# (Un)civil Judaisms:
# Orthodoxy and Heresy in the American Jewish Community's Relationship with Israel

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**Summary**

This thesis examines the evolution of the American Jewish community's relationship with Israel using the theoretical framework of civil religion, orthodoxy, and heresy. The analysis presented here emerges from Jonathan S. Woocher's seminal study of the civil religion of American Jews, *Sacred Survival*. The goal of this thesis is to understand how support for Israel became the orthodoxy of the civil Judaism that Woocher described, and to examine the development of heresies that have challenged that orthodoxy, in particular a new movement called IfNotNow. The contribution of this thesis is the development of a theoretical framework for understanding the mechanics of orthodoxy and heresy in civil religion, which was then applied to the particular case of the American Jewish community's relationship with Israel.

This thesis has a preface, three chapters, and a conclusion. The preface offers a personal raison d'être for the project. The first chapter defines civil religion, examines how Woocher applied the concept to the American Jewish community, and evaluates the contemporary relevance Woocher's analysis. The second chapter examines how support for Israel ossified into the orthodoxy of civil Judaism. The third chapter develops a theory of heresy that explains the emergence of movements that have challenged the orthodoxy of civil Judaism's support for Israel, and then focuses on one of those movements, IfNotNow. Finally, the conclusion offers some thoughts on the future of civil Judaism.

Source material about IfNotNow came from participant-observation, interviews with members, organizational literature, and newspaper articles. Other historical, sociological, and theoretical material for this thesis came from extensive consultation of secondary literature.

## Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements**

This thesis emerged from a question that Rabbi Dr. Larry Hoffman posed during his Ritual Studies course in the fall semester of 2016: “What would be the civil religion of American Jews?” After hearing this query, I immediately scribbled the words “civil religion of American Jews” in my notes, underlined them several times, and wrote “THESIS” next to them. When class was over, I approached Dr. Hoffman straightaway and we set a time to meet to discuss the topic. We spoke at length about what the dimensions of such an inquiry would look like, and we developed a proposal that I submitted in January 2017.

Since the very beginning, Dr. Hoffman has been a sage, insightful, and patient advisor, always encouraging me pursue my ideas to the fullest and pushing me to strive for excellence. His brilliant conceptual mind helped me clarify, concretize, and organize the work that you will read in the pages to come. And as if his wisdom were not enough, thanks to his endless kindness I left every meeting with him feeling better than I did when I walked in. Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not note that one of the reasons I am in rabbinical school is that Dr. Hoffman took me out for breakfast when I was an undergraduate at Penn and encouraged me to apply. Suffice to say, he has played an outsized role in my journey to and through HUC, and I cannot thank him enough.

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Krohn for supervising the translation of an excerpt from a 1984 article by Eliezer Don-Yehiya and Charles S. Liebman entitled “The Dilemma of Reconciling Traditional Culture and Political Needs: Civil Religion in Israel,” which I worked on as part of my review of the theoretical literature.

I first learned of IfNotNow in January 2017 during a conversation with my friend Rachel Marder, soon to be ordained a rabbi from Ziegler. After speaking with her again in August of that year, IfNotNow became the focus of my thesis. It has been such a blessing to have her as a thought partner and chavruta—she emphatically enriched the framing of this project.

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I am grateful to Lily Goldstein, who wrote her undergraduate thesis at Northwestern University about IfNotNow, and to my colleague Matt Green wrote a paper about IfNotNow for a class in spring 2017, both of whom shared their excellent work with me.

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## Preface:

## Which Side Am I On?

On a Friday morning in late March 2017, I boarded a Washington bound Amtrak train to attend my first American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference. On the one hand, I was anxious: having never been to Policy Conference before, I worried about joining the largest annual gathering on the American Jewish calendar (topped only when there is a Siyum HaShas, the celebration that concludes of the seven-and-a-half-year Daf Yomi cycle of daily Talmud study, which drew 100,000 Jews to MetLife Stadium in 2012).[1] On the other hand, I was excited as well: having lived in DC for four years prior to starting rabbinical school, I looked forward to the opportunity, during whatever downtime I could find, to visit old haunts and reconnect with old friends.

One of those old friends was a member of the Jewish acapella group for young professionals that I sang with when I lived in the District. In addition to being a marvelous tenor, he is also a fierce activist in progressive politics, having worked for organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the Marijuana Policy Project. Hoping to catch up with him, I texted him to let him know that I was in town and to see if he might be free to grab breakfast on Saturday morning. His response crushed me: “Hey!!! You here for Jewish resistance?...I’m going to Jewish resistance.”

[1] Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Nearly 100,000 Jews to Gather in N.J. to Celebrate Completion of Talmud Cycle Read More: Https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/news/nearly-100-000-jews-to-gather-in-n-j-to-celebrate-completion-of-talmud-cycle-1.454493," *Haaretz*, July 29, 2012, https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/news/nearly-100-000-jews-to-gather-in-n-j-to-celebrate-completion-of-talmud-cycle-1.454493.

Only two months earlier, I had organized and led a bus of 50 students from Columbia/Barnard Hillel to the inaugural mobilization of the Resistance[2] movement, the Women's March on Washington, a demonstration 500,000 strong that swamped the streets of Washington in protest the day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump. The Columbia/Barnard mission represented an extraordinary exercise in Jewish pluralism, a large part of the trip's raison d'être being the identified need to provide a means for Shabbat-observant students to attend the march while adhering to their religious practice. In order to meet this need, we arranged for prayer services and meals through Sixth & I Synagogue and lodging on the second floor of Hillel International's offices. Incredibly, our group was perfectly split between students who would be using electronic devices on Shabbat and those who would not. This meant that when we asked the students to select "cellphone buddies" (in order to ensure that we would be able to contact everyone should the necessity arise), we simultaneously triggered the added benefit of pairing students who otherwise never would have spent a Shabbat together. Here we had Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and unaffiliated college students united in common cause, praying with their feet on a beautiful Shabbat morning, rejecting the caustic rhetoric and disquieting politics of the incoming administration. One would think that this fine collection of young people epitomized "Jewish resistance."

But when my friend asked me if I was in town for Jewish resistance, he was referring to something else entirely: an action planned by a recently founded movement called IfNotNow. This organization had called for a mass mobilization of millennial Jews

[2] "The Resistance" is the term used to refer to the broad, collective movement that has engaged in protests against the election and policies of the Trump administration.

to descend upon the Washington Convention Center "to publicly reject AIPAC and their 'pro-Israel at all costs' politics that continues to enable and fuel the Occupation—now entering its 50th year—while making concessions to the antisemitism [*sic*] and Islamaphobia of the far right."[3] Or, in the parlance of our times: #JewishResistance, #ResistAIPAC. Hundreds joined the IfNotNow rally outside Policy Conference, praying *shacharit*, carrying signs, chanting slogans, singing songs, and barring doors.[4]

Given the standing ovation that then candidate Trump received at the previous year's Policy Conference—and the standing ovation that the President's name would receive when it was uttered by Vice President Mike Pence during his speech at this year's gathering—it was not unreasonable to conclude that, from the perspective of the "resistance," AIPAC's alignment with the current administration demanded resistance. It did not help matters when the Israeli ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer, announced that "for the first time in many years, perhaps in decades, there is no daylight between our two governments."[5]

As I continued to communicate with my friend throughout the day, updating him on what I was seeing and hearing from one convention speaker after another, I kept wondering: am I on the inside while my heart is on the outside? Certainly much of what I witnessed disturbed me, with plenary pep rallies that were soft on substance and hard on

[3] Yonah Lieberman, "Media Advisory: Over 1,000 Young American Jews Will Descend on AIPAC, Demand End to American Jewish Support for the Occupation," IfNotNow, March 25, 2017, https://ifnotnowmovement.org/2017/03/24/resistaipac-mediaadvisory/.
[4] Amir Tibon, "Hundreds of Young U.S. Jews Protest Outside AIPAC Against Occupation," *Haaretz*, March 27, 2017, Hundreds of Young U.S. Jews Protest Outside AIPAC Against Occupation read more: https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/1.779615.
[5] Ibid.

emotional manipulation, not to mention the standing ovations in honor of the very politicians I had traveled to the capital to resist in January.

Yet at the same time, I recognized that the program that brought me to Policy Conference, AIPAC's Leffell Fellowship for rabbinical students, offered a unique opportunity in the American Jewish world, a chance to learn alongside a diverse group of fellow seminarians about the most charged topic in Jewish communal discourse: Israel. Consequently my heart was certainly on the inside as well: these were future colleagues, many of whom shared my struggles with the content of the conference. As for those in the room with whose politics I disagreed—rabbinical students and others—as one friend reminded me, "This is their happy place. They look forward to this all year."

And like them—and everyone else who affiliates with AIPAC—I am a Zionist.[6]

However, I also identified (and still identify) with my friends and co-religionists on the outside, the Resistance.

So what do I make of myself? Which side am I on?

During the 2016 Policy Conference, a group of progressive rabbis organized a walkout of then candidate Trump's infamous plenary speech, and among their leaders was Rabbi Menachem Creditor, a Conservative rabbi from Berkeley, California. In an opinion piece in the *Forward* explaining his resolution to remove himself from the room as the future president approached the podium, Creditor wrote:

[6] AIPAC generally uses the term "pro-Israel" to describe its members. I prefer the term Zionist, which better captures the aspirational quality of believing passionately in the dream of the Jewish state, while also paying intellectual homage to the visionaries who imagined the transformational movement that made that dream a reality.

> This evening, at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference, Donald Trump will take the stage, bringing with him messages of hate, intolerance and violence. I will not sit idly by. I refuse to sit, and in that refusal I am united with my fellow rabbis against the politics of hate and its implications. No matter how often or how loudly the pro-Israel lobby urges us to be on our best behavior, we will not be present or silent when this demagogue takes the stage.
>
> There are multiple truths in the world; I acknowledge that my politics could be wrong. I know that I know only what I know. But of this I am sure: We have a choice at this moment in the theater of American politics. We are in serious danger as a society. Trump speaks through a microphone with enormous reach, and history reminds us that the politics of discrimination and bigotry yields disastrous implications and that eventually, there are no exceptions to who is targeted.[7]

One might think that such forceful rhetoric would compel AIPAC to silence Creditor or to ask him to leave the conference altogether. In fact the opposite happened: the day after Trump spoke, AIPAC featured Creditor in an activist profile video during the morning's plenary session. In this profile, he shared that many people ask him how he can advocate for so many progressive causes—gay rights, immigrant rights, gun control, and myriad more—and simultaneously support the State of Israel. His response: "I am a Zionist because I am a champion for all of these progressive values. To be a Zionist is to work

[7] Menachem Creditor, "Opposing Trump at AIPAC Is No Partisan Stance — It's Jewish and All-American Patriotism," *The Forward*, March 21, 2016, http://forward.com/opinion/336512/opposing-trump-at-aipac-is-no-partisan-stance-its-jewish-and-all-american-p/.

for the betterment of humanity."[8] Then, after the video profile concluded, Creditor took the stage himself, and there he had the opportunity to address many of the thousands of people to whom Trump had spoken the evening before.

And in spite of the tension that pervaded the room in 2016, Creditor returned to Policy Conference in 2017. In fact, he was invited to lead *havdalah* at the conclusion of the shabbaton that preceded the main gathering. A likely reason for this invitation: in addition to his progressive activism and Zionism, Creditor is an excellent musician and a notable composer of Jewish music. His most celebrated song, which he sang that evening, is "Olam Chesed Yibaneh":

> Olam chesed yibaneh (Let a world of love be built.). [9]
>
> I will build this world from love.
>
> And you must build this world from love.
>
> And if we build this world from love.
>
> Then God will build this world from love.[10]

These inspiring words, wrote Debra Nussbaum Cohen in an August 2017 *Haaretz* article covering the Jewish participation in the counter protests against the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, have become the "unofficial anthem of the Jewish resistance

[8] *Activist Profile - Rabbi Menachem Creditor*, March 2016, http://video.policyconference.org/watch/u1pm-elKDDHnqX30fqrnHQ.
[9] Psalms 89:3.
[10] Menachem Creditor, writer, "Olam Chesed Yibaneh," recorded 2001, Menachem Creditor.

movement."[11] Yet ironically, the night before the Jewish resistance would sing them as they gathered outside Policy Conference in protest, their author sang them on the inside.

Who owns this hymn and its buoyant vision of a world built from bricks of love with the humanity's hands united and the help of God? Those on the inside or those on the outside? They sing the same songs and pray the same prayers, so what defines their differences?

As I would later learn when I began to immerse myself in IfNotNow during my research for this project, the movement's provocative, interrogative mantra is "Which side are you on?" The side of freedom and dignity for all, or endless occupation? The impossible simplicity of this question begs so many more. But its implied indictment of everyone in attendance at Policy Conference—including Rabbi Creditor and myself—is plain: our side is the wrong one.

Indeed, for obvious reasons, I did not share my affiliation with AIPAC—no matter its tenuousness—with anyone during the two-day IfNotNow training that I attended in mid-October 2017 (save the one person who told me that he too had been at Policy Conference). Yet when I sat down a few days later to speak with an IfNotNow member who had been a facilitator at that training and finally revealed that I was on the inside during the movement's AIPAC escalation, she told me that she already knew. Shocked, I asked how. She declined to disclose her source. She then said that IfNotNow was looking forward to a slew of op-eds that those who had previously attended Policy

[11] Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Charlottesville Rally: Rabbis, Jewish Students Face Down White Nationalists," *Haaretz*, August 13, 2017, https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-1.806446.

Conference would write in advance of the 2018 convention declaring their rejection of AIPAC and their refusal to attend this year's gathering.

She did not directly ask, but I listened between her words: will you write one? Can we count on you? I am on your side, I thought, but I am not your style. No, I will not be writing an op-ed this year.

Instead, I am writing this thesis.

I am writing this thesis because as we will see, it is clear that there is something happening here with IfNotNow, an emerging millennial movement that has mobilized over a thousand young Jews who want to change the American Jewish world—in many more ways than just its attitude towards Israel. At the same time, it is also clear that AIPAC and other institutions of the Jewish establishment maintain a hegemony in the American Jewish discourse surrounding Israel. They represent an orthodoxy against which IfNotNow presents what can only be described as a heresy—again, in many more ways than just its attitude towards Israel.

In the coming chapters, we will analyze the relationship between this orthodoxy and this heresy. Our approach will begin with an exploration of the "civil religion" of American Jews, first described by Jonathan Woocher in his seminal work *Sacred Survival*.[12] We will then focus on how that civil religion's orthodoxy with regard Israel coalesced, examining in particular the role of legacy organizations like AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Next, we will investigate the history of heresies against this orthodoxy that have risen within the

[12] Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

American Jewish community. Finally, we will culminate with a deep dive into the contemporary heresy presented by IfNotNow and its implications for the future of the American Judaism.

