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AMERICAN JEWRY AND THE SEARCH FOR AMERICAN MORAL CONFIDENCE

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ Today, American Jews, like many of their non-Jewish compatriots, must contend with ideologies aimed at undermining their identity and values.
- ★ Restoring what makes America exceptional will go a long way to not only bringing America back from this low point in its history but will be formative in making America more welcoming towards its Jewish communities.
- ★ This will require not only Jewish moral confidence but also that of all Americans. This effort will not eliminate anti-Semitism, to be sure, but at least it can restore an appreciation within the public consciousness that America is exceptional. And that it is American exceptionalism that

Recent trends, including a dramatic [spike](#) in anti-Semitic attacks in New York City over the last two years and a recent [poll](#) that found more than a quarter of American Jewish millennials conceal their Jewish identity due mainly to anti-Israel pressure on campuses, have invited the question of whether it is the end of the American Jewry and what is needed to save it. [Bret Stephens](#) and [Adam Milstein](#) argue in separate settings, correctly, I believe, that the rise in anti-Israel sentiment can only be turned back by restoring America's strong bond with Israel, which is key to making America a welcoming home for Jews.

In a series of essays for Mosaic, Harvard emeritus professor Ruth Wisse [diagnoses](#) the top and less pronounced reason for what makes today's waves of attacks on America's Jews on its campuses and streets uniquely dangerous. It accompanies a "loss of Jewish moral confidence."



Wisse explains that as American Jews have joined their compatriots in enjoying unprecedented prosperity in their home in America, they have begun to forget what enabled their survival for millennia in the first place. It is a key part of their existence not shared by their Christian compatriots: living in the shadow of anti-Semitism, “an ideology aimed at [their] destruction.” The rise in comfort, welcomeness, and prosperity came with a loss of memory of how to recognize and fight anti-Semitism.

To take Wisse’s analysis one step further, the loss of Jewish moral confidence itself may be connected to a broader loss of Americans’ self-awareness. Today, it is fair to say Americanness—as identified even a decade or two ago—is no longer accepted because of the mainstreaming of attitudes aimed at framing American identity as deeply loathsome and oppressive—criticisms leveled from the Black Lives Matter movement and other leftist forces.

These forces and those sympathetic to them within the Biden Administration throw around labels of “fascism” and “racism” at conservatives, decrying those in disagreement with their policies as “threats to democracy.” The Biden Administration has also systematically deployed national security resources to surveil “extremism” among large segments of the population (including parents at school board meetings and uniformed service members).

The result is that today American Jews, like many of their non-Jewish compatriots, must contend with ideologies aimed at undermining their identity and values.

Restoring what makes America exceptional—not only in our education system but in our understanding of ourselves as Americans, in our conduct with one another, our relationship to our broader society and to those beyond it—will go a long way to not only bringing America back from this low point in its history but will be formative in making America more welcoming towards its Jewish communities.

This will require not only Jewish moral confidence but also that of all Americans. This effort will not eliminate anti-Semitism, to be sure, but at least it can restore an appreciation within the public consciousness that America is exceptional. And that it is American exceptionalism that accounts for why America has historically been the best home Jews have had in millennia. Not only is America’s tradition deeply informed by Judeo-Christian teachings, but it, in turn, fostered a uniquely deliberative society open to broad-ranging discourse and debate in the name of that American tradition. This unique combination of qualities made it vastly improve not only the lives of its Jewish



citizens but indeed those of all of its communities and even the people of other countries.

The solution, then, is restoring the correct teaching of history (especially of our own country), along with the standard of education, to protect America's children and their future.

The Three Lost “T’s” of American Life: Text, Tradition, and (Healthy) Tension

A Talmudic maxim has it that “rivalry among scholars increases wisdom.” Tension is critical for progress, whether in interpreting a line of scripture or finding solutions. But for that tension to be healthy and productive, it needs to be situated within a clear structure that is committed to preserving both tradition and a core foundational text. The relationship between these three “t’s” determines the stakes, sources, and standards of any given confrontation and can be the difference between a breakthrough and a breakdown.

