I’m grateful to Hillel Halkin, Evelyn Gordon, and Jordan Chandler Hirsch for their enlightening responses to [my essay](https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2017/05/why-many-american-jews-are-becoming-indifferent-or-even-hostile-to-israel/). All four of us entertain slightly differing views on the current disconnection between American Jews and Israel, and ascribe to it somewhat disparate causes, but we’re in agreement not only that the divide is widening but (in contradistinction to many other commentators) that the principal reason for this state of affairs lies not in Israel’s policies but in what is happening in American Jewish life.

In approaching that latter phenomenon, [Jordan Hirsch](https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2017/05/how-the-ebb-and-flow-of-american-politics-affects-american-jewish-attitudes-toward-israel/) adopts a fascinating angle: the extent to which American Jewish sentiment about Israel can be tied to the vicissitudes of American foreign policy. As he notes, the more thoroughly foreign-policy thinking in Washington and liberal opinion more generally have been penetrated by the view of Israel as morally compromised and strategically burdensome, the more tentative has become American Jewish support for the Jewish state. But attitudes change, and Hirsch sees grounds for a certain optimism: “even as Democratic sympathy for Israel has plummeted,” he writes, “Republican sympathy has skyrocketed.” Not only that, but “the traditional and deep-seated moral and strategic alignment between America and Israel, and between the American people and Israel, still very much exists.”

Those statements are undoubtedly true. And had we been holding this discussion a year ago, I would have shared Hirsch’s hopefulness. Today, I’m not so sure. Some 150 days into the Trump administration, the president’s foreign-policy strategy is still unclear, and it seems difficult to say much about the Republican party itself with any degree of certainty.

Where Israel is concerned, the president did assert in no uncertain terms that he sees it as a strategic ally, and in various ways has acted accordingly—but also not. (Examples include the waffling on moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and the agreement to provide Saudi Arabia with $110 billion in military hardware, dwarfing the recent ten-year $38-billion deal with Israel.) Moreover, so reviled is Trump among Democrats and liberals (and some Republicans) that, should he end up pursuing a coherently activist and pro-Israel agenda in foreign policy, the effect might ironically be to exacerbate rather than retard American Jewish distancing from the Jewish state.

In brief, despite Hirsch’s edifying and provocative lessons drawn from the historical “ebbs and flows” of American foreign policy, I find myself less optimistic than he concerning the near- or medium-term prospects for a reversal among American Jews of their current disaffection with the Jewish state. And my pessimism is only reinforced when I consider the divergent *cultural* trends between America and Israel that fuel the disaffection—trends to which I devoted a great part of my essay.

On this point I also mark a difference between my view and that of [Evelyn Gordon](https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2017/05/how-a-changing-american-liberalism-is-pulling-american-jews-away-from-israel/), who on the whole agrees with me that there is, in her words, “little prospect of a rapprochement between the two communities without a dramatic change in American Jewish attitudes toward liberalism, toward Judaism, or toward both.” Still, Gordon questions whether the divergent cultural traits pinpointed in my essay are really of the very essence, or rather, at least in the American case, of relatively recent vintage and therefore conceivably reversible.

About one of those divergent social and cultural traits—namely, American universalism versus Israeli particularism—Gordon writes:

It’s true, as Gordis notes, that unlike Israel, America was not founded to serve a particular ethnic group. Nevertheless, throughout most of its history, America has viewed itself and functioned as a nation-state. Thus, despite promoting supranational projects like the European Union, which entail forfeitures of sovereignty, America has shunned any such project for itself, preferring jealously to preserve its own sovereignty.

And on another cultural divergence, that between voluntary societies (like the U.S.) or involuntary societies (like Israel), Gordon counters my example of military conscription by pointing out that “Until 1973, when the U.S. abolished the draft, most American men did military service, just like in Israel.”

It’s true enough that America has always seen itself as a nation-state, but that has little bearing on whether it has also seen itself as committed to a particular ethnicity. We know the answer: in this respect, America has always differed from Europe, whose history is replete with examples of nation-states that also saw themselves as tied to particular ethnicities and as embodying particular ethno-national identities. Nowadays, of course, things are different: Europe consists of many nation-states that at least claim no longer to be bound to such ties or such identities. In the U.S., the transnational impulse is more muted but still very influential in the thinking and attitudes of many American elites—as Gordon’s tale of her alma mater’s evolving slogan (from “Princeton in the nation’s service,” to “. . . and in the service of all nations,” to, most recently, “. . . and the service of humanity”) vividly attests.

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Regarding military service, I’ll just note that in the U.S. conscription did not begin until the Civil War, was abolished between the World Wars and at other times as well, and is no longer in effect. America may not be as voluntarist a society as I suggest, but the history of conscription is not evidence of that.