## Chapter 1:

## From "Sacred Survival" to "Profane Perpetuation": The Collapse of Civil Judaism

### Defining Civil Religion

In his seminal 1967 essay "Civil Religion in America," Robert Bellah coined the concept of an American civil religion. The premise underlying Bellah's theory was "the sociological idea that all politically organized societies have some sort of civil religion."[13] Bellah defined civil religion as the "public religious dimension," that is to say a "collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity."[14] It is important to note that Bellah explicitly rejects the notion that the American civil religion is synonymous with Christianity; indeed, Bellah expounds that "this [civil] religion—there seems no other word for it—while not antithetical to, and indeed sharing much in common with, Christianity, was neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian."[15]

Closely reading Bellah's analysis, one is struck by the seven-word interpolation with which he justifies his use of the term religion: "there seems no other word for it." Unpacking this phrase is a task that demands our attention. Why "civil" and why "religion"?

First, "religion."

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[13] "American Civil Religion in the 1970s," in *American Civil Religion,* ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, by Robert N. Bellah (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 257.
[14] Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *American Civil Religion,* ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 29.
[15] Ibid.

In order to understand what Bellah meant when he placed his "social construction of reality" in the category of religion, it is helpful to look to the scholarship of one of his intellectual contemporaries and two of his intellectual descendants.[16] Peter Berger's groundbreaking work *The Sacred Canopy* (published in 1967, the same year as Bellah's essay) established an influential theoretical language for the sociological analysis of religion. Explaining the magisterial power that religion has over the maintenance of social order, Berger writes:

> The sociology of religion has been able to show in numerous instances the intimate relationship between religion and social solidarity…The definition of religion… [is] the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos. Every human society, however legitimated, must maintain its solidarity in the face of chaos. Religiously legitimated solidarity brings this fundamental sociological fact into sharper focus…Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death. The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hand of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it.[17]

Thus a primary function of religion is to organize the world in such a way that it preserves the bonds the hold a society together, especially in the face of overwhelming

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[16] Bellah, "American Civil Religion in the 1970s," 256.
[17] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 51.

stress, in particular, mortality itself. Returning to Bellah,'s analysis, we observe how America's civil religion accomplishes this end through

> …its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations.[18]

In this excerpt from Bellah's observations of American social solidarity, we see the correspondence between Berger's definition of religion and Bellah's use of the term in his own work, which explains Bellah's application of the word "religion."

What about "civil"?

For this task, it is helpful to turn to the terminological distinctions put forth by Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya in their analysis of the civil religion of the State of Israel.[19] In contrast to civil religion, Liebman and Don-Yehiya offer the term "traditional" religion, defined as "a system of symbols which provides ultimate meaning through reference to a transcendent power."[20] Examples of traditional religions are the many faiths practiced by individual Americans in their private lives, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and, of course, Judaism.

By contrast, standing at the core of civil religion is, in the words of Liebman and Don-Yehiya, a "corporate entity rather than a transcendent power."[21] While traditional

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[18] Ibid., 41.
[19] Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
[20] Ibid., 1.
[21] Ibid., 4.

religion is not constrained to a specific polity, civil religion emerges from the national identity generated by the formation and organization of a particular political society. Liebman and Don-Yehiya elaborate: "The objective of civil religion is the sanctification of the society in which it functions."[22] While traditional religion is also concerned with the "sacred legitimation of the social order," that is only one of its functions, the others being "to address a variety of problems and individual quests" that can most efficiently and effectively be confronted by placing ultimate authority in the metaphorical hands of a supernatural sovereign.[23] Liebman and Don-Yehiya acknowledge that this shortcoming renders civil religion less likely to achieve its ends than traditional religion, because it can "neither provide the individual with the ultimate meaning nor evoke from him the intensity of commitment which traditional religion can."[24] Nonetheless, its importance to the preservation of societal cohesion and the generation of collective meaning should not be underestimated.

Drawing freely on the insights of Bellah and Berger, Liebman and Don-Yehiya go on to enumerate three primary means by which civil religion seeks to infuse sanctity into the structure of social order. These are:

1. Integration: uniting the society by involving its members in a set of common ceremonies and myths, which are themselves integrative and in turn express a sense of common past, a common condition, and a common destiny on the part of the participants;

[22] Ibid., 5.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

2. Legitimation: transmitting the sense of an inherent justness or rightness in the nature of the social order and in the goals pursued by the society;
3. Mobilization: galvanizing the efforts and energies of society's members on behalf of socially approved tasks and responsibilities.[25]

Acting in concert, these three functions (integration, legitimation, and mobilization) shape the symbol systems that sustain civil societies and make possible their potential to perform projects that surpass the capabilities of individuals operating alone.

Though Bellah's original 1967 essay predates the work of Liebman and Don-Yehiya, we can see the utility of their analytical categories when we revisit his original observations. Let us apply this threefold framework to the examination of John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration with which Bellah introduces his theory. Bellah quotes from Kennedy's address:

> We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end as well as a beginning—signifying renewal as well as change, For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.[26]

In this passage, Kennedy calls for an *integration* of the American collective across party divides by dismissing the significance of his triumph over his political opponents. He also *legitimates* his assumption of the nation's highest office by identifying the constitutional oath he has just taken, as the one prescribed by the Founding Fathers. Finally, on that sacred stage on the Capitol's steps, in his speech's most famous line, Kennedy summons

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[25] Ibid.
[26] From John F. Kennedys first inaugural address on January 20, 1961, as quoted in Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 21.

the nation to *mobilize*: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Liebman and Don-Yehiya thus provide us with a useful vocabulary with which we can operationalize Bellah's conception of civil religion.

However, returning to Bellah's central claim, we see a dimension of American society that demands further scrutiny. To state the obvious, American democracy is bursting with diversity. To add nuance, because of America's exceptional diversity—the wide assortment of collective identities that our national conversation incorporates—Bellah's theory of civil religion opens the door to an intriguing area of inquiry: how, if at all, do the attitudes towards, the relationships with, and the interpretations of civil religion differ across the various subgroups that comprise the constellation of our civilization? And beyond that, is it possible for our society's subgroups to develop civil religions of their own?

**The Curious Case of American Jews**

Of interest in this thesis is the particular example of the American Jewish community: could it be said to have its own civil religion? This question of course begs another: how can a group ostensibly defined by a traditional religion *also* have a civil religion? What happens to its transcendent power? What corporate entity becomes its center? We begin to answer these questions with the observation that "Jewishness" is an identity that defies traditional categories, blending elements of religion, ethnicity, and culture.

Liebman and Don-Yehiya also noted the tension in confining Judaism solely to the category of "traditional religion," for while God obviously occupies a place it its

meaning system, Jews give unusual weight to the fate of the collectivity (especially in contrast to Christianity's focus on personal salvation):

> Some traditional religions were also born with a central focus on collectivities rather than individuals. The salvation or redemption Judaism envisions is a national, collective redemption, not an individual, personal one. Jewish religion defines a Jew by birth rather than belief or rite. Within the religion itself, there is a conception of the Jewish people which is independent of faith, belief, or ritual. And concern with this people continues to play a vital role in Jewish religious formulations.[27]

Concern with *this people* indeed—the importance of peoplehood in traditional Judaism aligns with Liebman and Don-Yehiya's definition of civil religion. To be axiomatic about it, peoples create their societies and societies create their civil religions—no God necessary. The centrality of peoplehood in Judaism creates the conditions that make possible the emergence of an ethnic and cultural Jewish identity independent of traditional Jewish religion, and the bonds that bind those people who share that ethnic and cultural identity create the conditions that make possible the emergence of a Jewish corporate entity independent of the institutions of traditional Jewish religion

Though their work focused on Israeli society, Liebman and Don-Yehiya's analysis easily crosses both the Atlantic and 30 years of history. Indeed, results from the 2013 Pew Research Center survey of Jews in the United States showed that of the 5.3 million self-identified Jews living in the US (2.2% of the total population), 62% of respondents said that being Jewish is mainly a matter of "ancestry/culture" as opposed to

[27] Ibid., 4.

the 15% who said that it is mainly a matter of religion and the 23% who said that it is all three.[28] Remarkably, especially given the Jewish community's propensity for generational infighting, this belief that Jewishness is largely cultural is uniform across age cohorts, with 62% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 49 and 61% of respondents over 50 agreeing with that notion.[29] Furthermore, when asked to choose whether each of nine characteristics and behaviors is essential to what being Jewish means to them, only 19% of respondents included the one obviously pertaining to Jewish traditional religion, "observing Jewish law," while 73%, the largest proportion, included "remembering the Holocaust" as a critical component of their Jewish identity.[30] Finally, the coup de grâce: 68% of respondents said that one does not have to believe in God in order to be Jewish.[31] Thus the data shows that Jews in America have a notion of Jewishness divorced from the traditional religion practiced by Jews.

This is not news. Jonathan Woocher recognized these trends 30 years ago in his 1986 book *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews.* In this critical contribution to the study of American Judaism, Woocher took Bellah's insights, applied them to the American Jewish community, and argued persuasively that this attachment to the ancestral and cultural aspects of Jewish identity facilitated the development of a civil religion.[32] On the one hand, he intended to say that "civil Judaism" is indeed Judaism even though it is not centered around God and not grounded in traditional Jewish

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[28] *A Portrait of Jewish Americans,* report, October 1, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

practice; on the other hand, he meant also that civil Judaism could function—if not flourish—in the American context because religions here do not need to be God-centered, so long as they proffer values and a way of life that is seen by others as (so to speak) Godly.

Woocher's argument builds on the thesis put forth by Daniel Elazar in his 1976 work on the organizational dynamics of American Jewry *Community and Polity*:

> It is the way of communities to develop a political dimension if they are to survive, and because Jews chose to survive as a community, they slowly began to forge a polity appropriate to American conditions: voluntaristic, limited by the reality of Jewish integration into American life, and far from exclusivist in its goals, but no less genuine for all that.[33]

Elazar proceeds to document the institutionalization of the American Jewish community, describing it as "a mosaic, a multidimensional matrix of institutions and organizations that interact with each other in their attempts to cover the range of communal concerns while preserving their respective integrities."[34]

In *Sacred Survival*, Woocher focuses on one facet of this mosaic: the Federation movement. Elazar had certainly acknowledged the importance of Federations to the American Jewish polity, but in the decade following the publication of *Community and Polity*, the Federation movement had "emerged as its central force, the single most comprehensive and representative expression of American Jewry's political and moral

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[33] Daniel Judah Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1995), 7-8.
[34] Ibid.

unity."[35] By 1986 also, Liebman and Don-Yehiya had offered an analytical framework on which Woocher could draw. He was therefore able to enrich Elazar's thesis, and to put his contribution into the context of the newly emerging literature on the subject coming from Israel. Using the very terms offered by Liebman and Don-Yehiya, Woocher shows how the civil Judaism of the Federation movement integrates, legitimates, and mobilizes the American Jewish polity:

> This faith expressed and sustained the unity American Jews felt among themselves, legitimated the endeavors of the community to promote Jewish group life while promoting maximal involvement in American society, and inspired Jews to contribute to the support of other Jews and the pursuit of social justice…The American Jewish civil religion prescribes a model of Jewishness which synthesizes ethnicity and religiosity and places both firmly within the embrace of American pluralism. It links American Jews to the totality of the Jewish people at a level beyond ideological diversity. Perhaps most important, it gives American Jews transcendent purposiveness by holding out to them a vision of Jewish destiny and mission in which they have a central role to fulfill.[36]

Essential to the understanding of a civil religion is the examination of the core myth that its faithful hold dear. As Woocher saw it, the sacred narrative underlying civil Judaism was the cycle of tragedy and renaissance that has characterized the history of the Jewish people, the enduring—and well-founded—belief that the Jewish minority is eternally on the precipice of extinction. Indeed, as implied by the moniker that Woocher

[35] Woocher, *Sacred Survival*, vii.
[36] Ibid., 20.

gave the civil Jewish faith, "sacred survival," one could say that its master story is rooted in what Salo Baron famously described as the "lachrymose theory" of Jewish history.[37] Baron had first use that terminology in 1928, but it had become especially poignant by Woocher's time of because of Israel's 1967 and 1973 wars. Prior to 1967, Jews had assumed that the external threats to their existence had largely been eliminated, as Israel would always accept Jews from elsewhere in the world and give them safety within her borders. However, with the Six-Day and Yom Kippur Wars (especially the latter), that easy conclusion seemed questionable. The Jewish people were once again the eternal other, rising from the ashes to be sure, but nonetheless just as threatened with extinction as they had ever been. Preventing that eventuality was what the Federation movement was for—and they raised extraordinary sums of money in support of that goal. Combining these elements, Woocher explained the core myth of sacred survival as a recapitulation of the age-old trope of constant Jewish victimization and persecution, but updated and revised with an emergent hopeful character cultivated by the wild success of the Jewish people in the American context: we can end this.

**The Era of Sacred Survival**

Grounded in the animating narrative of constant threat, especially after the wake-up calls of 1967 and 1973, civil Judaism focused on securing the perpetuation of the Jewish people. It does so, moreover, not just from a particularistic standpoint of the Jewish People alone, but with the universalism that derives from being Jewish in

[37] Salo W. Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation" (1928), in *The Menorah Treasury: Harvest of Half a Century*, ed. Leo W. Schwarz (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964).

America. The American story and the Jewish story are seen as intertwined. Contrary to the Zionist narrative, civil Judaism in America sees two centers of Jewish life, both Israel and the diaspora, with America as the zenith of exilic possibility—a second haven for Jews, equally as important as Israel. The two havens come together in the tale that Woocher tells. Emerging from this dual conception of the Jewish story are seven major tenets that Woocher delineates as the worldview of sacred survival:

1. The unity of the Jewish people
2. Mutual responsibility
3. Jewish survival in a threatening world
4. The centrality of the State of Israel
5. The enduring value of Jewish tradition
6. *Tzedakah*: philanthropy and social justice
7. Americanness as a virtue[38]

Taken in turn, the first three tenets recapitulate the master story of America's civil Judaism, while the last four enumerate the objectives and associated activities that constitute the means by which its sanctified aims should be achieved. Tracing the threads, the unity of the Jewish people—present, past, and future—initiates a rallying cry that demands mutual responsibility between its members. The persistent perils to Jewish perpetuation require us to act together because we are covenantally bound to each other. And we act by supporting the State of Israel, by uplifting Jewish tradition, by philanthropic pursuits, and by celebrating our Americanness.[39] These are clearly

[38] Woocher, *Sacred Surival*, 67-68.
[39] Ibid., 68-89.

principles that *integrate* and *mobilize* the citizenry of the American Jewish polity; and *legitimate* the sacred canopy that the Federation movement has draped over the social order that it has created.

