 2010 Brandeis University survey agreed that caring about Israel was a very important part of them being a Jew.^{xv}

The Generational Gap: Young American Jews' Alienation from Israel

Support for American liberal ideals and support for Israel have become tenets of the American Jewish community during the past century. However, recent studies suggest that younger American Jews struggle to reconcile their liberal values with Israel's policies. While many of the younger generation still show support for the Hebrew state, in general, they care about Israel less and criticize it more than older American Jews. Just as historical factors, such as the Six Day War, were integral in forming the bond that older generations of American Jews share with Israel, the lived experience of the younger generations has shaped their more distant relationship with Israel.

While many have considered American Jewish support for Israel to be a given, recent studies suggest that the affinity young adults within the American Jewish community have for Israel is waning. A recent study titled "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel" found a significant generational gap in levels of attachment to Israel among American Jews. Almost uniformly, the study shows that the younger the age cohort, the more "alienated" respondents were with regard to Israel. Younger age groups were less likely to feel that caring about Israel is an important part of being a Jew, just as they were less likely to be concerned that the United States will cease to be an ally of Israel.^{xvi} Furthermore, while nearly 80 percent of respondents 65 and older said that the destruction of Israel would represent a personal tragedy, only about 50 percent of respondents under the age of 35 held that

view.^{xvii} This study suggests strong evidence that Israel means less to younger American Jews than their elders.

An August 2010 study conducted at Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies offers some explanations for the generational gap in support for Israel among American Jews. While the study found that younger American Jews remain relatively connected to Israel, the data suggests that they are more likely to be critical of Israel than older generations. For example, when presented with Israeli and Turkish statements regarding the May 2010 flotilla incident in which Israeli soldiers and pro-Palestinian activists clashed as the activists tried to bypass the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, younger age groups were less likely to agree with the Israeli statement.^{xviii} Rather, the plurality of the group age 18-29 felt that the truth was likely "about halfway between the Turkish and Israeli statements."^{xix} Younger respondents were also more likely to feel that the flotilla incident had made them feel less attached to Israel.^{xx} Furthermore, younger respondents were more likely to feel that the United States is too supportive of Israel and less likely to feel that it is not supportive enough.^{xxi} The study indicates that younger American Jews are more inclined to take a moderate view of Israel's policies than older age cohorts.

The reason for this discrepancy is linked to the lived experience of each generation. Older American Jews see Israel as a small state surrounded by enemies, fighting to protect not only itself, but also Jews around the world. Younger American Jews, on the other hand, see Israel as a regional hegemon and military power. Older American Jews experienced "the terrifying days leading up to the Six Day War, when it appeared that Israel might be overrun, and by the bitter aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, when much of the world seemed to turn against the Jewish state."^{xxii} Younger generations, instead, grew up seeing images from the First and Second

Intifada and hearing about the destruction caused to civilian infrastructure in Lebanon during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. As Peter Beinart notes in his New York Review of Books op-ed piece “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” younger American Jews are thus “more conscious of the degree to which Israeli behavior violates liberal ideals, and less willing to grant Israel an exemption because its survival seems in peril.”^{xxiii} These younger American Jews struggle to square their political beliefs with Israel’s actions.

The younger generation of American Jews, whose identity is not shaped by the Holocaust, 1967 or the Yom Kippur War, is finding it more and more difficult to identify with a country whose policies toward the Palestinians in the occupied territories often belie the liberal ideals that many of them have come to cherish. Central to this ideology and to their Jewish values are equality, social justice, empathy for the plight of impoverished peoples, and critical discussion of social and political issues. On the issue of equality, many observers, including the U.S. Department of State, have observed that Arab Israelis face systematic discrimination. For example, due to a potential conflict of interest, Arab Israelis are not included in Israel’s policy of mandatory conscription. While this policy may seem intuitive, the U.S. Department of State notes that those who did not enlist had less access to state benefits “for which military service was a prerequisite or an advantage.”^{xxiv} American Jews, who promote social justice in the United States, can find it difficult to endorse Israel’s treatment of Arab Israelis. These discriminatory policies represent a clear departure from the values of social equality that so many young American Jews consider integral to their political identity.

