



PERSPECTIVES

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Israeli Attitudes Towards American Jews

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the Israeli elections approach, cleavages are revealing themselves in Israeli attitudes towards American Jews. This is unfortunate, as Israel does not exist in a vacuum. A deeper understanding is required of what Jews face outside of Israel. The State of Israel faces many challenges regarding American bipartisan support. Just as Israelis don't want American Jews to make Israel a partisan issue, Israeli leaders should not push American Jews away.

In Benny Gantz's first campaign speech, he attempted to take shots at Netanyahu. In the process, he provided telling clues about his attitude towards American Jews:

In a month and a half, we will all choose between a ruler who has English from Boston, heavy makeup, and luxury suits – and an Israeli leadership which is real, caring, authentic, and not phony.

Gantz attacked Netanyahu for the time he spent in the US representing Israel at the UN and elsewhere:

When I lay in muddy foxholes with my soldiers on frozen winter nights, you, Benjamin Netanyahu, left Israel to improve your English and practice it at luxurious cocktail parties...On the days when I commanded the Shaldag combat unit in life-threatening operations on enemy soil, you, Benjamin Netanyahu, worked your way bravely and determinedly between makeup sessions in television studios. While I trained generations of commanders and fighters, you took acting lessons in a New York studio."

Netanyahu grew up in Philadelphia and did not need to improve his English. He has just as much Israeli pedigree as does Gantz, including IDF combat service. The dig

was nevertheless clear and direct: American Jews, or those behave like them, cannot be seen as full-fledged Israelis.

Notwithstanding this attitude, Gantz attended the recent AIPAC conference in Washington. There, he addressed tens of thousands of pro-Israel Americans, vowing to strengthen the strategic alliance with the US in the political arena as well as in the battle against terror. In so doing, he signaled that he needs the American Jewish community, albeit on his own terms.

But why should the Israeli melting pot be selective?

While Israelis have embraced American pop culture and like to build economic and cultural bridges, American history and politics are lost on most, especially when it comes to understanding American political trends. For example, during the last presidential election, few Israelis had heard of Donald Trump but recognized Clinton's name as a result of the Oslo years. As such, they assumed Hilary would be better for Israel.

This gap goes back to the early days after the establishment of the state, when David Ben-Gurion himself got into a battle with Jacob Blaustein, a past president of the American Jewish Committee. Ben-Gurion stated that American Jews needed to move to Israel, which generated a series of exchanges between the two as to the character and nature of the young state. Blaustein argued that if Israelis wanted the support of American Jews, it behooved the state to be democratic.

It is ironic and sad that most Israelis still do not fully appreciate the American side of the Zionist enterprise, going back to the days of Col. David Daniel "Mickey" Marcus and Eddie Jacobson, whose contributions are still visible in Israel today.

Israel's most prolific diplomat, British-born Abba Eban, was also the most unappreciated in Israeli circles. When Eban died, the most poignant tribute to him and his legacy came from then Chief Rabbi of Israel Yisrael Meir Lau. "When I heard on the phone that Abba Eban had died," he said, "I had to say sorry. We never appreciated him as much as we should have."

Eban is still considered to be the gold standard of Israeli diplomacy. While Israel has evolved over time, diplomacy and tact are still needed but not always found, a sad reality we are seeing now during the campaign leading up to Israel's upcoming elections on April 9.

Israeli statesmen have represented the Jewish state to the global community, highlighting the quandaries in which civil servants often find themselves. Israeli ambassadors to the US, for example, are required to negotiate with the Washington Beltway — as well as the American Jewish community — as representatives of the State of Israel, not as commanders or even policymakers. Yitzhak Rabin, for

example, was revered as IDF Chief of Staff and later as the PM who dared embark on the Oslo peace process. But although Rabin understood the need to make a case for Israel in the US, as ambassador to the US in 1968 he was not savvy enough to know what methods might backfire. In the eyes of polished diplomats like Eban, Rabin did not seem suited to the role. Eban often complained to Menachem Begin and other members of the Israeli parliament about Rabin's vocal support for Richard Nixon, jumping into what Eban argued should be a non-issue in US-Israeli relations.

By 1992, when Rabin was elected PM for the second time, he had learned from his mistakes. Managing to find just the right combination of toughness and flexibility, he charmed Washington – especially President Bill Clinton, who considered him a seasoned diplomat and warrior.

Similar confrontations have emerged in recent years, including during the term of former ambassador to the US Michael Oren – an American-born, Princeton-trained Middle East historian who understood the ins and outs of Washington and American Jewry. Oren clashed with his boss, then-FM Avigdor Liberman, a brash, Russian-born politician who at times acted in a manner more befitting *The Sopranos* than the head of Israel's diplomatic corps.

Historically, Golda Meir stands apart, as she was the only American to date to gain the premiership and was part of Ben-Gurion's inner circle. Her US immigrant story resonated both within and without Israel and was useful to the furthering of US-Israeli relations, especially after the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Today, long after Eban and Meir, American Jews and Israelis are called upon to exhibit “moral fiber” by using their very Jewish identity as a vehicle to question Israel and its legitimacy. More perverse are the uses of Jewishness to passionately make pleas for the Palestinian cause and the assertion that Jewishness is somehow based on pro-Palestinian beliefs as a “progressive” value. For American Jews on the far Left, as for Arab Palestinians, the events of 1948 are the “original sin.”

Israel does not exist in a vacuum. A deeper understanding is required of what Jews face outside of Israel. The State faces many challenges regarding American bipartisan support for Israel. Just as Israelis don't want American Jews to make Israel a partisan issue, Israeli leaders should not push American Jews away.

Whatever happens after April 9, Washington and Jerusalem need to find common ground to deal with the Zionism of 2019 and highlight the shared values that are part of the broader fabric of Jewish identity. Lau was right in his assessment of Eban. We should not repeat past mistakes as we look for common ground.

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