Taking a more than cursory glance at Woocher's tenets, however, a frank truth becomes apparent: for the most part, in Jewish parlance, the principles of sacred survival are rather *pareve*; that is to say they are hardly radical. Woocher himself recognized this, writing that they "represent modern restatements of classical Jewish values and perspectives."[40] But that is the nature of civil religion, which must be broad enough to enlist the support of all members of the group in question. Indeed, revisiting Liebman and Don-Yehiya's distinction between traditional and civil religion, we can see that six of Woocher's seven core beliefs reiterate ideas at the heart of the Jewish traditional religion, ideas that Jews in general have heard before and can assent to with ease. It would be unsurprising to arrive at any synagogue at any time in the history of rabbinic Judaism and hear a sermon on the unity of the Jewish people, our mutual responsibility to each other, the reality of our persistent persecution, the enduring worth of our tradition, the importance of charity, and, of course, the dream of returning to Zion.

The obvious outlier is the virtue of Americanness. Woocher recognizes the potential tension posed by the competing impulses of tenets drawn from Jewishness on the one hand, and from Americanness on the other. In particular, how can one celebrate the "centrality" of the State of Israel and in the same breath aspire to be wholly American? Woocher responds by describing a fascinating feedback loop within the civil Jewish faith:

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[40] Ibid., 67

> In [the minds of American Jews], Israel represents a consummation of America's own values of democracy and justice. American Jews feel no anxiety that their passionate support of its security in the world makes them any less American and resent anyone who so regards them. In this way too, pursuit of the polity's survivalist agenda if fact reinforces the American Jew's sense of integration as well. Israel…is appropriated in a way…[that] demonstrates…that the pursuit of integration with survival is not only possible, but essential. Each thrust undergirds the other; good Jewishness and good Americanness indeed go together. [41]

Woocher's observation here leads into the phenomenon that we will explore in the next chapter: the effort of American Jews to make Israel as important to their fellow Americans as it was to them, to make support for Israel not just good Jewishness for Jews, but good Americanness for Americans.

First, however, we should note another critical dimension of civil Judaism: its resonance with the American civil religion as described by Bellah. Woocher highlights two key characteristics of the consonance between the two civil faiths. The first is their shared symbolic vocabulary. Indeed, the central text of Jewish traditional religion, the Hebrew Bible, is the source of "the theological key for the American experience.... America is a promised land of liberty and destiny, a moral beacon, a 'light unto the nations.'"[42] But according to Woocher, even more important than their common lexicon is their aligned outlook: "[American civil religion and civil Judaism] share a fundamental

[41] Ibid., 101.
[42] Ibid., 101.

orientation to the world: activist, moralistic, messianic, at once highly particularistic and universal."[43]

Civil Judaism thus becomes a manifestation of the Jewish subgroup's *own* civil religion and also, in a way, a "denomination" of the general American civil religion. What distinguishes America's civil Judaism, more than anything else, is this neat integration with the American civil religion as a whole:

> The common vision of Jewish and American civil religion serves as testimony to the reality of the higher synthesis which civil Judaism preachers and pursues. It is the authorization for American Jews to pursue their dual destiny in confidence that they are truly members of the American family…Through the simultaneous affirmation of both civil religions American Jews establish their true belongingness in American life (even if their ancestors arrived but a few generations ago), but also their special place in that experience. America is, after all, created in their image, and in pursuing the civil Jewish version of Jewish destiny, they are merely reinforcing the terms of America's own self-understanding.[44]

In sum, while America's Jews can easily practice their traditional religion under their adopted homeland's sacred canopy, blessed to sit beneath their own vine and fig tree in a society that gives to bigotry no sanction, to be a truly *American Jew* is to adhere to the tenets of civil Judaism, to participate in the grand project of ensuring the sacred survival

[43] Ibid., 101.
[44] Ibid., 102.

of the Jewish people, while affirming that very survival as part and parcel of the American dream itself.

**Profane Perpetuation**

Twenty years after the publication of *Sacred Survival,* Woocher revisited the subject of the American Jewish civil religion, updating his original analyses by taking into account the socio-cultural developments of the ensuing two decades.[45] Woocher observed that while the civil Judaism he originally described "defined a way of being Jewish that enabled its adherents to give meaning to their identities as Jews by connecting them to a great historic drama of death and destruction," Jewish life in the early 21st Century had become increasingly "privatized and personalized," undermining the embodied solidarity of the Jewish institutions through which the civil religion was practiced.[46]

Woocher's reevaluation of his own theory tracks with the general changes in American society observed by his intellectual forebear Robert Bellah, "who wrote in the 1960s and 1970s about American civil religion [and] turned his attention in the 1980s and 1990s to the growing 'privatization' of American religion'" in his 1985 classic *Habits of the Heart*.[47] The broad trends that Bellah and his co-authors identified in that work were explored in the Jewish community in particular in Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen's 2000

[45] Jonathan S. Woocher, "'Sacred Survival' Revisited: American Jewish Civil Religion in the New Millennium," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism,* ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[46]Ibid., 283.
[47] Ibid., 288.

book *The Jew Within*.[48] Cohen and Eisen knew that later sociological literature had rejected Bellah's extreme notion of "Sheila-ism"—the idea that individuals make up their own religion by choosing freely a little bit of this and a little bit of that. They declared the Jews they studied to be no different. They too were not altogether individualistic. They had not altogether dismissed the power of religion in their lives. But still, Americans Jews had become self-sovereigns, throwing off the yoke of Jewish institutional life and normative practice that had defined the religious experience of previous generations.[49] Given these realities, Woocher concluded that "the era of sacred survival may…have passed," fading into an individualized spiritual project increasingly defined by a person's own search for meaning as opposed to participation in the greater Jewish polity.[50]

At stake is the concept of "plausibility structure," which Peter Berger had defined in *The Sacred Canopy* as follows:

> Worlds are socially constructed and socially maintained. Their continuing reality, both objective (as common, taken-for-granted facticity) and subjective (as facticity imposing itself on individual consciousness), depends upon *specific* social processes, namely those processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question…Thus each world requires a social "base" for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. This "base" may be called its plausibility structure.[51]

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[48] Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
[49] Ibid., 39 and throughout.
[50] Woocher, "'Sacred Survival' Revisited," 296.
[51] Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 45.

Without a strong plausibility structure serving as their foundation, the narrative poles that hold up a religion's sacred canopy are liable to collapse. What worried Woocher was the civil Judaism's increasing failure to demonstrate a strong plausibility structure.

Woohcer had noted originally how "the existence of the Jewish polity itself [served] as a powerful 'plausibility structure' for the civil religion's faith tenets."[52] Indeed, Woocher went even farther than that, practically fawning over the force of nurture that the American Jewish polity had become:

> ...civil Judaism can point to a massive plausibility structure to support its Jewish belief claims. The Jewish polity is impressive in its size and scope. It can direct assistance to Jews virtually anywhere in the world. Its leaders meet with presidents and prime ministers. Its appeals for funds reach into nearly every Jewish American home. It is affecting Jewish history…It persuades by the sheer force of the polity's own energy. [53]

Yet Woocher has an almost throwaway observation that becomes especially relevant to this study: the centrality of the State of Israel to the entire ideological edifice. He writes:

> Civil Judaism's claims of Jewish unity, endangerment, responsibility, and destiny are rendered believable because they are being lived, not only in the North American Jewish polity, but in *the unprecedented plausibility structure, the State of Israel, with which the polity is so closely bound up* [Italics my own].[54]

Here, Woocher's observation is so pivotal and so remarkable that it is worth trimming the fat to restate it more simply: Israel serves as a plausibility structure for America's civil

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[52] Woocher, *Sacred Survival*, 102.
[53] Ibid., 103.
[54] Ibid., 103.

Judaism. That is to say, *the legitimation of American civil Judaism was predicated on the existence of the Jewish state.*

This claim is astonishing. And later in this thesis we will more fully examine its implications. But first, we must return to Woocher's fear that the plausibility structure that sustained the social order of civil Judaism was collapsing by the time of his 2005 follow-up article. He writes:

> …One must conclude that the American Jewish polity, and especially the federation system, lost ground over the past two decades. The reasons are many, some, having to do with a general decline in the credibility of political system…, and some having to do with changes internal to the Jewish community. American Jews feel less threatened, less needy of a strong polity to protect them and look out for their well-being. They are less willing to accept voluntary "self-taxation," and they want to preserve greater control over their own resources. They resist calls for unity; division and contest over values and policies are more frequent. They are more critical of institutions for their perceived rigidity and slowness to adapt. They are also less likely to be stirred by appeals to higher purpose. The result is that the American Jewish polity can no longer expect and no longer receives the same deference and support that it once did. Its ideology, the American Jewish civil religion, is, therefore, less compelling as well.[55]

Indeed, for most American Jews, what Woocher called the rallying creed of sacred survival turned into the tedious yawn of profane perpetuation.

[55] Woocher, "'Sacred Survival' Revisited," 289-290.

As of 2005 Woocher was still unwilling to wholly eulogize sacred survival; indeed, he suggested that civil Judaism might be reborn from the ashes of the outbreak of the Second Intifada, given the energy with which America's Jews rallied to Israel's behalf at the time.[56] Yet he hesitated to be fully bullish about the prospects for a glorious renaissance of civil Judaism:

> Empirically, evidence for a dramatic resurgence of civil religious sentiment—even for a substantial broadening and thickening of American Jewish popular support for Israel—is simply not yet available. That the most committed Jewish activists have rallied to Israel's cause with renewed vigor is clear. Whether a broader sweep of the American Jewish population is fundamentally rethinking the nature of its Jewish commitment and reembracing the myth and ethos of the Jewish civil religion is more doubtful.[57]

In the discussion of weakening plausibility structure of civil Judaism cited above, Woocher pointed to such things as heightened individualism and the desire to avoid taxation. Here, however, he discusses the issue at stake in this study: the potential decline of Israel's place in the core myth. In 2005, the Second Intifada just over, the large plausibility structure of the Jewish state still stood rather firmly. But Israel had become much more than just one more tenet of sacred survival—it was developing into the central pillar on which the civil Jewish faith was increasingly dependent. For many, unflinching, uncompromising, unhesitating allegiance and dedication to the well-being to

[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

the Jewish state was totally eclipsing all of the other tenets of civil Judaism that Woocher described 30 years ago. And it is to this phenomenon that we will turn in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2:

## Hearts in the East:
## How Sacred Support for Israel Became the Orthodoxy of Civil Judaism

### A Tale of Two Conferences

In the preface to this thesis, I described my complicated feelings towards my March 2017 trek to Washington, DC for AIPAC's Policy Conference. But four months before that trip, in November 2016, I had made the southward journey to the nation's capital for a different major happening of the Jewish American year, the General Assembly (GA) of the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA). For obvious reasons, Woocher's *Sacred Survival* pays a great deal of attention to the history of this annual gathering, which was initiated in the early 1930s by JFNA's precursor, the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, and quickly became the most important summit for the leadership of American Jewry.[58]

However, from the limited perspective of one young Jew's experience half a century later, the feeling of purpose of the General Assembly's early years that Woocher depicts so vividly seemed to have fossilized. Though the 2016 conference's theme was ostensibly "Jewish Journeys" and its logo a bright pastel compass, gone was the sense of a coherent collective direction that Woocher captures in his accounts; the meeting's scattershot itinerary was instead filled with uninspiring stops to uncover the mysteries of Millennial engagement, to explore new frontiers in fundraising technology, and to fret about the ominous dangers posed by the Boycott-Divest-Sanctions (BDS) movement

[58] Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 40.

against Israel. In the halls, interactions were perfunctory, smiles few and far between, malaise the mood of the moment.[59]

The contrast between the GA and AIPAC's Policy Conference, anecdotally and arithmetically, is striking and instructive. While an impressive 3,000 people journeyed to the GA, a preposterous 18,000 made the pilgrimage to AIPAC. While there were plenty of seats to be found at the GA's plenaries, those who attended AIPAC's pep rallies were treated to spectacles that were staged by the same team that choreographs the Oscars. While the GA was once the place for American Jewish leaders to see and be seen, its status as the signature event on the American Jewish calendar has been superseded by the uncompromising scale and pageantry of AIPAC's annual affair.

How AIPAC's Policy Conference succeeded the Federation movement's General Assembly as the Sukkot of civil Judaism—and how the orthodoxy of civil Judaism ossified around support for the State of Israel—is the story of this chapter.

**America the Promised Land**

In order to understand how support for Israel ascended to the highest dogma of civil Judaism, we must first understand how the other elements of sacred survival faded from importance. As we observed in the previous chapter, this process was fairly straightforward, though here we will contextualize it within the broader narrative of the American Jewish story.

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[59] Admittedly, I attended the GA only days after Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election, a shock that surely sobered the festivities. Given that nearly three quarters of American Jews voted for Hillary Clinton, assuming that the GA attracts a representative sample of the American Jewish population, then three in four people present at the conference had substantial reason to be distraught.

Two centrifugal forces, one internal and one external, have been acting upon the American Jewish community, propelling its members outward and disrupting the sense of solidarity that was once at the center of the civil Jewish faith

First, we will examine the internal force: the wild success of American Jewry. In short, the Federation movement was a victim of its own achievements. Under its aegis, America's Jews became the most successful minority in human history. Full stop. According to the 2013 Pew study, American Jews are twice as likely to be college graduates as their fellows Americans (58% vs. 29%), three times as likely to have a post-graduate degree, (28% vs. 10%), three times as likely to have an annual household income over $150,000 (25% vs. 8%), and only half as likely to have an annual household income under $30,000 (of this last category 60% fall into age brackets in which would expect to find more limited earnings, under 30 and over 65).[60] In addition, statistically echoing Will Herberg's classic 1955 analysis of American religion (*Protestant-Catholic-Jew*) over six decades later, America's Jews are among the three religious groups towards which their fellow Americans feel the warmest—along with, unsurprisingly, mainline Protestants and Catholics.[61]

To summarize, over the course of the second half of the 20th century, America proved itself to be truly a promised land for its Jews. Not since the days of Muslim Andalusia have the Jewish people found themselves flourishing in a more perfect

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[60] *A Portrait of Jewish Americans,* report, October 1, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.
[61] Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell, and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), Kindle, 504.

diaspora. And such perfect conditions demand an incredible amount of psychic energy to sustain a belief in the constant storm-is-coming narrative that is the core myth of sacred survival.

