UNDER REVIEW

JEWISH IDENTITY WITH AND WITHOUT ZIONISM

New books provide sober histories of the conflicts among Jews over Israel and offer alternate ways forward.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

February 15, 2024



Illustration by Matt Chase

Save this story

Although the prospect seems scarcely imaginable now, there was a time, not very long ago, when American Jews were free to have no particular thoughts or feelings about Israel. This was true not only of run-of-the-mill Jews but of

intellectuals and writers as well. And it wasn't merely that assimilation—an act at once idealistic, pragmatic, and mortifying—was more pressing to a Philip Roth or a Saul Bellow than one's relationship, one way or another, to the nascent Jewish state. It's that Israel, and Zionism, didn't seem like relevant objects of concern. This is no longer a tenable position. Joshua Cohen's novel "The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family," which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2022, is a revisionist history that needed little more than a year to lie in wait for its time. The book is premised on a counterfactual: What if the American Jewish intellectuals of the interwar period—that is, between the end of the Second World War and the Six-Day War—had been forced to wrestle with Zionism? And what if their Zionist challenger hadn't represented the ostensibly liberal, humanist, kibbutznik wing of the movement that was then in ascendance, but the expansionist, chauvinistic, Messianic contingent then in retreat? These aren't idle questions.

Cohen's novel is narrated from the present but takes place in 1959, to coincide with the publication of Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus," a book with only a single glance over its shoulder at Israel—a reference to the fact that the American Jew, when he thought about Israel at all, then considered it a place that didn't have enough trees. Very loosely based on a personal anecdote relayed to Cohen (who, I should probably note, is a friend of mine) by the late Harold Bloom, "The Netanyahus" tells the story of an encounter between Ruben Blum, a first-generation scholar of taxation—"I *am* a Jewish historian, but I am *not* an historian of the Jews," he warns, defensively—and Benzion Netanyahu. At the time, Benzion was a largely unknown and quasi-mystical interpreter of the Iberian Inquisition—which, for him, represented the perennial efflorescence of antisemitism as a racialized (and hence ineradicable) phenomenon. Much later, he became known as the (spiritual and, incidentally, actual) father of Bibi, the current Israeli Prime Minister, and as, in Bibi's retelling, the patriarch of American-Israeli relations. Blum, as the lone Jew on a rural campus that stands in for Cornell, is

asked by his Waspy, alcoholic department head to host Benzion for a job talk. Benzion, who believes that the Jewish people can only be safeguarded in perpetuity by Jewish state power, has become persona non grata in Israel in part for the extremity of his views—the territorialist belief, for example, that Jewish sovereignty ought to extend over "Greater Israel." He has been invited to interview for a joint appointment in the college's history department and its seminary. The rationale is budgetary, but Benzion, despite his secularism, exploits the irony of the occasion to try out the kind of end-times ethnonationalism that will soon drive Religious Zionism and the settler movement.

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Blum, for his part, has done his best to leave seminarian attachments behind. His Bronx childhood straddled a yawning divide between his religious education—rabbis droning on about the Jew's existence outside time, in an eternal recurrence of exile, persecution, and dispossession—and its American counterpart: destiny made manifest in ceaseless forward motion. He ultimately chooses to study history of not the Judeo-pessimistic but the Whiggish departmental variety. Benzion's arrival heralds, for Blum, the return of the repressed. The sly patricidal joke of the book is that Roth was only half right to identify Jewish American repression as sexual. Although the novel culminates in a comic episode of priapism, the libidinal emancipation of the Netanyahu family owes less to Sigmund Freud than it does to Theodor Herzl. What has been repressed, for Blum, isn't sex but Israel—both the actual state and its reconstituted form of muscular Jewish identity.

In the beginning of "The Netanyahus," both Blum and Benzion feel as though they have at last entered history. For Blum, this has meant a self-conscious climb into American middle-class hide-a-bed comfort. (He has compromised with the rabbis of his youth by specializing in the subdiscipline of economic history, where Jews might not have been agents but were at least reliable subcontractors.) Benzion, however, is inflamed by the idea that it was only with the "ingathering of exiles to Zion" that Jews emerged as a proper people on the world stage. Benzion considers Blum a delusional fool for having bought the kind of "integration" America is selling him: extermination on the installment plan. (Blum's daughter effectively risks her life for a nose job.) Blum, for his part, believes that what Benzion professes is not history but thinly veiled theology. He is nonetheless drawn in, to his surprise and discomfort, by Benzion's provocation that American Jews have ransomed themselves for the fantasy of belonging.

