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BOOKS

Saving the crumbling relationship

Why US and Israeli Jews are more different than we think, but still need each other

By JEFFREY B. KOBRIN

An Israeli national flag and an American one are projected on a part of the walls surrounding Jerusalem's Old City. (File photo: Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

Daniel Gordis offers a succinct analysis of what he terms the “crumbling bonds” between Israel and America in his most recent book *We Stand Divided: The Rift Between American Jews and Israel*. Gordis looks at the historical, political, religious and social differences underlying core values of both Israelis and American Jews, concluding that certain key assumptions that each side has about the other are at best, inaccurate, and at worst, utterly false.

Whereas, for example, the Christian founders of the United States were careful to create a country with a universalistic bent, the founders of the State of Israel, creating a country for Jews by Jews, were intentionally more particularistic in their philosophy and politics. Americans assume that since Israel is a democracy, it is essentially a smaller, “Hebrew-speaking, falafel-eating version” of the United States, but this is not the case. Gordis admits in his introduction that he must – by necessity – paint with a broad brush and thus, attempts to allay the visceral reaction that individual readers (on either side of the ocean) may have when they feel that any of his characterizations or analyses do not apply to them.

Israelis are unafraid, writes Gordis, of rejecting the Jewish reticence to fight their enemies. Gordis is a careful and close reader of history and literature, and offers a plethora of sociological and historical data to support his claims: His deft reading of the illustrations of the Wicked Son in a number of Haggadot, for example, shows that while medieval Jews dressed their Wicked Son as a soldier, the Palmah’s Haggada portrayed him as a “dandy” in a shirt and tie, leaning away from a shovel and a guard tower. On the cover of that same Haggadah was “a young man, the fields of the farm or kibbutz behind him, gazing intently at the rifle in his right hand.” Gordis extends this argument to explain that Americans, by contrast, are less willing to involve themselves in the messiness of war. To this reviewer, however, Gordis begins to editorialize somewhat when he extends this argument to explain American Jews’ relative unwillingness to play a role on the stage of history, to get some rest from what novelist Saul Bellow’s character Humboldt (also cited by Gordis) called “the nightmare” of history.

Israelis, says Gordis, define themselves through their peoplehood; American Jews by their religion. Therein lies part of the issues dividing the two. Gordis is a gifted storyteller, and offers a wonderful anecdotal illustration of this point, claiming that when one asks an Israeli to complete the phrase “Jews and...” Israelis will respond “Arabs,” because Arabs are a people. Israelis, claims Gordis, would not think to say “Jews and Muslims,” even though most Arabs are, in fact, Muslim. American



Jews, on the other hand, would complete the phrase “Jews and...” with the word “Christians,” since Americans tend to think in religious categories. (Indeed, this example resonated with both Israelis and Americans with whom I shared it.)

GORDIS FEELS that a look at the American-Jewish reactions to the initial founding of the State of Israel are telling, and his evidence is compelling. Tracing the reactions across the major denominations during the period of the late 1940s, even prior to the State’s founding, Gordis finds an initial resistance and reluctance to its very existence: At the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in both 1945 and 1946, then-Chancellor Louis Finkelstein refused to allow the singing of “Hatikvah” at the graduation ceremonies on the grounds that a political song had no place at a religious ceremony. During the same period, Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik resisted granting ordination to a student who was an open supporter of the Betar movement. (On the Israeli side, meanwhile, David Ben-Gurion could not understand why American Jews did not make aliyah in droves.)

One of the core differences that Gordis identifies between the ethos of American Jewry and that of Israel is that religion in America “was a vehicle of dissent, and dissent was key to the American project.” For Israelis, on the other hand, “religion was seen as a barrier to creating the new Jew, when the new Jew was key to Israel’s purpose.” This difference is core, and plays out in a number of subtle but vitally distinct ways.

For example, Gordis holds that the fundamental difference in identity-formation between American Jews and Israelis accounts for their different takes on the importance of religion in the public square. Americans therefore are much angrier than Israelis, claims Gordis, when the Prime Minister reneges on a deal for Reform and Conservative Jews to have access to the Western Wall or when illegal asylum-seekers are sent back to their country of origin. Israelis, for their part, are more sanguine – and are confused by the American reaction. “When Israel does something ethnocentric that strikes American Jews as antithetical to fundamental American values,” Gordis writes, “many American Jews reflexively call those steps ‘anti-democratic’... Israelis, in turn,

cannot understand why American Jews, who face overwhelming pressures to assimilate, do not understand the significance of what Israel is desperately trying to preserve.” These are difficult differences to bridge, and they are not helped by a number of challenges that keep Americans from fully appreciating Israeli culture.

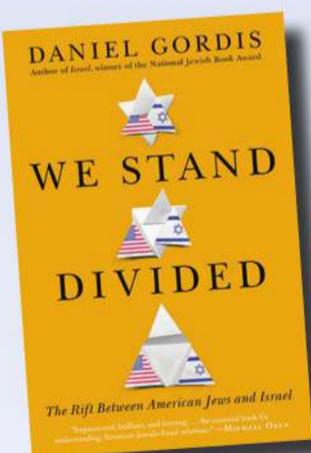
Gordis correctly identifies an ignorance on the part of many American Jews of Israeli history and culture, which stems in no small part from the inability of most American Jews to understand Hebrew. While this is music to the ears of this educator fighting the battle for *Ivrit* education in New York, the issue goes beyond the Hebrew language: Gordis depressingly – but accurately – recounts the incapability of 80% of Birthright Israel applicants to accurately identify Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua and David Grossman, or for 40% of the same applicants to correctly identify the name of the Israeli parliament from the following choices: “(a) The Bet Din (b) The Kotel (c) The Knesset or (d) The Schwarma.” While Gordis admits to a growing Jewish illiteracy on the Israeli side of the ocean as well, the American side has much further to travel to make up for their ignorance, and that much less motivation, he writes, to do so.

“Zionism,” Gordis notes, “has both united and divided the Jewish people in a way that no other cause or movement ever has done.” Harkening back to the initial Zionist dream, Gordis says that Herzl himself understood that without a united Jewish people, “neither Zionism nor a Jewish state made any sense.”

While noting that the strong bond between America and Israel has certainly not existed throughout Israel’s history, Gordis makes a strong argument for saving this relationship. He concludes his analysis with a number of theoretical and practical takeaways for attaining that goal, applications which begin with “a fundamental decision not to let the relationship flounder” and to healing the rift of the book’s title.

Channeling songwriter Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem,” Gordis writes that the cracks in everything are precisely what lets the light in. This relationship offers too much to either side for it to be abandoned. The insight and analysis that Gordis puts forth in this volume is an important step in beginning this vital process.

The writer, a rabbi, is the head of school at the North Shore Hebrew Academy in Great Neck, New York.



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By Daniel Gordis
Ecco
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