The second centrifugal force was an unintended consequence of the first. It has been said that Jews are just like everyone else, only more so. In America, the truth of this saying has manifested itself more radically than any observer of Jewish history could possibly have imagined. The most salient illustration of this reality is the enduring drama of American Jewry's troubled relationship with intermarriage.

The most ubiquitous uninterrogated assumption in the discourse about the American Jewish future has been the claim that exogamy represents an unambiguous evil that will lead to the extinction of the Jewish people, that it is an existential threat to our survival that must be dealt with through programs and campaigns.

The truth, of course, is far more complicated. For most of Jewish history, marriage between Jews and non-Jews was unthinkable—if not illegal—not just for Jews, *but also for non-Jews*. As Salo Baron observed, before the Emancipation of European Jewry, the segregation of Jews from non-Jews was a policy that was both voluntary and *compulsory*, imposed as much *from without* the Jewish community as from within, with the goal of thwarting "social intercourse" between Jews and their Christian neighbors.[62] But after European polities began emancipating their Jewish populations, whether these newly minted citizens of the Mosaic persuasion would be able to marry their compatriots proved a thorny question to which an affirmative response was expected. This was

[62] Salo W. Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation" (1928), in *The Menorah Treasury: Harvest of Half a Century*, ed. Leo W. Schwarz (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964), 55.

famously illustrated by the inquiry concerning intermarriage that Napoleon posed to his Grand Sanhedrin in 1806, to which that assembly of Jewish notables responded that exogamy was indeed permissible to Jews, though without religious celebration in a Jewish context.[63] And as the walls between Jews and non-Jews crumbled in 19th-century Europe, assimilation became a desirable end for many in the Jewish community, a sign of their acceptance into the broader society. What indicator could better validate the successful achievement of that aspiration than non-Jewish parents permitting their children to marry Jews?

How this process unfolded for Jews in the American context was, of course, different, but the Jewish hope for acceptance was the same. America never emancipated its Jews because they were never ghettoized; however imperfect, freedom of religious practice has been a hallmark of American society since its founding, magisterially enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Indeed, one can point to several examples of the gratitude that America's Jews have shown to their new promised land. To offer one of note, Thomas Jefferson's residence, Monticello, was acquired in 1834 by a Jewish naval officer named Uriah Levy, his goal being to preserve the estate as a monument to the third American president, in large part out of his appreciation for Jefferson's authorship of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1777.[64] America's foundational embrace of its Jewish residents thrust the Mosaic minority into the thick of the American melting pot from its inception.

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[63] "Answer to Napoleon (1806)," in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, ed. Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153.
[64] "Uriah Phillips Levy," Monticello, accessed December 03, 2017, https://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/uriah-phillips-levy.

During the 20th century, that melting pot began to stir in a profoundly different direction on the subject of interfaith marriage. Between the beginning of the 20th century and its end, America's intermarriage rate for all religions nearly doubled from just below 30% to just above 50%. And the Jews, being just like everyone else only more so, tracked with the general trends in American society and saw their intermarriage rate rise above 50% in the late 1990s.[65] This demographic reality also marched in step with a major shift in American attitudes towards interfaith marriages, which in 1951 were viewed as acceptable by only 54% of the population, but by 1982 had attained 80% approval (the last year the question was asked).[66]

Predictably however, given sacred survival's assumption that Jewish extinction is always just around the corner, America's Jews have sharply diverged from their fellow citizens on the question of the intermarriage's acceptability. As recently as 2006, a survey found that 65% of Jews still believed that it is somewhat important to very important that their children marry within the tribe, a slight second to Mormons in their preference for endogamy, and ten points higher than the next faith on the list.[67] One wonders, however, if it is largely older Jews who think endogamy is necessary, while younger Jews, the Jews actually doing the marrying, feel less certain about the issue. Regardless, the pervasive anxiety about intermarriage that dominates American Jewish discourse today is a rather new phenomenon—a sign itself that intermarriage is becoming the norm. It did not even make the index of Woocher's *Sacred Survival* in 1986.

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[65] *A Portrait of Jewish Americans.*
[66] Putnam, Garrett, and Romney, 151.
[67] Putnam, Garrett, and Romney, 155.

By 2013, all that had changed. When the *New York Times* reported on that year's Pew study of American Jews, it made the threat of intermarriage the primary topic of its first two paragraphs :

> The first major survey of American Jews in more than 10 years finds a significant rise in those who are not religious, marry outside the faith and are not raising their children Jewish — resulting in rapid assimilation that is sweeping through every branch of Judaism except the Orthodox.
>
> The intermarriage rate, a bellwether statistic, has reached a high of 58 percent for all Jews, and 71 percent for non-Orthodox Jews — a huge change from before 1970 when only 17 percent of Jews married outside the faith. Two-thirds of Jews do not belong to a synagogue, one-fourth do not believe in God and one-third had a Christmas tree in their home last year.[68]

Indeed, the title of the second chapter of that Pew study was "Intermarriage and Other Demographics"—"other demographics" being the usual and unexciting data about age, fertility, household composition, and socioeconomic status.[69] Those shocked and troubled by the headlines about the 2013 study, who view the rising rate of intermarriage with considerable concern, are likely those who adhere to the essential narrative of sacred survival, the story that we constantly protect ourselves from disappearance and destruction. That notion hardly resonates with those who accept the reality of

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[68] Laurie Goodstein, "Poll Shows Major Shift in Identity of U.S. Jews," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2013, accessed December 03, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/01/us/poll-shows-major-shift-in-identity-of-us-jews.html.

[69] *A Portrait of Jewish Americans.*

intermarriage and understand it as a sign of America's Jews being radically accepted into their broader society.

The existential fear that animated the core myth of civil Judaism was thus undermined by these two extraordinary achievements of American Jewry: one the one hand its socioeconomic success, and on the other its social integration (to the extent that intermarriage no longer seems worrisome). As the late 20th century turned to the early 21st, the threat to their survival no longer proved compelling to America's Jews, and without that threat, a kind of civil Judaism that depended on the mission of "sacred survival" began to pale. Thus the keepers of that mission's flame were compelled to redirect the majority of their protective energies to Jewish communities outside of their own polity, communities that really did seem to be in danger of disappearance. And so they focused their hearts and minds in the same direction that centuries of their ancestors had done before them: eastward.

**Tribal Unity and External Threats**

In order to hold itself together, a community needs forces that contain it, either internal (tribal instincts that draw Jews together) or external (societal barriers erected by non-Jewish neighbors against Jewish participation). For minorities who are always drawn to the rewards of assimilation, external barriers play an especially important role, and in late 20th century America, whatever resistance to Jewish integration that still lingered in the broader American society disintegrated with unthinkable rapidity.

As a result, tribal unity became all the more important, and in order to sustain its equilibrium, the American Jewish community needed to increase the gravitational pull of the narrative conceived to hold the community together. And no narrative captures

Jewish attention more than a terrifying tale that of imminent Jewish tragedy, if not here in the United States, then elsewhere. One such narrative that maintained the unifying energy of the American Jewish community for some time was the threat to their brethren living under the anti-religious oppression of the Soviet Union's Communist regime. A full discussion of that movement's historical importance for American Jewry is beyond the scope of this paper and is in fact unnecessary for us to explore in detail. It is worth mentioning, however, as the prime example of such a doomsday story in the late 20th century when everything else seemed to be going so smoothly. But the threat to Soviet Jewry no longer exists. There is no longer even any "Soviet"—the Berlin Wall has fallen. This reality left the American Jewish community in need of another threat narrative to generate the gravity necessary to hold it together: and so it turned to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

**The Heresy of Early American Zionism**

I once heard a rabbi recount her experience lobbying her state government for the rights of undocumented immigrants. One of the members of the legislature saw her and her colleagues in the capital, and immediately presumed that they were there to advocate for Israel. Such is the extent to which the American Jewish community's passionate support for the State of Israel is taken for granted.

Yet this was not always the case. And before we further explore the emergence of Israel's centrality to American Jewry, it is important to understand that this was not an inevitable development by any stretch. While Zionism emerged as the most consequential response to modernity among the Jews of 19th century Europe, the American Jewish community, influenced by the re-imagination of Judaism that arose in Protestant

Germany, preferred religious reform over Jewish nationalism. It cannot be overstated how profoundly opposite the Zionist and Reform projects were during this time, for each answered the essential question of the problem of the modern Jew in fundamentally different ways.

According to the Zionist worldview, the problem of the modern Jew was inescapable anti-Semitism—an inevitable result of living among non-Jews; therefore, only by living in a sovereign country of their own could Jews flourish as an equal among the nation-states of the world. Zionists thus believed that all Jewish life in the Diaspora was "inevitably doomed."[70] For the Reformers, by contrast, the problem of the modern Jew was an outmoded religion; only by reforming religious practice and ideology to appear more similar to their neighbors, could Jews hope to flourish as equals . Concerned that Zionism would lead to charges of dual national loyalties, the Reformers thus famously repudiated the messianic dream of a return to the Land of Israel in their 1885 Pittsburgh Platform:

> We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore

[70] Steven T. Rosenthal, "Long-distance Nationalism: American Jews, Zionism, and Israel," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 209.

> expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.[71]

The father of American Reform Judaism, Isaac Mayer Wise, went farther, describing Zionism as the product of "the momentary inebriation of morbid minds."[72] And America's Reform Jews were not the only dissenters to the Zionist project: even the Orthodox community—whose members are in many ways the anchor of the contemporary American Zionist cause—maintained a general distance from the early Zionist movement, objecting to it for religious reasons.[73] There were exceptions of course –Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver were notable Reform rabbis and fervent Zionists—but speaking broadly about their early relations, American Reformers and Zionists mixed together about as well as oil and water.

Yet as Wise and Silver demonstrate, this antagonism was not the whole story. Other important figures emerged in the early 20th century to champion the Zionist project as well. The most important of these was Louis Brandeis, who viewed his Zionism as a natural outgrowth of his Americanism and the progressive causes for which he fought in his adopted homeland. As Peter Beinart explains,

> [Brandeis] saw in the kibbutz movement the chance to build a society free from the corporate monopolies that he believed had perverted democracy in the United

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[71] "Declaration of Principles," Central Conference of American Rabbis, accessed December 10, 2017, https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/declaration-principles/.
[72] Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972), 402.
[73] Martin J. Raffel, "History of Israel Advocacy," in *Jewish Polity and American Civil Society: Communal Agencies and Religious Movements in the American Public Sphere*, ed. Alan Mittleman, Robert A. Licht, and Jonathan D. Sarna (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 105.

States. “It is democracy that Zionism represents,” Brandeis told a Boston crowd in 1915. “It is social justice which Zionism represents, and every bit of that is the American ideals of the twentieth century.”[74]

After Brandeis ascended to the Supreme Court, the aforementioned Stephen S. Wise succeeded him as America’s most prominent Zionist.[75] Indeed, he founded the Jewish Institute of Religions as a competing rabbinical seminary to the Hebrew Union College, largely because the College rejected Jewish nationalism.

My point here is not to provide a full accounting of the individuals and organizations that contributed to the early American Zionist movement but merely to say that in the early years, they were the exception. Given the present context in which most observers take the Zionism[76] of American Jews for granted, it cannot be emphasized enough that in its nascent stages to be an American Zionist was to be a heretic. This is especially true in view of the fact that, as we will see later, the appearance of absolute consensus became a hallmark of the American Jewish establishment’s presentation of its support for Israel.

This however, was prior to the era of Woocher’s civil Judaism. And it was not until the shocking, horrific events of the mid-20th century that the imperative of the sacred survival of the Jewish people would seize the American Jewish consciousness, and with it the fervor of conversion en masse to the Zionist project.

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[74] Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt and, 2012), 34.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Admittedly, in the present day, “Zionism” has become a charged word. Here I use the term strictly to mean the belief that the Jewish people have the right to a sovereign state in the Palestine.

**From Nightmare to Dream**

Salo W. Baron's seminal 1928 essay on the history of 19th century European Jewry famously begins: "The history of the Jews in the last century and a half has turned about one central fact: that of Emancipation."[77] Nearly a century later, I would amend that assertion as follows: the history of the Jews in the last 75 years has turned about one central fact: that of the Holocaust.

No factor more greatly precipitated the mass conversion of American Jewry to the Zionist cause than the mass murder of European Jewry. Weighed down by the guilt of their failure to save their brethren in the Old World, American Jews were lifted up by the opportunity to redeem themselves by supporting their kinsmen in Palestine. Here are two figures that illustrate the fervor of their conversion, as reported by the historian Steven T. Rosenthal:

> By 1945, over 2.5 million American Jews, almost half of the population, belonged to organizations that endorsed the goal of a Jewish state. Between the end of [World War II] and 1948, they contributed an astonishing 400 million dollars for Israel's relief, development, and defense.[78]

That would be more than $4 billion in 2017. To offer one legendary example to illuminate the power of the Israel to generate enormous funds from American Jewish community, in January 1948 future prime minister Golda Meir (at that time Meyerson) attended the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations and Welfare funds in Chicago with the ambition of raising $25 million to equip the Jewish military in Palestine. In the

[77] Baron, 50.
[78] Rosenthal, 211.

end, she returned home with $50 million.[79] In addition to their fiscal support, this pre-state period also witnessed the beginnings of political force that the Israel advocacy of the American Jewish community would become. Campaigns in support of the Zionist cause, both of mass publicity and private lobbying, convinced the American public and President Harry Truman to disregard the recommendations of the State Department and to back the 1948 United Nations partition plan and to recognize the establishment of the State of Israel.[80]

As American Jews rose from the nightmare of the Holocaust to the dream fulfilled of the Jewish state, they were captivated by the symbolic achievement realized by the Zionist project, and felt a new sense of pride in their Jewish identity.[81] During the intervening decades between Israel's founding and the next major turning point in our story, the 1967 Six-Day War, the American Jewish community began to institutionalize its support for the nascent state. The two most important organizations to emerge during this period were the American Israel Public Affair Committee (AIPAC) and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (Presidents Conference).