These quibbles aside, Evelyn Gordon’s forceful dissection of the many ways in which American Jews “have chosen to follow the dictates of contemporary liberalism,” a liberalism as antithetical (in her word) to the Jewish tradition as to the American political tradition, is bracing in the extreme. At the end of her remarks, she does express the belief that, on the American scene at large, today’s liberal trends can be reversed, for the simple reason that “modern liberalism itself is too radical a departure from centuries of political and religious tradition to be viable over the long run.” She is, however, “far less certain that the needed change will occur in time to save American Jews’ relationship with Israel.”

Sadly, I agree.

Hillel Halkin and I are [similarly at one](https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2017/05/the-vanishing-of-the-jewish-collective/) on the extent and gravity of the divide between American Jews and Israel. But in the end, he asks, how much does it really matter?

The distance between Israeli and American Jews is growing? Let it grow. It’s natural. The two populations live in different worlds, speak different languages, face different problems, challenges, and dangers, have different worries, fears, and life experiences, adhere to different values, and think of themselves and their surroundings in different ways. . . . Most American Jews are not going to spend much of their time thinking about Israel, and even fewer Israelis are going to think about American Jews. *But so what?*

As for the fear that weakening Jewish support could adversely affect American policy toward Israel, Halkin concludes: “Israel has survived a great deal in the first 69 years of its existence and [even] prospered. . . . It will survive the weakening of American Jewish support for it, too.”

Since I believe that the weakening of American Jewish support for Israel is inevitable, I hope that Halkin is right. But “survival” is not the only measure that matters. The question is not only *whether* Israel will be but what kind of country it will be—and here I remain sufficiently American to resonate powerfully to Thomas Jefferson’s words in his last public letter, in which, referring to the Declaration of Independence, he wrote:

May it be to the world what I believe it will be (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men . . . to assume the blessings and security of self-government.

Israel’s leaders, and particularly its better-educated statesmen of an earlier era, were fully conscious of the degree to which America’s light was a beacon of inspiration to *them*. Indeed, a little-known fact is that the first draft of Israel’s own Declaration of Independence was written with the help of an American Jew named Harry Davidowitz. His draft, which David Ben-Gurion ultimately edited extensively, began:

WHEREAS this Holy Land has been promised by the Lord God to our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to their seed after them, and

WHEREAS our ancient Jewish People had for a millennium and a half its State in this Holy Land

AND WHEREAS the ancient Jewish State in this land ceased to exist after the destruction of our Holy Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman Legions, and the exile from Palestine of the greater part of our people and their dispersal amongst the nations of the world

AND WHEREAS throughout the centuries of their exile our people has suffered loss of life and property by the hands of their many oppressors such as no people has been called upon to endure since time began, culminating in the cruel extermination of one third of our people at the hands of the enemies of mankind since the outbreak of the Second World War. . . .

The draft concluded:

NOW THEREFORE, WE, the Representatives of the Jewish People in solemn gathering assembled, and appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name and by Authority of the Jewish People, solemnly publish and declare the Establishment in Palestine as of right of a Free and Independent Jewish State. . . .

AND for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we do in the name and of behalf of our Jewish people, mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our Sacred Honor.

Striking as are the Jeffersonian borrowings and echoes in this document, it is but one example of the degree to which many of Israel’s moments of greatness have been colored by the model of America. “So what?” Hillel Halkin might respond: the influence is still there to be drawn, and American Jews are no longer needed to do the drawing. To which my own response is that American influence comes in many forms.

Within a mile or so from where I live, south Jerusalem is peppered with institutions that were formed by Americans and are financed largely by Americans, and that constitute a pipeline of thoughtfulness, intellectual sophistication, and level-headedness. They include the Shalom Hartman Institute, Pardes Institute, Shalem College, the Mandel Leadership Institute, the Israel Democracy Institute, the Pelekh Girls High School, the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, and more.

These institutions, which also include innovative synagogues of all varieties, are coloring Israeli life countrywide—and enriching Jewish life in the Diaspora as well. Will upcoming generations of American Jews—the generations that are more or less gradually walking away—create or support institutions of this or comparable ilk? It is hard to know, but not difficult to guess.

Perhaps my own sadness, in obvious distinction to Halkin’s “so what?,” lies in the recognition that we and many of our closest friends and colleagues live in Israel because we were raised in an American Jewish community that exuded love for the Jewish state. True, that is a matter of heart rather than of reason, or ideology. True, too, reason and ideology played central roles in the building of the Jewish state. But ideologies change and collapse, and cold reason would have dictated that the state could never have come into being. No less central to its building were the qualities of heart and of love that dwelled deep in the souls of the women and men who built it.

That is why I cannot be as nonchalant as Hillel Halkin. To me, the Zionist project is all about love and about heart, and the mere specter of an American Jewish community bereft of those qualities—of devotion to what is without doubt and by far the most exceptional Jewish enterprise in 2,000 years—strikes me as nothing less than heartbreaking.