



Rabbis for Religious Freedom & Equality in Israel



"The State of Israel... will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience..."
Israel's Declaration of Independence (May 1948)

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Introduction

Feb. 2, 2017
6 Sh'vat, 5777

Dear Friends,

How important is the State of Israel in the daily lives and identities of the people we serve? Have you witnessed a change in attitude and loyalty to Israel over the last decade? since the War in Lebanon? since the Six Day War?

How many of us have been called, "Self hating Jews," in the last year? It's been a personal shock for me, as an ohev Yisrael and a servant of the Jewish people for nearly 5 decades, to be screamed at that I am a destroyer. Clearly, not only do we now promote different visions of Israel as a people, but the controversies have often gone over the line of vicious and personal.

The Ruderman Family Foundation's research into Jewish connection to Israel

[Click HERE for: 'Politicians and Shabbat - This is not the way!' by Rabbi Uri Regev](#)

'Shabbat appears in the Ten Commandments twice; once anchored in Divine Creation and once in the context of social justice, concern for society's weak.'



New Study Examines American Jewry's Relationship with Israel

eJewishPhilanthropy, Jan. 27, 2017

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

Israel – a Unifying or a Divisive Issue among American Jews?, a newly released academic paper from the Ruderman Family Foundation, outlines a number of reasons behind an increasingly complicated relationship between American Jews and Israel.

Published by the Ruderman Program for American Jewish Studies at the University of Haifa, the paper, written by Alon Pinkas, former Consul General of Israel in New York and foreign policy advisor to four previous Israeli Foreign Ministers, indicates that Israel is no longer in the top five issues that influence American Jewish voting patterns in U.S. elections.

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tracks the changes many of us experience regularly. In my community, the vocal advocates for Israel I believe chase away those who are less attached and seek to avoid personal confrontation. Those who do care, but avoid controversy in the face of bewildering claims and complicated facts, simply walk away and find other interests when Israel is no longer critical to their self concept and existentially irrelevant. Where do we turn?

Clearly, our people require a heroic Israel, an embodiment of the Western ideals we cherish. And barring that, our folks need an Israel with which they can identify from their own experience and lives. Why would the Jewish State deny my Jewish identity, for which I have struggled, our people ask? If they can't include me in their definition of "Who is a Jew?" what do I need them for anyway? It's difficult to explain quickly.

Uri Regev's article, posted here from The Jerusalem Post this week, envisions what shabbat might be in a State for all Jews. We all remember Ahad Ha'am's comment, "More than Israel has kept the sabbath, the sabbath has kept Israel." We work for a Homeland in

Israel – a Unifying or a Divisive Issue among American Jews?

Alon Pinkas, *The Ruderman Program for American Jewish Studies*, January, 2017

[Click HERE for the full report](#)

Summary Points

- Israel plays neither a distinctively unifying or patently divisive role in American-Jewish life. It is both, and in equal measure, because different issues affect different sectors and individuals within the American Jewish community.
- Israel's role and place in the life and perceptions of American Jews has more to do with how they define themselves as a community and as Jews than with how they perceive Israel.
- A significant majority (Approx. 70%) of American Jews feel "very" or "somewhat" attached to Israel. In this regard, Israel remains a central issue—sometime unifying, sometimes divisive—for them. So there is no doubt that, since 1967, Israel has held a special and unique place in the collective American-Jewish mind.
- The bond between American Jews and Israel remains strong and their commitment to the country is solid. On some levels and issues, however, the ties are fraying. The recurrent friction and unresolved issues have strained and weakened the links over the last 10 to 20 years and created widening cracks.
- Israel remains an omnipresent theme in American Jewish life, but with the passage of the generation that remembers 1967 and before, Israel is increasingly losing its centrality in the minds of American Jews under the age of fifty.
- Before 1948, American Jews occupied a unique situation as the only ethnic and religious group in the United States that had no "homeland" no "old country" to idealize, wax romantic about, and yearn for, as other immigrant groups could. This fact, combined with the Holocaust, is of tremendous importance for understanding the evolution of American Jewish perceptions of and relations with Israel.
- The State of Israel is not central to Judaism (the opposite may be true), which existed and flourished as a civilization

which that historical reality becomes a present spiritual connection all Jewish sensibilities, regardless of Jewish affiliation.

Increasingly we see that our vision of democracy cannot be taken for granted, that goals we once considered inevitable are no longer shared by all. The Ruderman study points out the complexity of Israeli society, and that cultural diversity does not make our sense of democracy into an automatic reality the way it did in the sixties. For Israel to fulfill its destiny, our collective work must succeed in ensuring a pluralistic understanding of Jewish life.