AIPAC was founded by I. L. Kenen, an operative of the American Zionist Council (AZC) who began lobbying Congress on behalf of Israel in the early 1950s. In order to liberate his endeavors from the strict limitations on lobbying activity placed on non-profit organizations like the AZC, in 1954 Kenen officially registered his operation

[79] "Golda Meir Speech Raises $50 Million for Haganah," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed December 10, 2017, https://jwa.org/thisweek/jan/21/1948/golda-meir.
[80] Rosenthal, 211.
[81] Ibid.

as the American Zionist Council of Public Affairs (AZCPA). Finally, in 1959, Kenen changed the name of his organization to AIPAC in order to attract the support of Jewish leaders who were uncomfortable with the label Zionist.[82] During these early days, Kenen secured millions of dollars in foreign aid to the new Jewish state, and he succeeded in placing pro-Israel planks in the 1952 platforms of both the Republican and the Democratic parties.[83]

As AIPAC was establishing itself as a force to be reckoned with in the legislative realm of the American government, a need was also perceived to create an institution to manage relations with the executive branch. Acting on the advice of John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State to President Dwight Eisenhower, an informal gathering of the heads of major American Jewish organizations was convened in March 1954 in order to develop a structure by which the whole of the American Jewish community could speak with one voice on matters pertaining to Israel.[84] From this meeting, the Presidents Conference was born, and along with AIPAC, the groundwork had been laid for the next half century of Israel advocacy on behalf of the American Jewish community.

**The Sun is in the East**

In June 1967, after the dust of six days of war settled over the newly drawn map of the Middle East, Israel became the sun at the heart of the solar system of American Jewish life. Threatened with total eclipse by the annihilatory rhetoric of its Arab neighbors, Israel emerged shining brighter than ever before with a stunning, miraculous

[82] Raffel, 114.
[83] Ibid., 113.
[84] Ibid., 114.

victory, inviting renewed public expressions of Jewish pride under the bright spring sky. In *Sacred Survival*, Woocher argues that the impact of the Six-Day War on the American Jewish community "was only slightly less monumental," than its impact on Israel itself—a bold statement considering that the tiny Jewish state had tripled the size of the territory under its control in less than a week.[85]

Yet dramatic evidence backs up Woocher's claim. United Jewish Appeal (UJA), a philanthropic umbrella organization whose primary objective was to raise funds for Israel, saw its allocations nearly quadruple from $64.5 million in 1966 to $240 million in 1967. Then in 1974, after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, UJA's fundraising efforts more than doubled to $511.2 million.[86] AIPAC also benefited significantly from the events of June 1967. As of May of that year AIPAC was broke, and its director was using his own money to pay for organizational expenses like letters and telegrams to public officials; by early June, it was permanently in the black.[87] In the 1995 updated edition of his classic 1976 analysis of the American Jewry, *Community and Polity*, Daniel Elazar describes AIPAC's extraordinary post-1967 growth:

> After 1967, AIPAC became a favorite cause of the new generation of "hands-on" activists. It now claims a countrywide grassroots membership of 50,000, with a staff of over 70 lobbyists, providers of information, and researchers. It is closely intertwined with Congress, its major lobby object. Several thousand attend the annual AIPAC policy conference…Prominent members of the U.S. administration and Congress appear at their plenary sessions and the attending activists meet

[85] Woocher, 65.
[86] Raffel, 117.
[87] Raffel, 118.

> with their representatives on an individual basis…In 1987, 307 legislators attended the AIPAC policy conference, including 86 senators and 221 representatives from both parties…"[88]

Steven Rosenthal argues that driving this development was the zeitgeist of the late 1960s, during which the Black Power movement normalized overt expressions of ethnicity, creating space for Jews to publicly support Israel, not only for religious but also for ethnic reasons.[89] In short, numerous scholars use the word "watershed" to describe the events of 1967 and their effects on the American Jewish community—that term seems to capture it best.

To summarize after the horrifying events of the Holocaust, Zionism became the darling cause of all American Jews, even those who had rejected Zionism earlier. By the 1950s AIPAC had come into being as had the Presidents' Conference. But AIPAC's real growth came after the 1967 war. The Federation movement grew similarly at that time, and by the early 1980s, it had become the prime institution in American Jewish life. When Woocher came to describe civil Judaism in *Sacred Survival*, he recognized the Federation movement as its primary carrier. By then however, the situation in Israel was at an all-time high—this was after the 1967 and Yom Kippur Wars, but before the First and Second Intifadas. And so sacred survival's energies were directed in support of Jews worldwide (not just Israel), particularly Jews in the Soviet Union who were the best example of the core myth's claim of an ongoing threat to Jewish continuity.

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[88] Daniel Judah Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1995), 32.
[89] Rosenthal, 213.

By the turn of the millennium, however, Soviet Jews were free and the Soviet Union itself was no more. Meanwhile, Israel's situation worsened, and organizations established specifically to support Israel flourished—none more so than AIPAC. The Federation movement, once the loudest trumpeter of sacred survival, now came second to AIPAC. At this point a new orthodoxy, championed by AIPAC and its peer organizations seized civil Judaism: a single-minded focus on supporting Israel, come what may. And we will conclude this chapter with an exploration of this new orthodoxy, an ideology we will call "sacred support."

**Sacred Support**

In *Sacred Survival*, Woocher presciently observed that "…American Judaism recognizes only one heresy which subject the perpetrator to immediate excommunication: denial of support to the State of Israel."[90] In the years following 1967, the appearance of unity and unanimity on Israel advocacy emerged as the supreme priority for the American Jewish community. Indeed, analysts of the American Jewish community are unequivocal on this point. Chronicling the history of American Jewry's support for Israel, Martin Raffell described the "effort to identify and nurture community consensus" on Israel advocacy as a central aspiration of Jewish communal institutions.[91] Steven Rosenthal wrote that "For millions of American Jews, criticism of Israel was a worse sin than marrying out of the faith."[92] Finally, in their 2007 critique of the unconditional,

[90] Woocher, 77.
[91] Raffel, 119.
[92] Rosenthal, 214.

unwavering support that Israel receives from the American government, political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt wrote,

> It is difficult to talk about [the influence of the Israel lobby (AIPAC, the Presidents Conference, etc.)] on American foreign policy, at least in the mainstream media in the United States, without being accused of anti-Semitism or labeled a self-hating Jew.[93]

In short, the defining characteristic of a "good" American Jew in the post-1967 world has increasingly become automatic support for the state of Israel—*sacred support*.

And every March at AIPAC's Policy Conference, a mixed multitude of "good" American Jews march on Washington. Their bodies are in the west but their hearts are in the east. This is the pilgrimage that the orthodoxy of today's civil Judaism asks of every American Jew, not *aliyah* to Jerusalem but *yeridah* to the District of Columbia, to lend one's voice in endorsement of its highest creed: uncompromising support for the State of Israel.

It is a fundamental characteristic of orthodoxies, however, that they produce their discontents. And it is to the heretics against sacred support and their heresies that we will turn in our next chapter.

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[93] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 9.

## Chapter 3

## Total Heresy:
## IfNotNow's Challenge to Sacred Support

### Heretics at the Gate

On April 30, 2014 the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations gathered to consider the admission of a new member to its ranks. In order to receive a seat at the table that ostensibly comprises the 51 most important Jewish institutions in the country, this group needed to attain a supermajority of 34 yay votes, two thirds of the body. It failed. And so J Street, the then seven year-old lobby which billed itself as the "home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans," was denied entry into the association that claims to speak for the American Jewish community.

The question, of course, is why?

J Street was founded in 2007 by Jeremy Ben-Ami, a former Clinton administration domestic policy advisor, who sought to fill a perceived gap in the Israel advocacy voices in Washington. Hence the name J Street, a nod to the missing letter in the alphabetical grid of the nation's capital—and also, obviously, to the "J" in Jewish.[94] The invitation to the organization's initial fundraiser stated the following raison d'être:

> For too long, the loudest American voices in political and policy debates have been those on the far right—often Republican neoconservatives or extreme Christian Zionists. J Street aims to change that. We are the first and only lobby and PAC (political action committee) dedicated to ensuring Israel's security,

[94] James D. Besser, "New PAC To Offer Pols A Dovish Mideast View," The Jewish Week News, March 26, 2008, accessed January 11, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20080403074343/http://www.thejewishweek.com/viewArticle/c39_a5882/News/International.html.

> changing the direction of American policy in the Middle East and opening up American political debate about Israel and the Middle East.[95]

This program reflects the opinion of considerable segments of the American Jewish community. According the 2013 Pew study, 61% of American Jews are optimistic about the prospects for a peaceful two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, yet only 38% believe that the Israeli government is making a sincere effort to bring about a peace agreement, and a further 44% believe that the continued building of Jewish settlements in the West Bank hurts Israel's security.[96] Whereas AIPAC and the Presidents Conference (of which AIPAC is a member)—the twin pillars of the orthodoxy of civil Judaism that we explored in the last chapter—reflexively reject the notion that American Jews have the right to criticize the Israeli government, legitimate pluralities of the population for whom they claim to speak disagree with Israel's current policies. J Street gives those pluralities a voice.

Nonetheless, J Street received only 17 votes in favor of its bid for admission, half of the threshold it needed to hit. Obviously its heretical willingness to criticize Israel lay behind its rejection. Still, J Street claims to be pro-Israel, with support for the Jewish state being a central principle of its platform. The greater strength of what I am calling its heretical position can be found embedded in the organization's initial public statement following its snubbing. In that statement, J Street asserted that it was

> …disappointed that our bid for membership to the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations has been rejected. This is a sad day for us, but also

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[95] Ibid.
[96] *A Portrait of Jewish Americans,* report, October 1, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.

> for the American Jewish community and for a venerable institution that has chosen to bar the door to the communal tent to an organization that represents a substantial segment of Jewish opinion on Israel. We are, however, most heartened by the tremendous support we received from many of the largest and most prominent organizations in American Jewish communal life who urged their fellow members to join them in building a robust and representative community body.[97]

The nine words in question are "represents a substantial segment of Jewish opinion on Israel." As we discussed in the previous chapter, an essential tenet of civil Judaism's orthodoxy with regard to support for Israel is that the American Jewish community speaks unequivocally on the subject. Furthermore, AIPAC and the Presidents Conference are the two organizations with the charter to walk the halls of power on behalf of the Jewish people. J Street's original sin was thus its heretical recognition of a political reality: American Jews are in fact divided when it comes to Israel. And as it goes with heresies and heretics, they could not be granted entry into the tent.

This however is hardly the end—or even the beginning—of our journey through the heresies that have challenged civil Judaism's sacred support for Israel. Indeed, in late July 2014, only a few months after J Street was denied a seat at the table of major American Jewish organizations, a group of young American Jews gathered outside of the offices of the Conference of Presidents in New York. The reason for their assembly: their

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[97] Edwin Black, "The inside Story of J Street's Rejection by the Conference of Presidents," *The Times of Israel*, May 30, 2014, accessed January 11, 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-inside-story-of-j-streets-rejection-by-the-conference-of-presidents/.

dismay at to the death toll from Operation Protective Edge, Israel's military action to subdue Hamas' rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. They wore black. They recited the Mourner's *Kaddish*. They sang a *niggun*. They lit candles. They made a video and posted it to YouTube. And they delivered a lengthy letter to Malcolm Hoenlein, the Conference's executive vice chairman (critical passages excerpted below):

> We are here today to demand that the Conference of Presidents join our call to stop the war on Gaza, end the occupation, and forge a path forward for freedom and dignity for all people in Israel and Palestine.
>
> …Though we interpret our Judaism in diverse ways, we are all Jews. For all of us, our tradition obligates us to a particular commitment, born of shared texts and a shared history, to the notion that all people are created equal, and that all people deserve freedom and the opportunity to forge their own future. Our own history of oppression has taught us that our freedom cannot be achieved absent the freedom of our neighbor.
>
> …We reject the view that "we have no choice," that this violence is necessary and inevitable. We act because too many in our community endorse this dangerous view in our name. In a moment that necessitates courage and foresight, too many abdicate responsibility.
>
> …Today, we visit the office of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, which claims to represent us. It does not. We will recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* for those who have died over the last weeks, we will consecrate their memory by reading their names, and we will call on the

representatives of our community to join us as we demand an end the war on Gaza, an end to occupation, and freedom and dignity for all people of the region.

Join with us. Stop the war on Gaza. End the Occupation. Freedom and Dignity for all.

If not now, when?[98]

This initial protest sparked the organization that will be our focus for the remainder of this chapter, the newest heretical movement to challenge the orthodoxy of sacred support: IfNotNow. But before we begin our in-depth examination of IfNotNow, it is important to pause to develop some theoretical points as to how heresies happen, which will help us to both understand the organization's emergence and how to situate it within American Jewish landscape.

**How Heresies Happen**

Our theory of heresy will be drawn from the work of two of the towering figures of 20th century social science: one whom we have already met, the sociologist Peter Berger; and one whom we have not, the anthropologist Mary Douglas. We begin with Berger.

In 1979, Berger revisited the study of religion in a provocatively entitled book *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*. In this work, Berger reclaims the word heresy from its particular meaning in the religious context—a breakaway faction from a faith community—and turns to its etymological

[98] Antonia Blumberg, "Jewish Group Delivers Mourner's Kaddish For Gaza Victims," *The Huffington Post*, July 26, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/26/jewish-group-kaddish-gaza_n_5622021.html.

origin, the Greek verb *hairein*, which meant simply "to choose."[99] Berger posits that following the dissolution of the sacred canopy that characterized the religious condition of premodern times, modern religion became wholly a matter of choice: "The premodern individual was linked to his gods in the same inexorable destiny that dominated the rest of his existence; modern man is faced with the necessity of choosing between gods, a plurality of which are socially available to him."[100] Given that modern religious life has become a matter of picking and choosing, Berger presents three options available to contemporary people of faith: the deductive "orthodox" approach, which pretends that nothing has changed, the reductive "secularizing" approach, which neuters religion of its transcendental power, and the inductive "individualist" approach, which eschews authority in favor of experience.[101]

As we apply Berger's paradigm towards our own ends, we are tracing a curious case: civil Judaism is obviously a product of modernity—it could not exist without American Jews' ability *to choose* to express their religious identity as they wished. It is thus, in Bergerian parlance, a heresy. However, as we concluded in the last chapter, civil Judaism has also ossified into an orthodoxy with regard to Israel, moving from what Woocher named "sacred survival" to what we have labeled "sacred support." In Bergerian terms, however, sacred support is not actually an orthodoxy, as much as it is a neo-orthodoxy. Consider Berger's distinction between the two:

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[99] Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1980), 27.
[100] Ibid..
[101] Ibid., 60-65.