What makes their overlap a "minor and ultimately negligible episode" for Benzion, if not for Blum, is that their encounter is one of ships in the night. The two figures —the uneasily Americanized Jew and the fervently ideological Zionist—glance off each other, bound in orthogonal directions. As Blum reflects:

> Just about a decade prior to the autumn I'm recalling, the State of Israel was founded. In that minuscule country halfway across the globe, displaced and refugee Jews were busy reinventing themselves into a single people, united by the hatreds and subjugations of contrary regimes, in a mass-process of solidarity aroused by gross antagonism. Simultaneously, a kindred mass-process was occurring here in America, where Jews were busy being deinvented, or uninvented, or assimilated, by democracy and market-forces, intermarriage and miscegenation. Regardless of where they were and the specific nature and direction of the process, however, it remains an incontrovertible fact that nearly all of the world's Jews were involved at mid-century in becoming something else; and that at this point of transformation, the old internal differences between them—of former citizenship and class, to say nothing of language and degree of religious observance—became for a brief moment more palpable than ever, giving one last death-rattle gasp.

We never learn much about Blum the contemporary narrator, the Blum who can recall this supposedly "negligible" episode in such agonizing detail, although we can infer from his stray comments about the contemporary campus atmosphere of "grievance" that he entertains some culturally reactionary sympathies. Part of this might be his sense that there is no place for Jews in the new landscape of competitive victimhood—that identity politics has become a militarized option for every minority aside from his own. And one can safely assume that Israel and Zionism are no longer things that Blum feels the desire or latitude to ignore. It's clear, from his analysis of the "death-rattle gasp" of difference between his own attitude and Benzion's, that the latter's views are no longer as alien to him as they were in 1959. The twinned transformations might not have been quite so divergent after all. Like escaped prisoners in a screwball buddy comedy, they're about to realize that they're shackled together. Understanding the mechanisms—inevitable and otherwise—that effectuated that shift is an exercise Cohen leaves to the reader.

The problem, as Cohen is aware, is that most American Jews have forgotten, or perhaps never knew, how estranged a figure like Blum might have felt at mid-century from someone like Benzion, and thus have no real idea how we came to take for granted the troubled kinship between American Jews and Israel. How did American non-Zionist Jews become liberal Zionists or even right-wing Zionists? (And how, in turn, did their grandchildren become anti-Zionists?) When Cohen's book first appeared, it was read as a comic allegory about identity politics. This is true, although it was at the same time a tragic allegory about identity politics. The present moment, when the boundary between identity politics and global realpolitik has become blurry, clarifies the novel's stakes. Two new books—Shaul Magid's "The Necessity of Exile: Essays from a Distance," completed just before October 7th, and Noah Feldman's "To Be a Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel, and the Jewish People," written late enough to be updated—provide judicious, sober genealogies of the political and spiritual

conflicts that have afflicted Jewish communities in light of their relationships to Israel. Taken together, they invite a more capacious understanding of Jewish lives and Jewish futures in the diaspora.

Magid, a professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth and an ordained rabbi with a pulpit on Fire Island, was raised in a New York suburb by secular Socialist parents with ties to the Workmen's Circle, then a mutual-aid society devoted to the cultivation of Yiddish cultural autonomy. In 1978, as a hippie in his early twenties, he moved to Israel in an aimless search for spiritual communion. He had, by his own admission, no interest in Zionism or even Judaism, but he sought by instinct a sense of cosmic affinity in the sunlit uplands of the ancients. Over the years, he took up with like-minded counterculturalists in a Jerusalem yeshiva, fell in and out of various Haredi communities, and spent time among the early settlers. As he wandered in the desert, he was exposed to crosscurrents of Messianism. On the one hand, he was introduced to the dwindling strongholds of religious anti-Zionism, whose proponents maintained a "spiritual posture" against the establishment of a secular Jewish nation, which violated two thousand years of rabbinical teaching about exile; he eventually came to read Joel Teitelbaum, the Satmar rebbe and a lifelong opponent of the Jewish state, a homecoming that was supposed to occur only with the arrival of the Messiah. On the other hand, Magid was attracted to the then marginal rise of Religious Zionism, which married Romantic ideals about nation and land to a divine quest for the deliverance of the Jewish people. The Religious Zionists, who looked upon the settlement of their God-given enclave as a necessary precursor to the fulfillment of the covenant, "truly believed they were the vanguard, riding the wave of messianic time." He writes, "To me, it appeared to be a Jewish spiritual path that had left Europe behind. Its center was not the nostalgia of the shtetl but the mysterious resonance of a more ancient landscape. I later came to see that while the former was quaint and outdated, the latter was powerful yet dangerous."

