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Why Israel Is Losing the Liberals

By Leonard Fein

You squirm, you wriggle, you deny, you denounce the methodology, but eventually there's no escape: The data show quite decisively that here in America, Israel is considerably more popular among conservatives than among liberals.

The most recent confirmation of that comes from the highly regarded Global Attitudes Project of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press; their findings are based on a survey taken during the fighting in Gaza.

Overall, if you're a fan of Israel, the news isn't terrible. Forty-nine percent of Americans are more sympathetic to Israel than to the Palestinians; only 11% prefer the Palestinians. That's more than a 4-to-1 advantage for Israel among those who have an opinion. (The results in Europe are wildly different.)

It's when Pew breaks down the results that the pro-Israel leftward-leaning among us begin to cringe. Here in America, Israel has a 7-to-1 advantage among conservatives, a nearly 5-to-1 advantage among moderates — but only a 3-to-2 advantage among liberals. Among Republicans, Israel is preferred by 69%; among independents, by 47%; by Democrats, by 42%. By any measure, these are huge differences. Do they matter? And: How can they be explained?

There's history, of course, beginning as early as 1967. The '67 war was as much a morality play as a military confrontation, and in the weeks of run-up to the war, it was clear, worldwide, that Israel was Good and the Arabs were Evil. But once the war was over, Israel lost its status as the sympathetic underdog; it became the mighty Occupying Power. Over the years, it has confirmed that position many times, most recently in Gaza.

Israel plainly wants to be simultaneously Sparta and Athens; in some important ways it is. But that's a frightfully difficult thing to pull off for decades on end. One day a carnivore, the next day a vegetarian? And many liberals, whatever their daily diets, are celebrants of vegetarianism.

A more precise history would take account of the internal politics of the New Left and the emergence in the '60s and '70s of the Black Power movement — and, years later, of neoconservatism, with its disproportionately Jewish intellectual elite.

For those of us with memories of earlier days, memories of the kibbutz and the Histadrut, memories of Israel before it became a client state of America, people who once, perhaps naively, imagined Israel as a Scandinavian-style nation in the Middle East if not an actual socialist utopia, there's been biting disappointment. But it's not the disappointment that underlies the Pew statistics, nor even the history. Most liberals, after all, still “prefer” Israel; many work actively on behalf of an Israel more in keeping with earlier hopes.

But more than a few reflect a persistent ideological problem that goes back to the early days of Zionism. Let's call it a widespread case of Inflated Universalism.

Many Jews on the left (as also many others) have always felt queasy about nationalism, vastly preferring to imagine a post-nationalist world of universal brotherhood. Their brave new world, a world without boundaries, was rudely shaken and rendered not only absurd but also unseemly by the Holocaust. In the wake of the horror, denunciation of Jewish nationalism — Zionism — was virtually unthinkable. And even if Jews offended by nationalism could somehow still think the thought, they could hardly speak it out loud.

Over these last few decades, however, there's been a reversion. Israel's history can easily (if simplistically) be read as confirmation of the early anti-nationalist conviction. Is not the right in Israel on the rise, the often xenophobic right? Are not Israel's principal defenders in the United States the Cheneys and the Hagees and the sulking neocons? Has the settlement project not been a disaster? Can a liberal American Jew easily accommodate the fact — so say the polls just now — of a Netanyahu government, or of an Avigdor Lieberman whose party may win as many as 18 seats, eclipsing Labor?

It is hard to persuade thoughtful people that this is merely a blip in an otherwise exemplary story of democratic development. We now know that the settlement project was not

an instance of clever subterfuge, of nimble, ideology-driven settlers outsmarting an overly bureaucratic government. We know that the government itself — Labor and Likud alike — was an active sponsor of settlements that repeatedly and massively violated both Israeli law and international law.

This we know from a still-classified report by reserve Brigadier General Baruch Spiegel, the most exhaustive and detailed report on the subject that has been done. The report, which was obtained by the Israeli daily Haaretz, shows, inter alia, that in about 75% of all the settlements, construction has been carried out without the appropriate permits or contrary to the permits that were issued. It also shows that in more than 30 settlements, extensive construction of buildings and infrastructure (roads, schools, synagogues, yeshivas and even police stations) has been carried out on private lands belonging to Palestinian West Bank residents. All this not merely with government acquiescence but with active government participation.

That does not mean the hyper-universalists were right all along. It does mean that Israel has played into their hands. It does make defending the core Zionist belief — call it “benign nationalism” — considerably more difficult.

The hyper-universalists will not go away, but more than higher approval ratings among liberals are here at stake. The foundational aspiration of the Zionist project is at stake.