> The orthodox mind is the one that has not yet perceived the character of the modern situation…The neo-orthodox mind, by an act of will, denies the modern situation at least to the extent of denying the import of its cognitive challenges. Put differently, for the orthodox nothing has happened yet; the neo-orthodox acts *as if* nothing has happened. Put differently again, the orthodox continues to affirm the tradition "innocently"; the neo-orthodox has lost this "innocence" and is compelled to reaffirm the tradition in an often mind-wrenching effort.[102]

As we observed in the previous chapter, given the complex history of American Jews' relationship with Zionism, the emergence of American Jewry's sacred support could hardly have been taken for granted. The fact that it had to arrive in the first place implies that we should characterize it as a neo-orthodoxy.

And when it did arrive, sacred support behaved with what Berger identified as an essential trait of such neo-orthodox movements:

> The problem is, quite simply, that it is very difficult to forget [the] interval [between the decline of the tradition and its reaffirmation]. That is why…neo-orthodox movements come on with particular vehemence. Typically, they are a very noisy lot. No wonder: the recollections of that interval when the tradition was less than certain must be drowned out.[103]

Neo-orthodoxies are indeed a noisy lot, asthey must go to some length to demonstrate their "validity." They demand psychic contortions to maintain their plausibility, thus driving their adherents to uncommon passion.

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[102] Ibid., 97.
[103] Ibid., 68.

Such is the case with civil Judaism's sacred support for the state of Israel. Its militant faithful strain to sustain the illusion of consensus within the Jewish community, and attack with smothering vigor any and all who challenge that impression. Premodern religions could quickly quash dissenting factions in such a way as to render them relatively rare, But the modern situation, characterized by the heretical imperative, has vastly amplified the frequency distribution of the doubtful—and their sense of empowerment to act upon those doubts.[104]

In order now to understand how the doubtful act upon their doubts, we will turn to the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas. In particular, our analysis will utilize the framework of her grid-group cultural theory. Douglas developed the idea that societies can be classified according two dimensions. The first is group, which she defines as the general boundaries around a community and the extent to which the lives of the members of that community are controlled by the group.[105] The second is grid, which she defines as the rigidity of the regulations that give a society structure.[106]

Douglas uses these dimensions to describe four distinct varieties of social control, graphing them as below with group increasing on the horizontal axis from left to right and grid increasing on the vertical axis from top to bottom:

| | **Low Group** | **High Group** |
|---|---|---|
| **High Grid** | Isolate | Positional |
| **Low Grid** | Individualist | Enclave |

[104] Ibid., 27.
[105] Mary Douglas, "A History of the Grid and Group Cultural Theory" (lecture), accessed October 25, 2017, http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/semiotics/cyber/douglas1.pdf.
[106] Ibid.

Applying this paradigm, we can see that orthodoxies clearly occupy the space in the top right, characterized by both strong group boundaries and firm hierarchical systems. Douglas employs the designation "positional" as a label for these communities, describing them as "a form of society that uses extensive classification and programming for solving problems of coordination."[107] Such is the case with the faithful of sacred support, who have delineated sharp limits surrounding the proper orientation that American Jews should have towards Israel, and who have definitive rules as to who is permitted to speak on behalf of the Jewish people.

Because heretical movements necessarily break away from orthodoxies, the question is along which axis or axes do they move: grid, group, or both? According to Douglas, the answer is grid: the sectarians who lead a heretical group from high grid to low grid reject the structures imposed upon them by the positional communities from whence they came.[108] Rebuffing those traditional leaders who profess to speak on their behalf, the trailblazers who create dissident enclaves—often charismatic figures—claim to represent the enlightened ones, the saintly few who know the moral truth; indeed, they remain high on the dimension of group because they declare all outsiders—especially the members of their group of origin—to represent absolute evil.[109] A striking implication of this theory is that heretical groups will struggle to tolerate internal dissent as much as the orthodoxies from which they broke away. Adding to this chaos is the fact that factional communities—having cast off the rigidity of the grid of their groups of origin—tend to be

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Douglas, Mary. "A History of the Grid and Group Cultural Theory." *University of Toronto: Computing in the Humanities and Social Sciences.* Lecture. Accessed October 25, 2017. http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/semiotics/cyber/douglas1.pdf.

egalitarian, meaning that "authority is unprotected, leadership is always challenged, decisions have no coherent institutional framework."[110]

From these hectic beginnings, a heretical movement faces three potential fates. The first: its initial structural instability can be a death sentence, causing the collapse of the centripetal forces that hold it together. The second: it can simply be crushed by the orthodoxy of its origin. In each of these first two cases, the failed heretics encounter a critical choice: to opt in or to opt out. They can either opt in and return to their orthodoxy of origin—and should they be so inclined they can attempt to reform it from within. Or they can opt out of the great debate altogether, eschewing participation in a conversation in which they feel they have no voice. Then there is the third possible result: a heretical movement can conquer its orthodoxy of origin, develop its own grid, and thereby evolve into an orthodoxy in its own right. Given that supporting Israel was in fact initially counter to the predominant view of the American Jewish community in the early 20th century, we can conclude that this final possibility was precisely the path followed by the faithful of sacred support. And now, having dominated the discourse for over half a century, this orthodoxy is facing heresies of its own.

Berger's thesis helps us understand the increased frequency of heresy in contemporary society. Douglas' framework gives us a theoretical language to explain how these heresies coalesce into heretical movements. And now, armed with the tools we need to understand its development—and perhaps to forecast its future—we can apply our analytical machinery to IfNotNow, the most recent heretical movement to challenge civil Judaism's sacred support for Israel.

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[110] Ibid.

**The Heretical Alternative**

IfNotNow's objective is simple: to end the American Jewish community's support, both active and passive, for Israel's half-century long occupation of the Palestinian people.[111] This, however, is not a new idea. In fact, it is almost as old as the occupation itself. The first organization to challenge the status quo of civil Judaism and the orthodoxy of sacred support emerged in the aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, six years after Israel conquered the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the Six-Day War. Its name was Breira.

Breira (the Hebrew word for alternative) was founded as an alternative approach to the reflexive, unquestioning support that American Jews gave Israel following its victories in the two major mid-century conflicts. The appeals of its first public statement in December 1973 will sound familiar to those versed in the debate surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, calling on Israel "to make territorial concessions" and "to recognize the legitimacy of the national aspirations of the Palestinians."[112] But it is essential to remember that this organization was the first to forward them. Indeed, the authors of this opening salvo were well aware of the fact that their ideas would be received as heretical, writing "This is the reason we join together now—we deplore those pressures in American Jewish life which make open discussion of these and other vital issues virtually synonymous with heresy."[113]

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[111] "Our Story," IfNotNow, September 30, 2016, accessed January 12, 2018, https://ifnotnowmovement.org/about-us/our-story/.
[112] Michael E. Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 281.
[113] Ibid.

Unsurprisingly, the group faced an overwhelming backlash from the faithful of sacred support. Indeed, as Peter Beinart describes it:

> The reaction from the organized American Jewish community was savage. Benjamin Epstein, coauthor of *The New Anti-Semitism*, urged the Anti-Defamation League's parent organization, B'nai B'rith, to fire employees who associated with Breira…Members of Meir Kahane's Jewish Defense League attacked Breira's inaugural conference, trashing the hall and beating conferees.[114]

After only four short years of existence, it disbanded, largely because affiliation with the organization threatened its members career prospects.[115]

A full treatment of Breira's rise and fall is beyond our present scope (as is often the case for this *nachshon* of the American Jewish community, which is curiously written out of the comprehensive histories of American Jewry after World War II).[116] For our purposes, it is important to offer just one essential observation about Breira's impact. The top of its membership list reads like a veritable roll call of the most prominent Jewish thinkers and leaders of the second half of the 20th century: Steven M. Cohen, Jacob Neusner, Joachim Prinz, Eugene Borowitz, Charles S. Liebman, Irving Howe, Art Green, Arnold Jacob Wolf, and David Saperstein to name a few.[117] Their success indicates that while Breira offers an example of a heretical movement that failed because it was quashed by the reigning orthodoxy, many of its heretics nonetheless opted to return to the

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[114]Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt and, 2012), 81.
[115] Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 76.
[116] Staub, 281.
[117] Ibid.

fold of the American Jewish community. And because they elected to endure in the great debate, to participate rather than abdicate, their heretical alternative became—and remained—part of the conversation.

IfNotNow has thus inherited Breira's heretical legacy. Indeed, we can hear an echo of Breira's desire for an alternative in the IfNotNow's seminal letter to Hoenlein: "We reject the view that 'we have no choice.'" But for reasons we will examine through the remainder of this chapter, IfNotNow represents more than just an evolution of its ideological forebear. Rather, IfNotNow seeks a revolution in the American Jewish community that sweeps beyond the contents of the great debate to date. Indeed, it has positioned itself as nothing less than a total heresy against civil Judaism, challenging not just sacred support, but every dimension of the American Jewish establishment.

**"We Will Be the Generation"**

In order to understand the emergence of IfNotNow, it is important to begin by characterizing its membership. And in order to characterize IfNotNow's membership, it is essential to first describe the type of individual who is categorically excluded from its ranks, a textbook representative of the faithful of civil Judaism. In his book *The Crisis of Zionism*, Peter Beinart offers the perfect portrayal of such a person:

> The average large donor to a major American Jewish organization is in his fifties, sixties, or seventies. He has worked hard in his life and achieved status and wealth. Now partially freed from the burden of making money, he can devote some of his time to the things he cares about most. And what he cares about most, upon reflection, is the Jewish people. He remembers a time when he was not so wealthy and esteemed, when being an American Jew was not all sweetness and

> light. He remembers his parents, shaking with fear, in 1967, in the run-up to the Six-Day War, when it seemed that Israel might be destroyed. He does not remember the Holocaust; he is too young for that. But he has immersed himself in it. He has read more books about it, watched more movies about it, had more conversations about it, than about any other aspect of Jewish history, by far. When he goes to synagogue, he is often bored. When he goes to a Holocaust memorial, by contrast, he is overcome. And now, in the autumn of his life, he is playing his own role in the great struggle for Jewish survival. In the 1940s, when the Jews of Europe cried out from their ghettos and cattle cars, the Jews of America did little. Those Jews—he grew up around them—were tailors and shopkeepers; they were marginal, fatalistic, timid. What could you expect of them? Now the Jewish people, he believes, are again imperiled, this time in the very homeland created to give Jews refuge. But this time, their American brethren are people like him. They are not powerless and they are not afraid. If he goes to an AIPAC event, he may hear this story: In 1945 an American Jewish soldier helped liberate a concentration camp. Seeing his name tag, one of the survivors asked the soldier if he was Jewish. The soldier answered yes, expecting a tearful embrace. Instead, the survivor slapped him and said, "You're too late." I have heard this story many times at AIPAC functions. The room goes silent. The donor thinks to himself: "Not this time." And he writes his check.[118]

According to the master story of IfNotNow, everything is wrong with this picture: in every imaginable respect, this man represents the flaws of the out-of-touch generation

[118] Beinart, 31-32.

that is currently at the helm of the American Jewish establishment. For the moment, however, we will focus on his demographic details. First of all, consistent with the power structure of the time, he is generally a man, the walking embodiment of the so-called Ashkenormativity of American Jewish life; IfNotNow, by contrast, is largely directed by a diverse group, including women and queer-identified individuals.[119] Indeed, in a document that explains the movement's "DNA," IfNotNow describes its diversity with pride: "We live our Judaism in diverse ways. We are Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi, secular and religious, queer and Jews of color—each of us using the freedom our people have fought for to decide what being Jewish means for us."[120] Second of all he is (relatively) old; IfNotNow, by contrast seeks specifically to magnetize members of the Millennial generation to join its ranks. Indeed, as a 30-year-old attending one of the organization's weekend-long training sessions in October 2017, even *I* felt old.

How successful has IfNotNow been at recruiting this targeted demographic? Since its first action at the Presidents Conference in July 2014, the movement has attracted an active membership of 1400 individuals, spread across 13 regional communities that the organization calls hives.[121] It plans to hold ten training weekends over the first two months of 2018 alone. And over the next three to five years, it hopes to expand its capacity to 30,000 trained members and 150 hives.[122]

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[119] Aaron Steinberg-Madow, telephone interview by author, December 2, 2017.
[120] *IfNotNow DNA Guide* (IfNotNow, 2017).
[121] Steinberg-Madow. The hives are located in New York City, Boston, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Washington, Toronto, Detroit, Chicago, Austin, Minneapolis, Denver, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area.
[122] *IfNotNow DNA Guide*.

At this point it is prudent to pause to trace how IfNotNow swelled from a small group of young Jews reciting *Kaddish* at 3rd Avenue and 41st Street to a mature organization with such dramatic ambitions. Importantly, those who gathered in New York that day were not the only young Jews to protest the American Jewish establishment's silence to the death toll in Operation Protective Edge. Decentralized actions by initially disconnected groups also occurred organically in Boston and the Bay Area. Those who participated in these demonstrations of course publicized their exploits on social media. And thus the internet age facilitated a rapid progression by which the leaders of these disparate communities were able to connect with each other. In November 2014, a retreat was organized in New York for the East Coast leadership of these protests, and around that time it was decided that the budding movement should enter a deliberate period of hibernation in order to develop a strategy to achieve its long-term goals.[123] The leadership desired to frontload the planning process in order to allow the movement to hit the ground running when it formally relaunched.[124]

That period of strategic hibernation ended a year later, in November 2015, when IfNotNow held its first training for trainers in Massachusetts. During the intervening year of relative silence, two key things happened. First, the organizers of the movement elected to employ the Momentum community organizing model in order to shape their organization. The Momentum model is based on the premise that social movements succeed, not by influencing institutional leaders, but by swaying the people for whom

[123] Emma Saltzberg, interview by author, October 25, 2017.
[124] Sarah Brammer-Shlay, telephone interview by author, October 31, 2017.

those institutional leaders claim to speak.[125] Once those people have been swayed, the institutional leaders are left with no choice but to follow them. We can see how IfNotNow has incorporated this approach into its strategy in the following graphic:

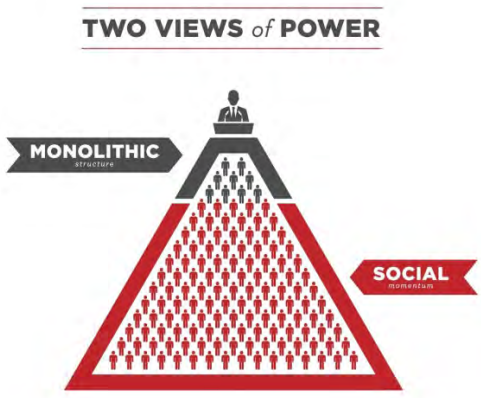


*Figure 1: IfNotNow's Social View of Power as found in the organization's DNA.*

This graphic intends to illustrate that the commonly held belief that power in the American Jewish community operates monolithically is misguided. In the words of the "DNA":

> …by mapping out the triangle we see that actually the people on the bottom—those that participate within communal institutions and those on the outside who the top is desperately trying to engage—are the ones with the power to shift our community, if we organize.[126]

In addition to this counterintuitive view of power, the Momentum model also calls for movements to be strategically decentralized in order to empower autonomous members to act on their own.[127] We see this in the ambiguity—and ubiquity of the passive voice—in my chronicle of IfNotNow's early history; those individuals who I

[125] "About Momentum," Momentum, accessed January 13, 2018, https://www.momentumcommunity.org/about-momentum.
[126] *IfNotNow DNA Guide.*
[127] "About Momentum," Momentum.

interviewed about the organization's founding were notably uncomfortable ascribing credit to any particular person for its success during that stage in its story. Events sometimes seemed to have happened that no one in particular seemed to have organized. I witnessed additional evidence of this unease with formal leadership designations during the training that I attended in October. One of that weekend's presenters wittily remarked that IfNotNow is not a leaderless movement, but a "leaderful movement." At another point, a presenter euphemistically referred to the organization's staff as "stipended volunteers."