He catches an early glimpse of disturbance on the horizon at a Shabbat service in Atzmona, a settlement in Gaza. He writes, "Gazing out at the village of Khan Yunis, seeing Palestinians riding their donkeys and carts home from the market, and hearing the call to prayer from the many mosques that dotted the landscape, I realized that the people in Atzmona did not really see the Palestinians as coinhabitants; they were not part of their project. The settlers viewed their neighbors as part of the background, like the flora and fauna." Something, he says, "broke inside me in that beautiful spot by the sea." At the time, as Religious Zionism was beginning to coalesce as a political movement, Magid observes that Palestinians were still not exactly seen as enemies; they were more like natural features of an Oriental panorama, obstructions to the Zionist project to be rearranged or removed by God's will. By the time Magid served in the I.D.F., though, during the first intifada, the hostility had become explicit. The tensions between his apolitical spiritual yearning and the reality of the political project on the ground became too much for him to bear. Some of his fellow-travellers on the hippie path began to adopt the increasingly common position of "right on Israel, left on everything else," but he found himself ultimately unable to reconcile "the counterculture's commitment to the freedom, justice, civil rights, nonviolence, and equality in the context of Israel's continued occupation that includes systematic discrimination against the Palestinian population."

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The book is a record of his painful surrendering of Zionism, an ideological project that he compares to Manifest Destiny. He advocates instead for what he gingerly

calls "counter-Zionism," a "new collective ideology that, if enacted, could serve Israel as a more liberal and democratic place for the next phase of its existence." Zionism in its statist form was, in other words, an historically spent force, a nineteenth-century solution to the problem of antisemitism; it is past time, he thinks, to seek a new solution that allows for the self-determination of both Israelis and Palestinians. The state's character, he writes, "would not be structured on the notion that this land 'belongs' to anyone, it would be a true democracy."

The fact that these are not new ideas is exactly the point. Magid's project—over the wide-ranging, moving, and learned essays that constitute the collection—is to do what Jews have always done when they want to mute or subdue the radicalism of a disruptive proposal: he locates the source of his authority in traditional antecedents. (The oldest rhetorical trick in the Jewish book is to recast one's defiance of one's parents as loyalty to one's grandparents.) The tradition he delivers out of collective amnesia is the long, complicated, and often elided custom of Jewish alternatives to Zionism as a national project. Between the eighteen-eighties and the nineteen-forties, statist Zionism was a minority aspiration. This was true at virtually every point along the spectrum of Jewish observance. For religious Jews, the establishment of a state prior to the arrival of the Messiah was an apostasy. The statist project was avowedly secular—the endgame was the construction of a new Hebrew culture to supplant Judaism as a religion—and observant communities generally wanted no part of it. For many Socialist and communist Jews, nationalism of any stripe was a monstrous and decrepit ideology. They predicted, especially in the wake of the First World War, that it would inspire exactly the kind of exclusionist zealotry that had long been the bane of European Jewish existence. A Jewish nation-state would invariably squander the righteousness the Jewish people had cultivated on the civilizational margins: as it is written in scripture, "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of

Egypt." For American Jews, the prospect of nationhood elsewhere undermined their faith in Jewish assimilation. They feared that it would summon the spectre of dual loyalty. These various cohorts didn't necessarily agree with one another about anything else—they were, after all, Jews—but they shared a deep suspicion of Zionism's commitment to *shlilat ha'golah*, or the negation of exile. In other words, the creation of a Jewish state would necessarily debilitate and collapse all other forms of Jewish identity and Jewish observance in the gravitational vortex of nationhood. The Zionists did not mince words about this aspiration; they reached for every standard antisemitic trope—that Jews were sickly, flawed, rootless, desiccated—to demean the forms of Jewish life in the diaspora.

The Second World War and the Holocaust—and the urgent need to get refugees out of Europe—made all these alternative Zionisms and anti-Zionisms seem wishful and obsolete. With the backing of Western powers that felt at once guilty and disinclined to accept the boatloads themselves, the Zionism of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, presented itself as the only viable option. This did not come without serious misgivings, both on behalf of the displaced Palestinians—the "solution" of the "Jewish question" in Europe simply kicked the can down the road to become the "Arab question" in Israel—and on behalf of all Jews elsewhere. Hannah Arendt, the thinker to whom Magid returns most often, had worked for a Zionist agency in her youth but by 1948 had come to warn that "under present circumstances a Jewish state can only be erected at the price of the Jewish homeland." Late in his life, Gershom Scholem, the greatest modern scholar of Jewish Messianism, allowed that these critics had had a point. "Zionism was a calculated risk in that it brought about the destruction of the reality of Exile," he told an interviewer. "The foes of Zionism certainly saw the risk more clearly than we Zionists." Ben-Gurion's vision nonetheless prevailed for two reasons. Paramount was the matter of historical exigency: the Holocaust had proved that Jews were not, in fact, as safe in the diaspora as they might have thought, and the refugees were explicitly unwelcome anywhere else. But it also had, in Magid's