At any point in its early history, America could have taken a different turn had there not been a commitment to a text—the Constitution—and a conversation on how to understand it. Regardless if one belongs to the textualist or originalist schools of American jurisprudence, it was once not controversial to observe that both approach the American Constitution as a sacred document. Indeed, it was the very respect towards the Constitution that animated the real tension over its application. And it was a tension that took place within the traditional channels and structures of American governance, particularly in the halls of Congress.

This was the environment that allowed two titans of the Republican and Democrat parties, Senators Orrin Hatch and Ted Kennedy, to engage in debate vigorously but remain close friends. Indeed, lasting legislation rarely becomes law without representation from both sides of the aisle and both chambers all going through a process of tension and then reconciliation. Senator Hatch's standard practice was to have at least one Democrat co-lead on a piece of legislation. In retrospect, I am both proud and amazed that for every piece of foreign policy legislation I helped introduce while part of Senator Hatch's team, with one exception, we had a Democrat co-sponsor. This included a bill calling for sanctions on Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, for which Senator Heidi Heitkamp joined. And this was after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action when President Obama made it near impossible for any serious bipartisan effort regarding Iran to take place.

It was an important education, and I was able to get to know and build relationships with many staffers from Democrat offices. For a different time perhaps (and, given size, perhaps limiting it to Senate), it might make sense as



a good orientation exercise for new Hill staffers to simply go out and grab coffee with every single staffer from the opposite party working on the same portfolio. That was certainly an objective I remember setting for myself. Unfortunately, today's environment leaves little room for real bipartisanship. Bipartisanship for bipartisanship's sake does not work if it lacks reverence towards text and tradition. We can and should certainly strive for bipartisanship, but we cannot begin that process without a return to basics—our founding texts and our traditions.

Tradition or Truth (Claim)?

Tradition is perhaps the most elusive of the three “t’s.” It is fair, if incredulous, to ask whether we would recognize an American tradition if we saw it. Certainly, there is Thanksgiving and Independence Day, but those are more in the related category of rituals.

What does it mean to act, speak, dress, and conduct oneself in an American way?

Today, discussion of tradition is much less frequent than assertions of axiomatic truth, often disconnected from evidence of reasonable opportunities to dissent. Denying the truth of a particular claim, such as the Leftist dogma that oppression is embedded in America's very DNA—regardless of any offer of evidence or opportunity for discussion—is met with swift reprimand and even censure. Social media platforms provide a natural opportunity to facilitate this behavior.

The late former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, observed in his last book, [Morality](#), that “[t]he return of public shaming and vigilante justice, of viral videos and tendentious Tweets, is not a move forward to a brave new world but a regression to a very old one: that of pre-Christian Rome and the pre-Socratic Greeks.”

Perhaps the most taboo subject in American life today is trust in elections. But the system of elections has always historically been notoriously prone to flaws—the very reason that many recent presidential and state elections have been challenged by both sides. And it is why an entire blue-ribbon bipartisan commission and report, the Baker-Carter Commission, was assembled—to help guide that discussion. One can dispute elections system and how elections are carried out while still accepting the current government leadership as duly elected. The topic of face mask mandates is another great example of the imposition of truth claims, irrespective of their veracity, and the shaming of those who contest them.



These examples are manifestations of a systemic pattern that rushes to shame and label because truth claims are not accepted uncritically. Lost are the traditions of American discourse and behavior that might, again, in another time suggest a debate or deep study. Indeed, this comes down to what is acceptable American behavior at the individual level. Recall another recent low episode in the breakdown of our institutions—the confirmation hearing of Brett Kavanaugh. I recall going into the office in the Hart Senate Office Building throughout his confirmation hearing, passing by the offices of other Republican Senators with protesters calling for their ouster. More pernicious still were death threats that our interns received from callers for the mere fact of working for a Republican Senator.

Here another great Talmudic passage comes to mind of a heated debate between several scholars going at it when a heavenly voice intervenes and tells them that the law is according to one of them. But the anecdote does not end there. One of the scholars responds by saying that following the delivery of the Torah at Sinai, we do not heed heavenly voices.