It should be noted that both IfNotNow's revised understanding of the nature of power in the Jewish community and its emphasis on decentralization represent, in and of themselves, heresies against the orthodoxy of civil Judaism. Sacred support grants only select individuals and institutions the license to speak on behalf of the Jewish people, most prominently AIPAC and the Presidents Conference. Civil Judaism centralizes power at the top, the most obvious example being the *very idea* of a Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, a notion which would be completely anathema to the ideology of IfNotNow.

Revisiting Douglas' theory regarding sectarian factions, we can see that in its apprehensive attitude towards centralized leadership, IfNotNow is consistent with the egalitarian norms that we would expect to see in a burgeoning heretical movement—good riddance, grid! However, what is distinct in the case of IfNotNow is our inability to identify the sort of charismatic leader around whom such groups tend to coalesce. In this case, the hyper-connected reality of the internet age likely diminished the necessity for

such a rallying figure, as the movement's founders were able to rapidly construct a vibrant virtual community without a coordinating force.

The second key event that occurred during that preparatory year was financial: T'ruah, an American rabbinic organization dedicated to human rights advocacy, stepped in to become IfNotNow's fiscal sponsor.[128] Fiscal sponsorship is a legal arrangement that allows established not-for-profit organizations to collect funds on behalf of a nascent group whose mission is related to that of the sponsoring organization. In 2015, T'ruah's fiscal sponsorship allowed IfNotNow to receive a $40,000 grant from the Arca Foundation, a private grant-making foundation that finances social justice groups.[129] Since receiving that seed grant, IfNotNow's financial capacity has expanded dramatically—it has now been incorporated into a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization in its own right with a $500,000 budget funded by multiple 5-digit gifts, including one unsolicited $50,000 donation.[130] The Arca Foundation issued $40,000 to IfNotNow in 2016 and 2017 as well. While those big checks have obviously helped a great deal, the strength of the group's financial position can also be attributed to its members, as two thirds of its funds come from grassroots donors.[131]

Having now examined IfNotNow's origins, we can finally turn our attention to the composition of its membership: who exactly does this movement welcome into its tent? The short answer to this question is fairly straightforward: anyone who opposes

[128] Steinberg-Madow.
[129] Arca Grantee Database, accessed January 13, 2018, https://www.arcafoundation.org/current-past-grantees/.
[130] Steinberg-Madow.
[131] Ibid.

Israel's occupation of the Palestinian people. We see this clearly stated in one of the organization's core principles:

> **We focus on what unites rather than what divides us.** We are individuals who are differently affiliated, but together we act as IfNotNow. We do not take a unified stance on BDS, Zionism or the question of statehood. We work together to end American Jewish support for the occupation. Organizational representatives are welcome to participate so long as their organization explicitly agrees to adhere to the principles, strategy, and story of IfNotNow.[132]

This big-tent orientation allows IfNotNow to draw members both from organizations closer to the mainstream Jewish community such as the aforementioned J Street, and from organizations that are considered to be far outside the norm, such as Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), which supports the Boycott-Divest-Sanctions (BDS) movement. Thus even though those who would tend to affiliate with J Street and those who would tend to affiliate with JVP might disagree on several—if not most—other issues pertaining to the American Jewish community's relationship with Israel, IfNotNow creates a sandbox in which they can play nicely together and focus on one core concern: the occupation.

Yet this singularity of purpose does not define the whole of what makes someone a welcome member of IfNotNow. Consider the organization's vision statement: "We will be the generation that ends our community's support for the occupation."[133] The last seven words of that vision—"ends our community's support for the occupation" —

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[132] "Our Principles," IfNotNow, July 24, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, https://ifnotnowmovement.org/about-us/our-principles/.
[133] "About Us," IfNotNow, September 30, 2016, accessed January 13, 2018, https://ifnotnowmovement.org/about-us/.

impose the kind of black-and-white worldview that Douglas' framework predicts would serve as the boundaries of a heretical group: insiders know the moral truth and outsiders are evil incarnate. However, the statement's first five words—"We will be the generation" —insist upon an unexpected—and highly exclusive—definition of the movement's boundaries: Millennials only, please.

That generational restriction limits the borders of IfNotNow's tent to approximately one fifth of the American Jewish community.[134] The next obvious question is who were the first 1400 people to walk in? In my conversations with several IfNotNow leaders, I asked them how they would characterize the membership of their movement. What emerged from those exchanges were pictures of three archetypes.

1. The first archetype grew up with a high level of Jewish engagement. She went to day school and camp. She got involved in Hillel in college. She went on Birthright. And through it all, she learned to believe that Israel was the infallible land of fairy tales. Then, at some point, she learned about the occupation. And she felt a profound sense of betrayal. She went from engaged to enraged. And that is what we will call this archetype, the "enraged engaged."

2. The second archetype also grew up with a high level of Jewish engagement, but closer to the fringes of the American Jewish community. She has never seen herself reflected in the membership of the so-called mainstream institutions like AIPAC and the Jewish federations. She was a member of Habonim Dror, the socialist Zionist youth movement, and attended one of its summer camps. While in college, she joined J Street

[134] *A Portrait of Jewish Americans,* report, October 1, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.

U. She has always known about the occupation and has always been against it. And in IfNotNow, she has finally found a community that gave her values the voice she was looking for. We will call her archetype the "finally found."

3. The third archetype grew up aware that she was Jewish, but did not have access to the kinds of robust experiences that would have empowered the development of Jewish identity. In fact, she became somewhat disaffected from Judaism—like the "finally found," she never saw herself represented in the Jewish community. Yet she readily participated in social justice movements. During college, she volunteered for the Obama campaign and after she graduated she served as a Teach For America corps member. Then one day she read a story about a new Jewish social justice movement called IfNotNow, and she found herself inspired by its call to action. She googled the organization and signed up for a training the next day. We will call this last archetype the "Jewly inspired."

Importantly, the common condition at the core of all three of these archetypes is one of alienation: the "enraged engaged," "finally found," and "Jewly inspired," all felt themselves to be in some way outsiders from the mainstream Jewish community. And the pain of that alienation fuels their passion.

In these three archetypes, we see how profoundly different the membership of IfNotNow is from the prototypical representative of the establishment Jewish community that Beinart described in the passage quoted above. Indeed, demographically speaking, IfNotNow positions itself in opposition to the faithful of civil Judaism in virtually every respect. We also saw how IfNotNow challenges the orthodoxy of sacred support with both its counterintuitive view of the nature of power in the American Jewish community

and in its emphasis on strategic decentralization as an organizational structure. Yet there is one more element the completes the picture of IfNotNow's total heresy against civil Judaism: its rejection of the lachrymose conception of the Jewish story.

**Breaking the Core Myth**

As we saw in our earlier discussion of civil Judaism, Woocher described the core myth of sacred survival as a synthesis of the persistent narrative that the Jewish people are eternally on the precipice of extinction and the can-do sensibility of the American spirit. The result: a hopeful belief that American Jewry is uniquely positioned to end the tragic cycle of death and destruction that has characterized Jewish history. The faithful of sacred support for Israel have of course absorbed this myth, a point that Beinart astutely captured in his profile of the average Jewish establishment donor that we saw above:

> And now, in the autumn of his life, he is playing his own role in the great struggle for Jewish survival…Now the Jewish people, he believes, are again imperiled, this time in the very homeland created to give Jews refuge. But this time, their American brethren are people like him. They are not powerless and they are not afraid…The donor thinks to himself: "Not this time." And he writes his check.[135]

Like most American Jews, members of IfNotNow are familiar with this story; however, they have modified its conclusion and its consequent call to action, rejecting the survivalist interpretation proffered by the adherents of sacred support. In their revision of the core myth of civil Judaism, which be found in the meta-narrative that the IfNowNow

[135] Beinart, 31-32.

includes in its "DNA Guide," the organization offers the following rereading of the lachrymose view of Jewish history:

> We too are scarred by our people's trauma. Our families are their families, and our grandparents their parents. We understand how trauma has caused some in our community to interpret history to mean that the world is against us. But we interpret our past differently—as a lesson that our freedom cannot be achieved absent the freedom of our neighbors.[136]

This is a striking retelling of the same tale that animates civil Judaism, only with an amended moral that upends the particularistic appeal of sacred support and reorients the activist energies that the core myth generates towards a universalist impulse.

The fact that IfNotNow bases its own story on such a precise revision of the core myth of sacred support is not surprising; it is the general way of heretical movements to claim that though they retain the same stories as the orthodoxies from whence they came, they possess new wisdom that allows them to arrive at the correct interpretation of those sacred narratives. What we also learn from IfNotNow's revision of the core myth of civil Judaism is that in spite of the fact that the common denominator that unites the organization's archetypal members—the "enraged engaged," the "finally found," and the "Jewly inspired"—is their sense of alienation from Jewish establishment institutions, the movement is as grounded and as invested in Jewish history as the orthodoxy that it is challenging.

And we will conclude this chapter with a deeper examination of a collection of observations that further illustrate this last point: that the faithful of IfNotNow are deeply

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[136] *IfNotNow DNA Guide* (IfNotNow, 2017).

devoted to their Jewishness. Because perhaps the most fascinating dimension of IfNotNow as a heresy against the orthodoxy of sacred support for Israel is this: though IfNotNow represents a heresy against *civil Judaism*, the tools that the movement is using to undermine its opponents are emerging from its members' reinvigorated relationship with *traditional Jewish religion*.

**Their Name is a Mishnah**

Some organizations simply have better names than others. Alas, the organizations that represent the orthodoxy of sacred support have terrible names. The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee is somewhat redeemed by the ease of pronouncing its acronym AIPAC, but that acronym also includes the confusing three-letter combination PAC, which in American politics stands for political action committee, a type of campaign fundraising organization that AIPAC is distinctly not. Worse yet is the clunky catastrophe that is the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which does not use an acronym and offers no clear abbreviation: is it the Conference of Presidents or the Presidents Conference

In contrast, IfNotNow has an excellent name. It is short. It presents a clear, emphatic statement of the organization's goal. And, in its most striking divergence from AIPAC and the Presidents Conference, it obviously invokes Jewish tradition. The name IfNotNow was lifted from the famous passage in Mishnah Avot: "[Hillel] used to say: 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me. And If I only for myself, what am I? And if now now, when?'"[137] This mishnah has been the inspiration and the organizing framework for

[137] Mishnah Avot, 1:14.

IfNotNow's narrative since the movement's inception, as we read in its open letter to Malcolm Hoenlein. And these details point to an important, novel feature of IfNotNow's program to challenge the orthodoxy of sacred support: its invocation of the modes, symbols, and rituals of traditional Jewish religion.

While IfNotNow's name is a classic example of the organization's use of a Jewish mode, quoting from the corpus of our sacred literature, its logo is a paradigmatic example of its use of a Jewish symbol.


*Figure 2: IfNotNow's "burning bush" logo.*

Here is IfNotNow's own explanation of its logo:

> Our logo, inspired by the burning bush, symbolizes our generation's call to leadership in the Jewish community. Just as Moses was commanded to return to Egypt and fight for the liberation of his people, we too feel called to take responsibility for the future of our community. We know the liberation of our Jewish community is bound up in the liberation of all people, particularly those in Israel and Palestine. The bush burns bright but is not consumed—the fire is not a mechanism of destruction, but rather a force of inspiration and transformation.[138]

[138] "About Us," IfNotNow.

Reading this description, it becomes apparent that in addition to having a mishnah for name, IfNotNow has a midrash for a logo.

However, while IfNotNow feels attached to Jewish tradition, it does not feel beholden to it. Rather, the organization often opts to lift symbols and place them in new contexts that refresh their meaning. For example, during a demonstration against President Trump's nomination of David Friedman as ambassador to Israel, one of the protestors sounded a shofar. Explaining the intention behind the deployment of that classic Jewish symbol, Alina Butareva wrote: "The activists stood after blowing a shofar—a rams horn used in the Jewish tradition to call our community to action in times of crisis—and recited a few of the many reasons they believe Friedman should not be confirmed by the Senate."[139] For most Jews, the shofar's familiar context is Rosh Hashanah; at the action against Friedman in DC, IfNotNow reclaimed the shofar as the voice of righteousness.

As creative as IfNotNow is in its use of Jewish symbols, the organization is equally imaginative with its revisions of Jewish rituals. Indeed, from the outset, when the first activists stood outside the Conference of Presidents offices in July 2014, the fact that they recited *Kaddish* for both the Israelis and the Palestinians who died during Operation Protective Edge—for both the Jews *and* the non-Jews, for whom *Kaddish* is not traditionally recited—illustrates the enthusiasm of its members to infuse Jewish rituals with subversive messages of social justice. The archetypal example of this practice is the "liberation seder," which has been a staple of American Passover celebrations for many

[139] Alina Butareva, "Activists with IfNotNow Stand Against Friedman's Nomination as Ambassador to Israel," IfNotNow, February 16, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, https://ifnotnowmovement.org/press/.

years that IfNotNow has unsurprisingly adopted. A more inventive illustration of IfNotNow's re-envisioning of traditional ritual was its "Liberation Sukkah," which a post on the movement's blog, *The INNside*, explained as follows:

> During the weeklong festival of Sukkot, Jews celebrate by building a sukkah, a temporary structure that reminds us of the impermanence of material comfort. The Liberation Sukkah will be a space to rejoice in Jewish ritual and connect the lessons of Sukkot with the importance of ending the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.
>
> **The sukkah, traditionally an open, communal space, embodies the virtues of inclusion and honest discourse too often lacking from our Jewish community institutions.** In March, Hillel expelled the Ohio State chapter of Keshet, a Jewish LGBTQ group, for co-sponsoring an event with Jewish Voices for Peace, an organization pursuing peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Recently, it was also revealed that the Israel on Campus Coalition, a group of pro-Israel organizations that operate on college campuses, endorsed a blacklist of pro-Palestinian student activists.
>
> **Both of these actions by prominent Jewish institutions send a clear message: Jews' presence in these institutions is conditional on unwavering support for Israel and the occupation.**
>
> Rather than compromise on our principles, IfNotNow NYC have built our own sukkah to create the vibrant, liberated Jewish community we want.

