

## **The great betrayal: American Jews stay silent as Israeli democracy withers**

The existential danger facing the Middle East's only Jewish and democratic state may not be Iran, but Israel itself.

By [Chemi Shalev](#) | Jan. 4, 2016 | 6:47 PM |

On Sunday, [The Washington Post denounced](#) the Israeli government's proposed new legislation against leftist NGOs, euphemistically called "The Transparency Law." In a sharply worded editorial, "A Danger to Israeli Democracy," the newspaper wrote: "The proposal reflects the kind of tactic that Russia and China have employed to squelch dissent, and it is not in keeping with Israel's core values as a democratic state."

The editorial was one of the strongest reactions yet in the United States to Justice Minister [Ayelet Shaked's efforts](#), transparent indeed, to suppress antigovernment NGOs and human rights groups by branding them, in effect, as foreign agents. And it resonates doubly loud when juxtaposed against the deafening silence of most American Jews in response to the waves of chauvinistic antidemocratic legislation and incitement in which Israel is increasingly drowning.

The authoritarian campaign, waged by Israel's ruling coalitions since Likud returned to power in 2009, has accelerated in recent months. It is now all-encompassing. It is being waged in the Knesset, in government ministries, in universities, in schoolrooms and in the media, both social and general.

It includes legislative assaults on free speech, incitement against dissenters, the withholding of government funds for political reasons, regulatory measures against – and greater government control over – television and other media, compulsory changes to school curricula, reinforced Orthodox hegemony over religious affairs and repeated attacks on the Arab minority. All this is accompanied by the constant drone of victimhood and xenophobia emanating from Israeli cabinet ministers, from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on down.

Cynically or genuinely, the proponents of this antidemocratic surge have convinced themselves and many others that Israel faces a grand conspiracy of internal, backstabbing "enemies of the state" who have joined forces with an irredentist Israeli-Arab fifth column and malicious anti-Semites abroad.

They have already succeeded in curtailing freedom of expression, chilling academic and media criticism of the government's policies and inflaming vicious hostility against left-wing politicians and spokespeople – up to and including the Israeli president himself – on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. With every success they get bolder and more

ambitious, while Israelis who disagree with their policies grow more despondent about the present and more apprehensive about their future.

Imagine the outcry among American Jewish liberals if the U.S. government in 2016 banned a book from public schools because it could promote racial intermarriage. Try to conjure the reaction to congressional legislation stipulating that Native Americans could not be taught in their own schools about the tragic history of their own people.

Picture the outpouring of horror and dismay if a desperate GOP presidential candidate tried to spur his white constituency to vote by telling them that Hispanics were flowing to the ballot boxes in droves. Envisage the shock if a U.S. president reacted to a murder or even a terrorist act carried out by an individual African American by pledging to “eradicate lawlessness” in the entire black community, as Netanyahu did Saturday regarding Israeli Arabs after the murderous attack on innocents in Tel Aviv.

Yet American Jews have kept mostly mum as such events and countless other manifestations of this dangerous drift have unfolded in Israel. Even though they rightly pride themselves on being the most liberal religious group in America, they have remained closemouthed about the Israeli assault on the values they hold most dear, the same values they describe as “shared” when lauding the supposed bedrock of U.S.-Israeli relations.

When Peter Beinart wrote in his famous 2010 New York Review of Books article that “the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism’s door,” he was referring to the great divide between the military occupation of Palestinians and Israeli democracy inside the Green Line. Six short years later, it seems American Jews are “checking their liberalism at Zionism’s door” even when the malignant side effects of the occupation have infiltrated across the 1967 borders and are eroding the democracy that they and many Israeli Jews hold most dear. What’s good for the American-Jewish goose, it seems, is not necessarily applicable when it comes to the Israeli gander.

I am not talking about groups such as the Zionist Organization of America, whose chairman Morton Klein wrote this week in support of Shaked’s offensive against “phony NGOs that seek to demonize the Jewish State with falsehoods.” I would not expect Klein, whose organization has been heavily funded by Sheldon Adelson and others of similar ilk, to be bothered by the blatant hypocrisy of a right-wing government exempting its own interventionist billionaires from its war against so-called “foreign intervention.” I would expect, perhaps naively, that other American Jews would be up in arms.