telling, just as much to do with a special offer extended to American Jews. In 1942, Ben-Gurion travelled to the Biltmore Hotel, in New York, to meet with American Jewish leaders, who until then had largely been indifferent or opposed to the creation of a Jewish state. The price of their investment, he learned, was to concede that American Jews would not be living in exile—a state of spiritual impoverishment and deracination—but in diaspora, a more neutral characterization of dispersion. The American Jewish project could proceed on its own parallel track. People like Ruben Blum were licensed to look away and do their own thing.

The problem is that most of these Jews soon discovered that doing their own thing was confusing and a lot of work. The outstanding question of American Jewish endurance and vitality—and the vexed relationship of that vitality to Israel—is at the center of Noah Feldman's "To Be a Jew Today." Feldman, a polymath and public intellectual at Harvard Law School, picks up more or less where Magid leaves off. Where Magid set out to work through, with lambent melancholy, his personal connection to Zionism and its discontents, Feldman seems to have wanted to write a book about anything but Zionism. The fact that he simply could not write about the condition of American Jewry without devoting more than a third of the book to Israel is exactly the crux of the issue—at one point, he pauses to assure an impatient reader that the Israel stuff is coming. For Feldman, Zionism has both shored up and constrained the American Jewish experience.

Feldman opens his book with two questions: "What's the point of being a Jew? And, really, aside from Jews, who cares?" He hastens to note that he himself has no existential hangups in this department; he was raised in a Modern Orthodox home, educated at a Jewish day school, and finds meaning, joy, and intellectual stimulation in the tradition. That's more than enough of a "point" for him. Why, then, if he has personally endured no dark night of the Jewish soul, did he bother

to write a book about the attempts to place Jewish identity on a more secure footing? Part of it is that this is just how the tradition works: Jews are commanded to practice, not to believe, so each successive generation is required to gin up some plausible reasons why, exactly, the balls ought to be kept in the air. Modern Jews of a certain intellectual dispensation are quick to cite a Talmudic story about the oven of *akhnai*, in which a group of rabbis are debating an excruciatingly minor point of law; God steps in to make a clarifying intervention, and the rabbis tell God, in no uncertain terms, to stay in his lane. The interpretation of tradition becomes a tradition of interpretation, and it's turtles all the way down.

If a sporting Talmudic fussiness were Feldman's fundamental aim, however, he wouldn't have written a patient book for a mainstream audience. His deeper goal is to take up, and with any luck do away with, the notion of the "bad Jew"—an epithet that almost all Jews, observant or otherwise, at some point apply to themselves. The question of Jewish legitimacy and authenticity can't be answered once and for all. As he puts it, Jews should give the bad-Jew shtick a rest: "Nor should Jewish communities, however defined, define others as bad Jews. A bad Jew is just a Jew expressing irony and self-skepticism and maybe a little guilt. In other words, a Jew."

Feldman spends the first third of the book reviewing the major strains of contemporary Jewish belief about God, ritual, and observance. He's less interested, however, in how various communities express their Jewish commitments than in how they *justify* them. Traditionalists don't bother; the study of Torah is self-justifying. Progressives look to the tradition for its ethical teachings—a lightly particularistic route to a universal liberal humanism. What Feldman calls "Godless Jews" are basically sports fans, who take pride in Jewish accomplishment and identification and kvetching without much else: Larry David, more or less. Feldman's own heart seems to be with the community he calls the Evolutionists, who attempt to split the difference. Like activist Justices who advertise themselves as strict originalists in their interpretation of the Constitution, they find ways to wield the tradition against itself; they "combine belief in God's authority handed

down via rabbinic tradition with the belief that God wants us, human beings, to evolve the tradition consciously in the right direction as we see fit."