**Decorated with fall foliage and protest signs, our sukkah reflects the intersection of our Jewish and political identities, which grounds our demand for freedom and dignity for all Palestinians and Israelis.**[140]

Here we see an excellent demonstration of IfNotNow's ability to mine the potent resources of Jewish tradition, and to employ them in order to challenge their opponents.

Yet beyond that, the above explanation of its "Liberation Sukkah" reveals once more how IfNowNow embodies a critical feature of Douglas' theory of sectarian factions: the stringent clarity of its moral boundaries. Indeed, as we have seen, IfNotNow largely adheres to the theory of heresy that we based on the work Berger and Douglas: its birth was facilitated by the availability of heresies in the modern context, its grid is barely existent, and its group could not be more clearly defined. And having now described the nature of IfNotNow as a heretical movement, we will conclude by examining its place in the American Jewish landscape.

[140] "IfNotNow NYC Inaugurates Liberation Sukkah in Washington Square Park," The INNside, October 09, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, https://medium.com/ifnotnoworg/ifnotnow-nyc-inaugurates-liberation-sukkah-in-washington-square-park-719ee073757.

## Conclusion:

## Civil Judaism Redux?

I recall one particularly poignant moment from the IfNotNow training that I attended in October. Describing her vision of a world in which IfNotNow has achieved its ambitions, one presenter imagined going to her grandmother and inviting her to join in an action against the occupation. She would say to her grandmother: "This is how I want to be Jewish. Come with me and be Jewish in this way."

The concept of protest as a Jewish activity would not be novel to this young woman's grandmother: the American Jewish community celebrates many examples of its historical participation in this nation's social justice movements. We are a people who famously pray with our feet. Yet for most members of this grandmother's generation, the idea of demonstrating against Israel would seem a contradiction in terms; indeed, as we have seen, sacred support for Israel as the orthodoxy of civil Judaism has defined the Jewish identity of this grandmother's generation. It was she and her peers who built and fortified the very institutional infrastructure—AIPAC and the Presidents Conference—that her granddaughter now targets.

Yet AIPAC and the Presidents Conference are not the only object of this granddaughter's ire. She has bones to pick with the synagogue that taught her Hebrew but never about Islam, the camp that played "Iron Dome" but never "Separation Barrier," and the Hillel whose Birthright trip brought her to Jerusalem but not Hebron.[141] In sum, the whole institutional apparatus of Jewish identity formation failed this young woman, as at

[141] We are no longer speaking of any specific young woman's experience, but rather aggregating a composite.

every level it was infected with the disease of convenient silence about an inconvenient truth. And nonetheless this granddaughter could be considered fortunate, for at the very least she once had access to the establishment; she saw herself reflected in its membership. Several of her friends in IfNotNow felt alienated from the mainstream American Jewish life from the start: they were born with identities that the community preferred not to embrace, they were raised on the community's fringes, or they were not raised in it at all.

IfNotNow thus represents a cohort of young Jews alienated not just by the Israel politics of the Jewish establishment, but by the existence of the establishment altogether. That is why the movement represents not merely a narrow heresy that challenges American Jews just to revise their attitudes towards Israel; rather, it is a total heresy that questions the very foundations of American Jewish life. To be clear, the organization does not aspire to renounce the American Jewish community—far from it. Rather IfNotNow insists on breaking from—if not simply breaking—institutions that fail to represent Jewish values as its members understand them, who "fail to heed [their] call for freedom and dignity for all."[142]

And beyond that, IfNotNow aspires to become an all-encompassing Jewish community for the millennial generation. An illustration: at the training that I attended, I spoke with a young woman, already a member of IfNotNow, during one of the snack breaks. She lived not far from me in Brooklyn, but she was talking about the possibility of moving. Her challenge was that she could not imagine leaving her Jewish community. Preparing to play Jewish geography, I mentally cycled through the various Jewish

[142] *IfNotNow Phase 2 DNA Guide* (IfNotNow, 2017).

communities in our neighborhood, and I asked her if she meant Shir HaMaalot, a local *minyan* with a strong social justice bent. She said no—she meant IfNotNow. She is not unusual in this respect. Many of the IfNotNow members with whom I spoke over the course of my research reported that the movement encompasses both their primary social circle *and* their primary outlet for Jewish life. These young Jews are manufacturing a comprehensive new model for the American Jewish community that appeals distinctly to millennials. Every classic mode of affiliation with and participation in the American Jewish project is subject to their strict moral scrutiny and a target for reinvention. In short: instead of joining shuls, they *daven shacharit* at their protests.[143]

In stark contrast to this program is the approach that one of the establishment institutions of sacred support has chosen in order to retain and bolster its ranks. In 2005, AIPAC made a bet on the long-term viability and relevance of the American synagogue, launching its Synagogue Initiative. Their website describes the venture as follows:

> In 2005, AIPAC launched the Synagogue Initiative, a program focused on increasing the number of America's synagogue members who participate in pro-Israel activism. For many American Jews, the synagogue is the central address for the expression of their Jewish identities. And throughout our modern history America's synagogues have been at the forefront of activism. Whether we call it temple or shul, it is where we celebrate milestones, where we remember lives lived, and where we go to make a meaningful difference. From calling attention to

[143] Emma Saltzberg, interview by author, October 25, 2017.

> the horrors of the Holocaust to marching in support of Soviet Jewry, our congregations have been at the heart of our activism.
>
> Synagogues are also the place where the centrality of Israel can become a stronger part of our Jewish identity. AIPAC has developed a menu of resources to help you enhance your synagogue's offerings for Israel-related education and participation, while providing an opportunity for every affiliated American Jew to become a pro-Israel activist…[144]

Members of IfNotNow would read the description of this initiative and dismiss it as a demonstration of everything that is wrong with the American Jewish establishment. Synagogues as the "central address" for the expression of Jewish identity? Appealing to the lachrymose myths of sacred survival? A top-down educational approach? All nonsense in 2018. And in addition to wagering on the synagogues in general, AIPAC has doubled down on rabbinic leadership in particular, a strategy that I am grateful to have benefited from—I did not pay my own way to its Policy Conference. AIPAC still operates with an older set of assumptions about how the American Jewish community works.

So what happens next? What does the future hold for civil Judaism, its orthodoxy of sacred support for Israel, and the heretical challenge it faces from IfNotNow?

As we discussed in the last chapter, heretical movements tend to follow one of three trajectories: they can collapse because of their structural instability, they can be crushed by the orthodoxy of their origin, or they can conquer the orthodoxy of their

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[144] "AIPAC's Synagogue Initiative," Aipac.org, accessed January 14, 2018, https://www.aipac.org/connect/communities/your-synagogue.

origin and become an orthodoxy in their own right. One might think that IfNotNow's most likely fate is the second, that like its ideological antecedent Breria, the organization's nascent voice will be nipped in the bud by the overwhelming might of the Jewish establishment. This outcome seems unlikely for two reasons. First, the members of IfNotNow are less threatened by the potential loss of livelihood that loomed over the leaders of Breira, as they are less integrated into the ranks of the establishment institutions that they are challenging than were there predecessors. Second, to date, AIPAC and its peer organizations have yet to publicly respond to IfNotNow's activities; indeed, AIPAC issued no response to IfNotNow's protest at last year's Policy Conference. Given these two considerations, we can conclude that, at least in the near future, we should not expect IfNotNow to be quashed by its opponents.

This brings us back to the first of the possible trajectories for heretical movements that I listed above, an outcome that seems far more likely in the case of IfNotNow: the organization could collapse for internal reasons. IfNotNow's growth strategy depends upon its ability to magnetize millennials to its cause and to then electrify them to action. There are two obvious problems with this approach. The first is that there are only so many millennials to engage. IfNotNow's theory of the case concerning the common narrative that millennials are disengaged from American Jewish institutions is that this distancing is rooted in their generation's moral objections to the Jewish establishment's silence on Israel's occupation of the Palestinian people. This claim strikes me as suspect. It is plainly reductionist and simplistic, ignoring numerous parallel and intersecting social and cultural processes that are causing earthquakes (economic insecurity and political polarization, to name a couple), not just in the American Jewish landscape, but

throughout the whole of American society. Furthermore, it rests upon the dubious assumption that a strong enough proportion of millennials care sufficiently about the issue of the occupation to act upon it. The second obvious problem with this strategy is a risk faced by all movements that are structured along generational lines: its members may simply age out of the organization. As I related in the previous chapter about my own experience at the IfNotNow training that I attended, as a 30-year-old millennial *I felt old*. For these two reasons, if IfNotNow hopes to starve establishment institutions like AIPAC of millennial members, and further hopes to turn a large segment of those same millennials into activists against those organizations, then we can anticipate that it has only a limited amount of time to do so. Thus if IfNotNow has miscalculated its millennial strategy, then AIPAC and its peer organizations—backed by millions of dollars, tens of thousands of faithful followers, and decades of operational experience—can simply wait out the heretical movement as a historical blip.

If IfNotNow fails for either of the reasons outlined above—either being quashed from without or crumbling from within—the next obvious question is what will happen to its members? Some will likely opt out of the great debate altogether, choosing other causes—within and without the Jewish community—to which to dedicate their time and energy. But as we saw in the previous chapter, the members of IfNotNow are uncommonly attached to the Jewish people and to Jewish tradition. For this reason, it seems eminently possible that if IfNotNow disappears, many of its members with follow the path blazed by the leaders of Breira, emerging as a new generation of leaders who

will shape the discourse of American Jewry during the second half of the 21st century.[145] And two organizations seem particularly poised to profit from an influx of supporters should IfNotNow disintegrate: the aforementioned J Street and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). J Street—which in spite of its rejection from the Presidents Conference remains closer to the American Jewish mainstream—would capture those who support Israel's right to exist; JVP—which, in spite of its excommunicated status due to its support for the Boycott-Divest-Sanctions movement, boasts over 475,000 "likes" on Facebook, nearly three times as many as AIPAC and over ten times as many as J Street—would pull in those more ambivalent about the existence of the Jewish state.[146]

Having considered what could happen should IfNotNow fails, we now turn to the third and final trajectory that the heretical movement could follow: the organization could win. Indeed, the last of IfNotNow's core principles articulates their fervent belief that they will do so:

> **We believe that we will win.** We know that we will succeed as long as we have the courage and energy to try. We are not discouraged by our opponents' strength or condemnation. Rather, we see these as a sign that we are on the right track. We are building a flourishing, joyous, liberated Jewish community that stands for freedom and dignity for all. If not now, when?[147]

Despite IfNotNow's tremendous disadvantages in size and resources, it possesses one advantage that we should take seriously: the fact that (as the saying goes), Jews are just

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[145] Matthew Green, "What a Difference 41 Years Makes: A Look at Breira and IfNotNow." Term Paper, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 2017.
[146] These "like" statistics were current on Facebook as of January 28, 2018
[147] "Our Principles," IfNotNow, July 24, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, https://ifnotnowmovement.org/about-us/our-principles/.

like everyone else, only more so. The political and cultural zeitgeist that has seized this country since the election of President Trump has lifted the activist spirits of the American left to the point where one can easily imagine IfNotNow riding that revived wave of progressive activism to a series of impressive victories, just as they did with their #ResistAIPAC demonstration in March 2017.

Indeed, a few weeks after that protest, Peter Beinart wrote an article in *The Forward* comparing IfNotNow to the Black Lives Matter movement, describing the organization as "the Jewish wing of a youth-powered activist awakening that the United States has not seen since the 1960s."[148] In that piece, Beinart argues that if the leadership of the American Jewish establishment continues to ignore IfNotNow, it does so at its own peril:

> … if American Jewish leaders don't like seeing kids who look like — and in some cases actually are — their own children protesting outside their conferences, they have only themselves to blame. It is the organized American Jewish community's moral complacency that has helped create IfNotNow. And it is that complacency that will make it a more and more formidable force in the years to come.[149]

If Beinart's analysis is correct and IfNotNow truly stands a chance of overthrowing the American Jewish establishment's orthodoxy of sacred support for

[148] Peter Beinart, "IfNotNow Is the Jewish Black Lives Matter," *The Forward*, April 4, 2017, IfNotNow Is The Jewish Black Lives Matter Read more: https://forward.com/opinion/368082/ifnotnow-is-the-jewish-black-lives-matter/.
[149] Ibid.

Israel, an obvious question comes to the fore: what would become of American civil Judaism? What might the civil Judaism of a victorious IfNotNow look like?

Based on our analysis of IfNotNow in the previous chapter, we can imagine a few of the dimensions its civil Judaism redux. First and most obvious, the centrality of the state of Israel that characterized Woocher's "sacred survival" and evolved into the orthodoxy of "sacred support" would be decisively extinguished. Israel would cease to be a necessary plausibility structure for the civil Jewish faith. The only thing that we can say with certainty about the new orthodoxy of civil Judaism redux is that it would be unwaveringly anti-occupation. Second, civil Judaism redux would likely embrace Jewish diversity in a way that Woocher's sacred survival did not, empowering queer Jews, Jews of color, and other groups presently marginalized from the American Jewish community to enter the tent, welcomed with pride. Third, civil Judaism redux would likely insist that the lachrymose myth of Jewish history demands of American Jews a universalistic orientation as opposed to a survivalist fear. Finally, given IfNotNow's affinity for traditional Jewish religion, civil Judaism redux would likely extract a new system of symbols and rituals from the Jewish tradition, prizing those elements that represent the values of universal justice and dignity for all.

The civil Judaism redux that I described above will sound like a dream to some and a nightmare to others. Whether it will come to be is of course an unanswerable question. What is certain, however, is that there is something happening here with IfNotNow's heretical challenge to the orthodoxy of civil Judaism and its sacred support for Israel. IfNotNow is making it increasingly difficult to dismiss as irrelevant the American Jewish establishment's problematic approach to the Jewish, especially for

millennials. And because of this, IfNotNow has made it likely that sooner or later all American Jews will have to answer its interrogative mantra:

"Which side are you on?"

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