In his end-of-year appeal for last-minute donations, for example, American Jewish Committee Executive Director David Harris proudly noted his organization’s main activities in 2015, a year marked by what he described as “fear and anxiety.” We convened a strategy conference in Brussels to fight global anti-Semitism, he boasted, “worked shoulder to shoulder with our elected leaders to help America show the

necessary leadership abroad” and “leveraged our unparalleled diplomatic infrastructure to facilitate new and deeper friendships between Israel and countries around the world.”

Harris seems to have missed the “fear and anxiety” gripping a sizable portion of Israelis as they watch their country grow estranged from the values embodied in the Declaration of Independence, a document increasingly derided and undermined by Israel’s new leaders. Perhaps the AJC differentiates between Advocacy for Israel, the first item on its website agenda, and advocacy on behalf of Israelis themselves.

Of course, there are countless valid reasons as well as lame excuses for the American Jewish reluctance to confront the Israeli government or to dedicate funds or efforts to constrain it. First and foremost, it is not in the Jewish community’s nature. Whatever the faults of the current government – and they are too grievous and too blatant for anyone but the most zealous right-wingers to deny – the bulk of American Jews who remain committed to Israel are wary of lambasting Israel or, even worse, handing its enemies valuable ammunition. And contrary to last year’s divisive dispute about the Iran nuclear deal, there is no powerful U.S. administration pulling American Jews in the opposite direction.

Many Jewish groups are also wary of jeopardizing their own ties to Netanyahu and his ministers: trans-Atlantic hobnobbing at the top is often a measure of their own influence and prestige in Washington and other world capitals. They are understandably concerned about operating outside their comfort zone of helping Israel fend off its external adversaries, not least of which because their increasingly conservative, militant and influence-wielding benefactors might withhold financial support in return.

Most American Jewish groups, national or local, JCC or synagogue, are also afraid of joining the ranks of J Street and the New Israel Fund on the right wing’s Enemies List; the two organizations are wrongly but consistently ostracized and delegitimized as BDS-backers and Israel-haters. The same chilling effect that is already palpable in Israel can probably be felt in New York, Los Angeles and other U.S. cities as well.

Perhaps American Jews remain unconvinced by the cries of anguish emanating from Israel’s peace camp; it is certainly more convenient for them to accept the government’s reassurance that it’s all much ado about nothing. And they can certainly point to the lack of any convincing counterbalance to Israel’s persuasive prime minister, someone who could rally the troops and enlist American Jews in a just war for decency and democracy.

“We need a leader, we need a leader” is the mantra voiced nowadays by Israelis who oppose the government, and while it is an accurate reflection of the sad political situation of Israel’s center-left, it is also an excuse to continue sipping lattes and planning the next family trip abroad while moaning and doing nothing. If Israelis themselves aren’t up in arms, why should American Jews be bothered?

One can empathize with many American Jews, especially older ones, who prefer to keep on supporting the Israel of their dreams, the Israel of their youth, while averting their

eyes and ears from the clear and the present. And one can understand why they would prefer to postpone a confrontation with Israel as long as its very real enemies such as Iran and Hamas continue to threaten its security and perhaps its existence. That is the fight they are used to, the battle that they feel most comfortable with, the war that has kept them united for so many decades.

But time is running out. By staying silent, by refraining from the kind of forceful, game-changing protest that the current situation warrants, American Jews are not only abandoning like-minded Israelis, they are betraying Israel itself. They don't owe it to Israeli liberals to come to their aid: They owe it first and foremost to themselves.

After all, the biggest existential danger facing the Middle East's only Jewish and democratic state may not be Iran, but Israel itself. And the time for American Jews to cry foul and raise hell against a government that is running roughshod over Israel's liberal legacy while intentionally alienating a large part of the population will soon be gone. Notwithstanding the thousand differences, it would not be the first time American Jews stayed silent and hoped for the best as clouds gathered and a storm threatened their brothers and sisters – nor would it be the first time they came to regret it forever more.