Furthermore, while these American Jews certainly do not question Israel’s right to defend itself and its borders from the terrorism that has long plagued the Israeli population, we believe that many young American Jews would like to see Israel show more empathy toward the

impoverished Palestinian population in the occupied territories. However, the continued construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank conflicts with this goal. These settlements not only impede the peace process, as the West Bank would certainly be given to the Palestinians as part of any two-state solution, but they also show a disregard for the dignity of the Palestinian population. Currently, a plurality of American Jews support the creation of a Palestinian state, yet the construction of settlements in the West Bank makes it difficult for the Palestinians to realize their right to national self-determination.^{xxv}

In addition to these encroachments in the West Bank, the quality of life in the occupied territories, particularly the Gaza Strip, violates American Jewish values of social justice. Although Israel pulled out of the Gaza Strip in August 2005, it maintains strict control over the flow of goods in and out of the territory. While its debatable whether or not terrorist attacks carried out by Hamas have forced Israel's hand, the situation is nonetheless lamentable. Quality of life in the Gaza Strip is extremely poor and the import-export restrictions have caused economic development to stagnate.^{xxvi} Again, the negative consequences for the general Palestinian population suggests that Israeli policy runs contrary to the American Jewish value of *Tikkun Olam*, or aiding the less fortunate. While these issues are complicated, many young American Jews are interested in seeing a Palestinian population afforded dignity and agency, which these policies deny them. In short, many young American Jews are disillusioned because they do not feel that Israel is doing enough to uphold their core values; they do not believe that Israel is practicing *Tikkun Olam* when it comes to the Palestinians. This leaves many American Jews, the younger generation in particular, struggling to find a middle ground in which they can reconcile their liberalism with their support for Israel.

American Jewish Political Organizations and the Stunting of Critical Debate

While younger American Jews are more likely to see the conflict from multiple perspectives and find it acceptable to voice criticisms of Israel, their views greatly depart from those of the Jews who hold the most power among America's pro-Israel political organizations. Although pro-Israel organizations in the United States have existed since Zionism's early years in the first part of the 20th century, it was not until after the Six Day War in 1967 that these groups began to have a strong presence in their size, wealth, and influence—a change that reflected the general surge of support for Israel among both the American Jewish and non-Jewish public.^{xxvii} Of these groups, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has been and continues to be the most well-known and the most important. In a 2005 *National Journal* study, members of Congress and their staffs placed AIPAC as the second most powerful lobby in Washington.^{xxviii} Today, AIPAC has more than 150 employees and works off of a budget, derived solely from private contributions, that amounts to an estimated \$40-60 million a year.^{xxix}

A central feature of AIPAC and other similar organizations is that they support Israel regardless of its policy decisions and that they try to quell criticism of Israel whenever it occurs.^{xxx} Their political power is such that they have succeeded in removing almost all debate about Israel from Capital Hill, the media, and academic circles; a phenomenon that contributes to the lack of debate among the larger Jewish community. In his article “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” Peter Beinart highlights the “terrible irony” of the fact that there is arguably more criticism of Israel within Israel than in the United States. Beinart explains that in Israel voices from the left and even center are increasingly concerned about threats to Israeli democracy; he points out that former Prime Ministers of Israel, Ehud Olmert and Ehud Barak, have publically shared the concern that Israel risks becoming an “apartheid state” if it

continues to occupy the West Bank. Yet in the US, leading Jewish organizations such as AIPAC hold steadfast to their vision of Israel as a state where all its leaders share what its website terms as an “unwavering commitment to democratic ideals.”^{xxxix} In truth, AIPAC does not go as far as some in the far-right Netanyahu coalition who say that Israeli Arabs do not deserve full citizenship or that West Bank Palestinians do not deserve human rights. Yet, AIPAC defends virtually anything that the Israeli government says or does and the organizations goes so far as to condemn groups that have historically been very critical of Israel, such as the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Beinart argues that, in doing this, “they make themselves intellectual bodyguards for Israeli leaders who threaten the very values they profess to admire.”^{xxxix}

