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: Alt-Neuland to Alt-New Jew

# Alt-Neuland to Alt-New Jew

• By ZACK BODNER

In 1902, Theodor Herzl wrote his famous novel *Altneuland*, or Old New Land. It depicted a modern Jewish State, a multicultural utopia unbound by traditional Jewish identity. This book and its predecessor, *The Jewish State*, were the pillars of modern Zionism that helped build the State of Israel and envisioned a more vibrant Jewish future.

Much has changed since Herzl's original vision. Now, once again, it's time to look beyond our traditional identities, this time to envision the Jew of the future, the Alt-New Jew.

Today, half the world's Jewish population lives in Israel. The other half still lives in the Diaspora – the largest concentration in North America. Living in very distinct worlds, we've developed very different cultures. In some cases, those cultural traits clash, which has led to intense and painful divisions, from political or religious differences to conflicting notions of vulnerability and our needs for self-defense.

While it may not be possible to overcome the differences that cause such clashes, we can bridge them by forging a new mindset embracing both cultures. The Alt-New Jew takes the best of Diaspora and Israeli Jews, merging into a new identity.

## Old Differences and a new way

Diaspora Jews have been a minority forever, so they have learned how to blend in, to keep their heads down, and to avoid rocking the boat. In America, many Jews have assimilated to the point that they have lost their sixth sense – to see when antisemitism is stirring up. They have become too complacent, too deferential, and too unwilling to prioritize the needs of their own community.

On the other hand, Israelis live in the toughest neighborhood in the world. To survive, they need to be aggressive. They have learned to defend themselves and fight back as a matter of necessity. They've developed sharp elbows – and they've thrived. In America, sometimes Israelis' assertive approach comes off as insensitive and even abrasive, and can ultimately be counterproductive.

The Alt-New Jew carves a new middle ground. It requires Diaspora Jews to become tougher, more assertive, and more willing to prioritize fighting for their own community. And it requires Israeli Jews to become a bit more patient, more diplomatic, more understanding that there is value to working the system and playing the long game.

## Better together, post-October 7

Since the October 7 massacre, American Jews have primarily supported Israel by raising money. They've done that well for 75 years, and this was no different. They raised nearly \$1 billion for Israel.

Yet Israelis living in the US worried that all that money would take too long to go through institutions and arrive in Israel, where it's needed immediately. So they went a different route.

They started buying equipment and sending it on chartered planes directly to the soldiers and kibbutzim. They funded directly for small organizations on the ground. They shared Google Docs and created WhatsApp groups to communicate with Israelis stranded abroad to get them back home.

In many cases, it worked because Israelis knew what they needed. But just as often, the equipment didn't match what soldiers and kibbutzniks required; things got held up in customs; and donors couldn't get information about how their funds were being used.

This moment showed us that Israelis could teach American Jews a new type of hands-on philanthropy. There was an opportunity to be more effective by merging Israeli immediacy with American attention to important details.

Likewise, when Israelis in the US wanted local political leaders to condemn antisemitism, they came in like a freight train. No one could stop them; they were hurt and angry and didn't understand it was so difficult.

They built up grassroots advocacy groups, they felt that American Jews weren't aggressive or quick enough and demanded that local city councils and school boards issue unequivocal resolutions supporting Israel and condemning Jew hatred.

When the statements didn't go far enough, created false equivalencies, or took too long to pass, Israelis were upset. They couldn't understand why yelling at non-Jewish, uninformed, and confused local leadership wasn't working.

Meanwhile, American Jews who've been on the ground, developing political relationships for generations, and using diplomatic language, knew that burning bridges by screaming at politicians was not the best way to get lasting results.

## Israeli 'chutzpah' & Diaspora 'sekhel'

The Alt-New Jew combines the best of Israel and the Diaspora: Israeli courage with Diaspora wisdom; Israeli directness with Diaspora diplomacy; Israeli pride with Diaspora pluralism. The Alt-New Jew does not see power and principle as opposites but as partners. The Alt-New Jew embodies both *sekhel* and *chutzpah* (discernment and guts).

The Alt-New Jew sees the bravery of IDF soldiers signing up to serve additional tours in Gaza and the immediacy of volunteers dropping everything to rebuild shattered communities, and wants to bring that spirit to American Jews.

The Alt-New Jew sees the ingenuity of American Jews crafting spiritually meaningful new ways of doing Judaism that inspire young people, respect women and LGBTQ Jews, and bring interfaith families into the fold, and wants to bring that spirit to Israeli Jews.

To actualize this Alt-New Jew, both Israeli and American Jews must ask themselves some tough questions.

Are American Jews clinging too tightly to our need to be accepted by the mainstream? Have we lost our ability to be the iconoclasts who resist groupthink and are willing to stand alone? Are we too self-righteous to accept that Israelis, living in the scariest neighborhood in the world, may need to be a little tougher and harder-nosed than us?

Are Israelis holding on too tightly to the conviction that they are constantly vulnerable to annihilation? Are secular Israelis so turned off by all religion that they're unwilling to show their children the beauty of basic holidays, rituals, and Jewish wisdom? Are they still terrified that if their children spend time in the Diaspora, they will forget who they are, assimilate, and bring an end to their Jewish heritage?

Grappling with the idea that someone else's way might be better is challenging, but immensely valuable. After decades of living in our respective environments, we may both be too afraid to let go of the past. But we must if we are to create a new way forward. Only then will we be able to envision a safer, stronger, more vibrant future: the future of the Alt-New Jew.

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