

Trouble in the Tribe (Dov Waxman, 2016. Excerpted from the introduction)

For decades, especially after the Six-Day War in 1967, the American Jewish relationship with Israel was largely characterized by unwavering support for Israel by most American Jews. Supporting Israel was an important part of American Jewish life and a central element in the “civil religion” of American Jewry. It was also a central component in American Jewish identity, especially among secular Jews for whom supporting Israel effectively became a kind of substitute religion and a new way of being Jewish. Although relatively few American Jews chose to live in Israel, many saw the Jewish state as a potential place of refuge, and a powerful symbol of Jewish rebirth after the Holocaust.

The mythic Israel that many American Jews idealized was a source of pride and unity. At a time when the religious and cultural ties that once united them were steadily diminishing, support for Israel became the glue that held the American Jewish community together. Although there were always small pockets of critics, for the most part there was an overwhelming consensus within the American Jewish community in support of Israel...

This support for Israel was expressed politically through advocacy for Israel, and financially through charitable donations to Israel. Politically, American Jews became vocal and highly effective proponents for U.S. economic, military, and diplomatic support for Israel. The pro-Israel lobby in Washington, DC, especially the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), emerged as an influential actor in U.S.-Israeli relations. ...American Jews donated huge sums of money to Israel and played a crucial role in the country’s economic development.

However, the era of uncritical American Jewish support for Israel—of “Israel, right or wrong”—is now long past. For the past two decades, a fundamental shift has occurred in the American Jewish relationship with Israel, as growing numbers of American Jews have become less willing to unquestioningly support Israel and more willing to publicly criticize its governments. Today, amid a widespread sense of disillusionment with Israel, many American Jews have a more critical and contentious relationship with the country. Although the vast majority of them still care about Israel, there is now much more ambivalence toward it and much less agreement about its policies.

Many American Jews, especially younger ones, are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with Israel's policies in its conflict with the Palestinians and skeptical of its governments' proclaimed desire for peace. As the political consensus about Israel within the American Jewish community has steadily eroded, divisions over Israel are growing among American Jews, and discussions about Israel have become increasingly antagonistic. American Jewish discourse about Israel now regularly degenerates into vitriol, hostile accusations, and ad hominem attacks. Indeed, the subject of Israel has become so highly charged and controversial among American Jews that some now completely avoid talking about it lest the discussion degenerate into an angry argument, as it often will.

...At the center of this debate are burning questions about Israel's future as a Jewish state, and about whether and how it can make peace with the Palestinians and become secure in a region now racked with violent turmoil and upheaval. But underlying this debate is an even deeper, more fundamental set of questions: What kind of relationship should American Jews have with Israel? Must they support it? Should American Jews support Israel unconditionally, even when it acts in ways that they believe are self-defeating or morally problematic? What kinds of opinions and attitudes toward Israel are acceptable, and what should be permitted within the American Jewish community? Can Jews publicly criticize Israel? Can they support boycotts against Israel? Can they even oppose the existence of the Jewish state itself? In short, what loyalty, if any, do Jews owe the Jewish state?

...It is also not at all surprising that Israel and its policies have become a topic of such vituperative debate among American Jews, as well as Diaspora Jews in general. After all, the existence of a Jewish state compels Jews everywhere to confront the question of what Israel means to them and what responsibility, if any, they have toward it. Since Israel claims to speak and act in their name, not only on behalf of its own citizens, it is almost impossible for Diaspora Jews to ignore Israel, even if they wanted to. Very few can remain apathetic about what is happening there, and they are almost obligated to have an opinion about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially now that it has become such a big, almost obsessive, issue for Western public opinion. For better or worse, many Diaspora Jews often feel somehow implicated in Israel's actions. What Israel does, what happens to Israel, and what happens in Israel, therefore, affects Jews worldwide. That is why the subject of Israel is at the center of Jewish political debate.



Source 4



Tosefta Berakhot 3:16

היה עומד בחו"ל יכוין את לבו כנגד ארץ ישראל שנא' (שם) והתפללו אל ה' דרך ארצם
היה עומד בא"י יכוין את לבו כנגד ירושלים שנא' (שם) והתפללו אל העיר הזאת העומדים
בירושלים מתפללין כנגד בית המקדש שנא' (שם) והתפללו אל הבית הזה העומדים
במקדש יכונו את לבן כנגד בית קדשי הקדשים שנא' (שם) והתפללו אל המקום הזה נמצאו
העומדין לצפון פניהם לדרום העומדים בדרום פניהם לצפון העומדים במזרח פניהם למערב
העומדים למערב פניהם למזרח ונמצאו כל ישראל מתפללין למקום אחד.

Those that are standing outside of the Land of Israel [should] direct their hearts towards the Land of Israel, and [only then] pray, as it is said, "And those that pray to You by the way of their land..." (I KINGS 8:48). Those that are standing in the Land of Israel [should] direct their hearts towards Jerusalem, and [only then] pray, as it is said, "And they will pray to God by the way of the city that You have chosen..." (I KINGS 8:44). Those that are standing in Jerusalem [should] direct their hearts towards the Temple, as it is said, "... and they should pray towards this house" (II CHRONICLES 6:32). Those that are standing inside the Temple [should] direct their hearts towards the Holy of Holies and [only then] pray, as it is said, "...they will pray towards this place" (I KINGS 8:30). It comes out that [all of those] standing in the north will be facing the south, [all of those] standing in the south will be facing the north, [all of those] standing in the east will be facing the west, [and all of those] standing in the west will be facing the east. And it will come out that all of the Jewish people will be praying towards one place.

Once I Sat (Yehuda Amichai)

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower.
I placed my two heavy baskets at my side.
A group of tourists was standing around their guide
and I became their target marker.
"You see that man with the baskets?
Just right of his head
there's an arch from the Roman period.
Just right of his head."
"But he's moving, he's moving!"

I said to myself:
"Redemption will come
only
if their guide tells them,
'You see that arch from the Roman period?
It's not important:
but next to it,
left down and a bit,
there sits a man
who's bought
fruit and vegetables
for his family.'"