In their effort to maintain this unconditional support of Israel and its politicians, pro-Israel groups such as AIPAC have followed the Israeli government’s shift toward the right that began in the 1980s.^{xxxix} This shift in politics also reflected the influence of a small group of wealthy conservatives who came to dominate the organizations.^{xxxix} As a consequence, these groups have increasingly found common ground with the Republican Party which, from the time of Ronald Reagan, has been considered more strongly pro-Israel than the Democratic party. Pro-Israel groups also began to work with evangelical Christians, who formed the Republican base, and who came out in large numbers in fervent support of Israel. In more recent years, mainstream pro-Israel groups have strengthened their ties to the neo-conservative movement; their platform fit comfortably with that of the Bush Administration as President Bush did not pressure Jerusalem to make serious compromises to achieve peace.^{xxxix} This support for President Bush did not reflect the views of the overall American Jewish community, for only 19% voted for him in 2000 and 24% in 2004^{xxxix} in contrast to the 78% of American Jews who voted for

Barack Obama in 2008.^{xxxvii} Thus, while Jewish voters continue to be overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic, the politics of the nation's most influential pro-Israel organizations have shifted to the right, away from the Democratic Party.

Many liberal Jews have long felt that mainstream groups such as AIPAC have failed to represent their point of view towards Israel and they have consequently formed a series of organizations through which they could voice their opinions. While these progressive groups, such as the Israel Policy Forum, Americans for Peace Now, Jewish Voice for Peace, and Brit Tzedek v'Shalom have pushed for policy changes that they felt would promote a peaceful solution to the conflict, they lacked monetary power and were unable to focus their energies on extensive lobbying. Likewise, until five years ago, their political clout was largely insignificant in comparison to the likes of AIPAC and many Jews such as us had not even heard their names. Then, in 2006, a group of philanthropists began a series of discussions about combining these progressive organizations into one more influential organization. These discussions ultimately resulted in the creation of "J Street," which refers to the street missing from Washington's grid, evoking the voice missing from Washington's policy discussions.^{xxxviii}

The organization shares the concern that Israel's status as a democratic, Jewish state lies in jeopardy; it asserts on its website that "a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essential to Israel's survival as the national home of the Jewish people and as a vibrant democracy."^{xxxix} J Street recognizes that current Israeli policy within the occupied territories "undermines the prospects for peace" and that Israel would have to make major concessions before any real solution could be reached. The organization envisions a negotiated two-state solution based on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem functioning as the shared capital of the two states.^{xl} Grounded in the assumption that American Jews have a role in pushing for this solution,

the organization's mission is two-fold: to "advocate for urgent American diplomatic leadership" and "to ensure a broad debate on Israel and the Middle East in national politics and the American Jewish community." In order to carry out this dual mission, J Street has created two sub organizations: J Street PAC, a legally independent political action committee, and J Street Education Fund, a charitable organization that works to raise its visibility and promote conversations about how to "best advance the interests and future of a democratic, Jewish Israel."^{li} These two organizations help J Street expand its lobbying and outreach beyond that of any previous progressive group.