The lesson is that we have it in our own system and selves to find a way to settle our disputes without the need for truth claims because we already have our tradition established for how to do so. By virtue of the fact that we all respect the same tradition, the same key foundational text, and our goal in our disputes is to find a way forward faithful to that tradition and text, we can be confident in knowing our quarrels are just and even necessary.

By contrast, today's quarrels, however, lack this shared commitment to American tradition and its texts and appear narrowly driven by vindicating truth claims and, through new technological means, exacting vigilante justice in their name, as Rabbi Sacks observed.

Ritual and Responsibility

Relatedly, we have rituals and responsibilities because of sharing a common tradition. In the category of rituals are holidays and the symbols of our traditions, which include the names of places and memorials of historical figures. What and whom do we choose to memorialize, and how?

Today's answers to these questions take the form of renaming military bases, removing statues, and renaming holidays. It is a mistake to see these efforts as mere undirected mob mentality; they are part of a specific kind of pressure to redefine and recreate American memory and tradition and to ostracize anyone who stands in the way.



The redefinition of rituals means Americans, as such, have different responsibilities in their relations with one another, to their society, and to the broader world. The rituals we practice or commemorate, whether gathering with family for Thanksgiving or visiting the 9/11 memorial in New York City, are all not only important on their own terms but also serve the function of periodically reminding us of how we got to where we are and the American identity that binds all of us.

Undoing this social fabric is one dangerous outcome of the disappearance of the three “t’s” mentioned earlier, their replacement with dogmatic truth claims and shaming. Those who were renaming bases and removing statues would argue that it is not enough to reject a particular understanding of American tradition merely. Rather, they hold that part of that rejection must be acceptance of what is presented as “truth.”

Discovering American Moral Confidence

The greatest threat to Jews in America today is the erosion of what makes America exceptional and great. If American society cannot come back from this moment in its history, it will be because of its elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels and because those in positions of authority and influence— university presidents, community leaders, military leaders, editors, and authors—lack the moral confidence to fight ideologies committed to America’s destruction.

A starting point would be recognizing Rabbi Sacks’ observations of the legacy of Christianity, Greek ethics and dialectic, and of course, the Jewish tradition, have together brought humankind out of its animalistic existence and charged human beings to rely on their higher intellects to think, engage meaningfully and critically, in a direction that moved humanity into a new future of progress and prosperity.

America is the greatest manifestation of how these traditions and ideas all came together in a nation-state. Its emphasis on strengthening those institutions that sustain these traditions—the family, the community, the church, and universities—has led to America being the most welcoming place on earth, with an unprecedented opportunity for not only its Jewish community but also for every other community that calls America home, and indeed for the people of many other countries as well.

Realizing the unmatched good that comes from America’s exceptional legacy requires taking action to protect it. The most immediate step is a proactive approach of reintroducing the texts and rituals of America not only as sacred parts of our heritage but also part of a single American tradition with whose



meaning and application Americans must grapple together. This must be cultivated not only at the K-12 level but also in universities and in our public sphere. Just as faiths need not only to exist but to be practiced, so too must we appreciate that our American tradition is a discursive one—to be learned but also vigorously debated in the name of preserving it. We need this healthy and dynamic tension informed by veneration of our founding doctrines and a commitment to live by them as our nation moves forward.

In doing so, we rediscover our responsibilities as Americans—to ourselves, to one another, to non-Americans, and to our history and its preservation. That is the debt we owe to those who sacrificed so that we can be here. Acting as responsible Americans is ultimately central to the continuity of the units of American life, from the family unit to our neighborhoods to our institutions and networks of learning, faith, and work.

This sense of responsibility is also what gives us the self-awareness we need to build healthy relationships not only within our communities and networks but also those outside of them, including with those outside of America's borders.

Jewish history is the story of survival against all odds and against the most evil and destructive forces ever to have appeared on the face of the earth. We are still here today. And we are ready to help our compatriots find our shared moral confidence as we together fight for the survival of our beloved home.

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