For Feldman, what's characteristically Jewish about all these camps is their ongoing struggle—with God, with Torah, with the rabbis, with one another—to determine for themselves the parameters of an authentically Jewish life. Jews are people who argue, ideally with quotes from sources, about what it could possibly mean to be "chosen." The major predicament for contemporary Jews of all varieties, in his view, is not that the struggle for meaning and self-justification is too burdensome or intractable. It's that this demand has become too minimally and easily met. And it's become too easy because of Israel. Feldman's argument is too sophisticated and manifold to summarize succinctly, but it amounts to the proposal that support for the Israeli state in the wake of the Holocaust has become not just the central political but the central *theological* underpinning of Jewish identity, at least for most non-Traditionalist American Jews. On the verge of destruction, we were redeemed by a miracle. This story became concrete and sacrosanct in the aftermath of the Six-Day War. The Holocaust itself was not enough—no people can build a sustainable and dignified self-image on the basis of victimhood alone—but Zionism transformed victimhood into triumph. This became the metanarrative that binds many contemporary Jews, from uneasy liberal Zionists to settler fanatics, to a tradition that can feel otherwise unmoored.

In 1959, Ruben Blum could look upon at Benzion Netanyahu as a yahoo, and take his diasporic leave. Over the following fifteen years, the "Zionization" of American Jewry was completed. This was as much a result of top-down planning—beginning in the aftermath of the 1967 war, religious schools rearranged their curricula around not religion but Israel—as a matter of organic demand for a new way not only to rationalize but to consecrate an otherwise assimilated life style. Zionism was, as Cohen insinuates, at the nervous vanguard of identity politics. It's obvious enough that this has put liberal Zionists in an untenable position, as

they've had to countenance—or not, as the case may be—an illiberal state. But to Feldman's mind the issue is much deeper. Insofar as support for Israel has, since 1967, become perhaps the single most important pillar of Jewish identity, it has turned Jews away from struggle and toward dogmatism. The varieties of novelty and vigor on the margin were diminished. (It seems important to note that the dynamics he's describing characterize American Jews; for Jews in other countries, where it's more common even today to feel marked as "other," the situation can be different.) On Passover, Jews celebrate our deliverance from Egypt—in Hebrew, "the narrow places"—but now it is an overweening attachment to the land of Canaan (which, even then, was already inhabited) that has rendered Jewish self-conception increasingly narrow. Like Magid, Feldman aspires to return the possibilities of diaspora to the center of the tradition—to propose that Jewish life can be more vigorous, more sustainable, and more *Jewish* when it pitches its tents on the periphery. When Roth finally directed his full attention to Israel, in the 1993 book "Operation Shylock," he proposed "Diasporism" as something of an inside joke. A younger generation is calling his bluff.

By the end of "To Be a Jew Today," the real "bad Jews" Feldman aimed to defend in his introduction aren't really the bagels-lox-and-Israel Jews: they are progressive Jews who can no longer support the Zionist project, not merely because of Palestinian suffering and the Palestinian right to self-determination, but because it is a failure of the *Jewish* imagination to act as though Jewish identity is decisively attached to a fallible nation-state—one that, as Arendt and others predicted, was destined to act like any other nation-state. There is a tendency, with the conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism, to regard Peter Beinart, or the staff of *Jewish Currents*, or the organizers of Jewish Voice for Peace or IfNotNow, or even at this point the Satmars, as bad or self-hating Jews—as, in fact, Kapos, turncoats more interested in their status as progressives than they are in protecting their people. These important books are not for them; many of them don't have to be reminded that the comprehensive identification of Jewishness and uncritical support for

Israel is an artifact of living memory. But perhaps their self-appointed critics might be served by these reminders of alternate traditions, and Magid and Feldman are serious messengers who cannot be written off as know-nothing social-media sloganeers. As Magid has it, "These enforcers are guilty of flattening the Jewish tradition to serve their chauvinistic nationalist political agenda. To them, what a Jew believes, what she eats, if she davens, or how she keeps Shabbat doesn't really matter. To be a Jew in good standing only means to support the Jewish national project."

Feldman believes that it is possible, irrespective of one's own personal position on Israel, to accept and even refine criticism of the country as a deep expression of one's relationship to tradition, and perhaps even an inevitable one. Many of these progressive Jews have been told since birth that Israel is an inextricable component of their Jewish self-image; their activism ought best be understood as an articulation of their Jewishness rather than a repudiation of it. In some ways, this attitude has become more difficult since October 7th, and perhaps in some ways easier. There are multiple ways to read the central encounter of "The Netanyahus": that had Blum paid greater heed to Benzion he might have been better able to anticipate what Israel, with his own complicity, would look like now; that Blum was wishfully naïve in his hope that his own assimilation would somehow prove a sustainable incarnation of Jewish identity; that Benzion was right, after all, in his certainty that enemies of the Jews would rise up in every generation, and that the diaspora provided insufficient protection; or that all these truths have become deeply intertwined in ways that do not, at the moment, permit easy resolution. Jews are still, as Feldman sees it, a family, whose "struggle is a covenant and a conflict and a concord all at the same time." ♦

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