J Street no doubt recognizes the same tensions we find so prevalent between liberal democratic values and support of Israel within the American Jewish community. In an attempt to reconcile these tensions, the founder and executive director of J Street, Jeremy Ben-Ami, states that J Street is trying to redefine what it means to be pro-Israel; he emphasizes that supporters of Israel do not have to be silent about the country's policies. In fact, supporters of Israel should pressure the country to change its policies and make concessions in a real and sustained effort to achieve a viable peace.^{lii} J Street maintains that, contrary to the image portrayed by the major pro-Israel groups, the majority of American Jews continue to be "reliably liberal" on questions of war and peace and consequently share the organization's views on the Middle East. In an effort to find evidence to support this claim, J Street, in an extensive poll in 2008 of Jewish opinion on Middle East issues, found that 60 percent of American Jews opposed further Israeli settlements. Furthermore, the poll results showed that American Jews overwhelmingly supported the idea that the US should be actively engaged in the peace process even if doing so would entail publically stating disagreements with Israel. While all of these findings appeared positive for the viability of J Street, the average respondent placed Israel eighth among a list of concerns. Only 8 percent

of those interviewed placed it first or second. Here lies J Street's biggest obstacle: its campaigns appeal most to the 92 percent of Jews who care about other causes more than they care about Israel. Meanwhile, the remaining 8 percent no doubt represent the bulk of the supporters of AIPAC and other similar organizations. Such percentages raise a question about J Street's prospects as, when it comes to lobbying, groups would prefer to be in the position of AIPAC who arguably represents the "passionate few," instead of in J Street's position, who could be likened to "the dispassionate many."^{xliii}

Along those lines, J Street needs to build its base of supporters and extend its lobbying power before it can truly help shape the policy discussions that occur on Capital Hill. Many congressmen and women view America's unconditional support of Israel's policies as part of the status quo and rarely question it. Even if they do question it, a number rely heavily on AIPAC and other powerful Jewish donors for campaign contributions and thus fear the financial and political ramifications should they publically voice their opinions.^{xliv} Yet despite the substantial influence of AIPAC, J Street has shown early signs of success. In 2010 J Street raised over \$5 million in operating funds with over 160,000 supporters and 45 full and part-time staff in eight cities around the country.^{xlv} With this growth, J Street is starting to be able to give a political voice to many American Jews, in particular to a significant portion of "the younger generation." Not only do the politics of J Street reflect the opinions of many young American Jews such as ourselves, but J Street literally embodies the younger generation as the average age of its staff is around 30 years of age, about twenty or thirty years younger than the average age of the staff at AIPAC. Another sign of J Street's "new-generation" status is that a significant portion of its money comes from small donations given over the internet.^{xlvi} Meanwhile, in 2010 J Street expanded its student chapter, "J Street U," to fifty college campuses across the country.^{xlvii}

Ultimately though, J Street's future hinges on whether both younger and older American Jews alike make peace in the Middle East a priority.

The United States and the Urgent Need for Policy Change in an Increasingly Volatile Region

Not only does J Street offer a political voice for our views, the views of the “younger generation,” and the views of many other American Jews concerning Israel, but the current nature of the US government and political climate dictates that this voice could play a key role in the immediate future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The founders of J Street chose an opportune time to start their organization as the Obama administration's commitment to a negotiated peace offers some glimmers of hope that J Street's policy prescriptions could be realized. Both J Street and the Obama administration function within the same idea that any viable peace in Israel/Palestine hinges on Israel changing its policies in the occupied territories. The Obama administration turned its political agenda into action during the fall of 2010 when it tried to get the Netanyahu administration to commit to a freeze on settlements in the West Bank as a foundation for the reopening of peace talks. While this effort was ultimately a failure, Al Jazeera's recent release of the “Palestine Papers” placed heightened pressure on the two countries to re-open peace talks as it revealed just how close previous talks have come to achieving a solution. Meanwhile, the current political climate in the Arab world has made the need for a peace solution significantly more pressing, thus forcing Obama to refocus his energies on the region.