I hope you agree, and would love to hear about your work for Israel. Please send any recent sermons on the topic to:
organizers@rrfei.org, or post on [our FB group](#).

Kol tuv,

Mark

Rabbi Mark H. Levin
RRFEI Editor

[facebook](#)

[email](#)

Contact us

email: organizers@rrfei.org
Phone (US): [646-334-5636](tel:646-334-5636)
Phone (Isr): [054-779-1179](tel:054-779-1179)

and religion in conditions of statelessness. That is valid and pertinent to the American Jewish experience prior to 1948 and to some extent even after that watershed.

- The self-image of American Jews, along with their self-perceptions, cosmopolitan approach, and value systems all developed before the birth of Israel. Their cultural development, socialization, and assimilation into American society and culture were their own and had nothing to do with Israel, whether as a place or an idea.
- Most American Jews were relative late-comers to Zionism and only reluctantly embraced and supported the idea and political movement. Well into the 1930s, most American Jews were outright hostile to the idea of Zionism, which they saw as a form of socialism alien to their attempt to assimilate in America. They saw no compelling reason to support the ideology before 1948.
- Zionism places Israel at the center of contemporary Jewish identity. This was rarely the case with American Jews. Naturally, then, the relationship between American Jews and Israel was somewhat ambivalent in its first two decades, 1948 to 1967.
- Descriptions of the relationship as one of close affinity, or an ongoing and ever-evolving love affair and close affinity, are a form of convenient amnesia in the best case, or selective rewriting of history in the worst.
- 1967 was a watershed year for the relationship and American Jews' view of Israel. Haunted by guilt for their failure to influence U.S. policy during the Second World War, American Jews now experienced another existential alarm: the weeks before the Six Day War, when Israel's survival was perceived as hanging by a thread. The "miracle" of the resounding military victory, against the background of the Cold War and Soviet support for Egypt and Syria, drew American Jews much closer to Israel. Concurrently, American Jews' increasingly deep involvement and integration into American politics turned Israel into a major rallying cry.
- The events of 1967 transformed Israel into what might be described as a "Secular religion" encompassing the entire mainstream Jewish establishment. It led to the emergence of a new slogan: "We Are One." Used as a call for action and sales pitch to solicit contributions and commitment to organizations and projects, it also had a major substantive

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consequence—turning Israel into the unifying cause and almost the *raison d'être* of all the organizations and their activities.

- Today, however, as numerous surveys have shown, Israel is not among the top five issues that influence American Jewish voting patterns in U.S. elections. Israel-related and pro-Israel activities, organizations, projects, and rallies proliferate, but American Jews tend to cast their ballots on the basis of other considerations. Their concerns are specifically American; their lively involvement and participation in American politics is not usually motivated by Israel-driven causes.
- The emergence of the “unique,” “special,” “unshakable” relationship and strategic alliance between Israel and the United States, starting in the late-1960s, consolidated Israel’s centrality in organizational and intellectual American Jewish life, but also produced friction.
- The bilateral alliance plays a two-edged role. On the one hand, as long as Israel and the United States maintain their alliance and special relationship, Israel will ipso facto be central to Jewish organizations, groups, and individuals. In fact, the strength and political viability of the relationship tends to be taken for granted, even as the occasional divergence of interests and controversial Israeli policies are more freely scrutinized by segments in the American Jewish community.
- “Dual loyalty” is an anti-Semitic canard hurled at American Jews for their supposed preference of Israeli interests over American, stemming from a peculiar relationship that other ethnic groups do not have with their “other homeland.” The issue is generally kept under wraps but somehow always lurks, and certainly since the Pollard Affair of 1985. It is relevant here only insofar as it contributes to an understanding of how American Jewish views of Israel are in turn seen by some Americans (both true anti-Semites and others).
- There are four broad reasons for the growing divide between American Jews and Israel: historical (post- 1967), cultural (diverging societal development), religious (the treatment of Reform and Conservative Jews), and political (“liberal” American Jews vs. “colonialist” Israel.)
- But there is also a fifth and overriding explanation for the disconnect: normalization. This means normalization of the

recognition that Israel is strong and powerful and not facing an existential threat; normalization of the relations between Israel and the United States; and the normalization, in the social, cultural, and political domains, of Jewish life in America.

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Resources

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Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel represents a broad spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, and champions the values of religious freedom and equality fundamental to World Jewry, in partnership with Hiddush for the realization of these principles in Israel and the Diaspora.

Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel
Website: WWW.RRFEI.ORG | Email: organizers@rrfei.org | Tel. [US] 646-334-5636; [Israel] 054-779-1179