The idea that the US could play an important role in pressuring Israel to change its policies has economic and political basis. Israel became the largest annual recipient of US foreign assistance in 1976 and has retained that position ever since. Israel now receives on

average \$3 billion in direct foreign assistance each year, which amounts to about one-sixth of America's foreign assistance budget.^{xlviii} In addition, Israel receives a significant amount of money in loan guarantees and military aid and she also receives an estimated \$2 billion annually in private donations from American citizens.^{xlix} Beyond these tangible forms of economic and military aid, the United States provides Israel with consistent diplomatic support, even in recent years as Israel has become increasingly isolated from the rest of the international community. The US hypothetically has the ability make this aid and support conditional on Israel changing its policies, a move that would not only increase the likelihood of a viable peace, but would ameliorate the images of both these countries within the international community.

The wave of democratic movements in North Africa and the Middle East has made Israel more dependent on American diplomacy and military support than ever as she faces growing concern about her security situation. While Israel may not have agreed with many of the policies of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt or King Abdullah of Jordan, these regimes provided Israel with a significant degree of stability as they remained committed to both quelling Islamist groups, such as Hamas, and to a broader regional peace with Israel based off of their respective treaties.¹ In particular, Israel fears that Mubarak's decline could bring to power a political party such as the Muslim Brotherhood that would likely conduct a more lenient policy towards groups such as Hamas and who could even revoke Egypt's 1979 peace treaty, a treaty which Israel has come to view as its cornerstone to regional peace.ⁱⁱ While Israel has very real reasons for being concerned, the current situation forces both Israel and America to evaluate their commitments to democracy. AIPAC's website touts that because "of her unwavering commitment to democratic ideas, Israel is America's indispensable ally in a sea of dictatorships."ⁱⁱⁱ Yet many Americans see the irony in that Israel, long valued as the only democracy in the region, now expresses great

concern about the potential birth of democracies next door.^{liii} In order to confront this contradiction, Israel needs to make a major commitment to reforming its settlement policies in order to help quell the anti-Israeli sentiments prevalent in Egypt, Lebanon, and other neighboring countries. Then both Israel and the United States could feel significantly more comfortable about supporting democracies that are likely to bring those frustrations to light.

The fact that Israel has thus far shown no signs of making any major policy changes necessitates a major diplomatic initiative from the Obama administration. Yet, in order for such an initiative to have a true impact, particularly if it is paired with a congressional ruling on aid, the role of J Street and of the larger American Jewish public is of critical importance. In recent years, the dissociation that many American Jews, particularly those of the younger generation, have felt between their liberal values and their support of Israel has led to a feeling of alienation from Israel itself. At the same time, those who have voiced criticisms of Israel have been frequently labeled anti-Zionist or even anti-Semitic, which has led to a widespread silence within the Jewish community. Critics of Israel's policies have felt afraid to speak out for fear of fellow Jews questioning their support of Israel or even their Jewishness. Such a feeling of disconnect and a lack of an open arena for debate may help to explain the 92 percent of Jews who, in J Street's poll, stated that they felt more strongly about other issues than they felt about Israel.

Yet we believe that a conflict should never be viewed as a status quo and the current political environment makes the need to find a two-state solution even more pressing. The values of healthy debate and looking at an issue from multiple perspectives that Mike remembers so clearly from his book of Jewish values needs to be reapplied to the topic of Israel in this country at the same time that the silencing of criticisms that Erica experienced needs to be avoided. The younger generation has a key role to play in driving this shift as our lived history gives us a

particular ability to consider the conflict through its various nuanced lenses while insisting that commitments to liberal governance be upheld. Such discussions will not go unheard as J Street offers a political platform supported by the Obama administration that help can turn these ideas into policy. It is time for the American Jewish community to redefine a Zionist as someone who not only strongly supports Israel's existence as a democratic Jewish state, but someone who can and should be critical of Israel's policies. Only such a Zionist can help Israel realize a future of democracy and peace.

Notes

ⁱ Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *The Book of Jewish Values: a Day-By-Day Guide to Ethical Living*, (New York: Bell Tower, 2000), 34.

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