
DR. DAVID GELERNTER: Thank you. The paradox is that Jews seem so conscientiously and enthusiastically opposed to their own interests. It’s been accepted for some time that a great big strong government and high taxes are bad on the whole for prosperous American Jews. But that’s only an economic argument and whatever else Jews are, no one has ever accused them of being practical.

The large, leftward bias in the Jewish community which is just a matter of fact has become far more charged in recent times in an era when liberals or left liberals are increasingly apt to be hostile to Israel. The Obama Administration’s views on Israel and its soft-ball policy towards the Iranian regime are no surprise: they were telegraphed in advance. Yet, of course, American Jews voted for Obama overwhelmingly.

But it seems to me that the real trouble facing the American Jewish community today is not whether the subject drinks Democratic alcohol or Republican alcohol, but the fact that he’s an alcoholic. He seems to be drinking to forget, and at times even to be drinking himself to death. The American Jewish community, broadly speaking, shows an increasing obsession with politics, and, in particular, liberal politics. And it’s the obsession that seems
to me the real problem. I’ll argue that the Jewish community comes by its liberalism honestly – though not because of the idea of social justice invented by the prophets or, I think, anything about social justice per se. Rather, because of the way Judaism curves spiritual space-time and makes a ball roll inevitably in the liberal direction. The mistake many Jews make nowadays is in figuring out which of the two major parties actually is liberal; which has plausible concrete plans that will make this nation better?

But in any case, engagement with politics is inevitable given the way Judaism has shaped the Jewish community. That shaping influence lives on despite the fact that most American Jews today know little about Judaism. It’s passed from parent to child, or has been so far, at the basic level of thought styles, attitudes to the world, subtle but deep-lying cues and clues. To put it another way, the Jewish community is still shaped by Judaism the way a fossil retains the shape of a once living creature.

To start, I’d like to talk about two motifs of Judaism I’ll call “face-to-faceness” and “here-and-nowness.” They both speak powerfully for engagement, including political engagement. Face-to-faceness runs all through Judaism. It predisposes Jews to look at each other and the world-at-large and themselves in the eye, to approach even God Himself in this way. We see the theme appear as a single famous word, a celebrated word, when God says of Adam, “I will make him a helper,” kenegdo. The Hebrew word kenegdo has no English equivalent but means in essence, “over and against him”; a reasonable translation is, “I will make him a helper who stands face-to-face with him,” on the creation of Eve in Genesis 2. The Biblical and later Jewish views have the person face-to-face with his universe starting with his spouse.

But before that a Jew must engage, so-to-speak, with himself. This is an important theme in the Bible, especially in the stories of the patriarchs and of Moses. I’ll mention just one; there are many possible examples.

Jacob struggles all night with a mysterious opponent; it may be a man, it may be an angel or the Lord himself. The story can’t quite bring this antagonist into focus. But the meaning of the all-night struggle is clear when we notice that this is the night right before Jacob’s reunion with a brother he hasn’t seen in years whom he’s wronged deeply and then run away from, whom he has every reason to feel guilty towards and to fear. The all night struggle is an externalized nightmare. Indeed in the Biblical world, imagining and
dreaming are much closer to each other than they usually are today. This is an important topic I’ve pursued elsewhere, the evolution of thought styles, the literary use of dream logic.

But the point of Jacob’s struggle is for Jacob to face up to himself, look himself in the eye, to struggle with and finally defeat his fear, confront his guilt and choose at last to go forward and no longer to run away. The Bible’s heroes are expected to face up to themselves, to engage with and not avoid hard issues.

In fact, they don’t hesitate to confront God himself. The ongoing argument between Jews and God is one of the main intellectual and spiritual threads of Jewish history over the centuries. In a well-known Biblical story, Abraham confronts God over his plans to destroy the thoroughly corrupt city of Sodom. Surely, Abraham believes, there must be a few innocent people in the city. “Will you actually,” he demands of God, “sweep away the just with the wicked? The judge of the whole Earth not doing justice?” Jews are taught by passages like this famous passage to engage face-to-face.

One of the most remarkable of all engagements or encounters in Jewish literature occurs in the Talmudic tractate Menachot. It’s a confrontation not with God, but with doubt. To put it another way, the rabbis imagine that God is forced to confront Himself. Moses and God are imagined in conversation. God has just shown Moses a vision of Rabbi Akiba, the greatest figure in the Talmud, martyred hideously, torn to death by the Romans. Moses asks God in anguish, “Master of the Universe, this is the Torah this the reward?” And all God can answer is, “Silence. That too has occurred to me.” Sometimes, the Talmud concedes, even God cannot believe in God. This is intellectual and spiritual engagement in the deepest sense; a religious nation face-to-face with the almost insuperably difficult problem of theodicy: God’s justice in an evil universe.

So, again, Judaism insists on your encountering and not turning away from your wife or your husband and yourself and your doubts and your inner struggles and your God. The atmosphere of Judaism is permeated by the suggestive, mildly psychogenic fragrance of encounter.
The whole structure of Judaism tilts like a mountainside towards “face-to-faceness.” And it’s no surprise that Jews got caught up in all sorts of ways; an important one being their tendency in modern America to look at political problems head-on and not to flinch or turn aside or shrug them off; or at least this is how they intend to act.

Let’s consider now more briefly a different but complimentary motif which I’ll call “here-and-nowness”; face-to-faceness deals broadly with human relations; here-and-nowness has to do with grappling with society or the world-at-large. It centers on Judaism’s stubborn refusal to be pinned down on predictions about the afterlife.

Judaism insists that this world must matter and that life is God’s greatest blessing. Here-and-nowness pulls in the same direction as face-to-faceness in inducing Jews, broadly speaking, to be engaged. A place to start is George Orwell writing, with his usual acuity, that a crucial problem of the modern age is how to restore the religious attitude while accepting death as final. Concrete hopes or fears about life after death have certainly been one force helping to keep religion aloft. But Orwell’s words don’t deal fairly with Judaism; of course, they weren’t intended to. The rabbis tend to be vague in discussing life after death; Judaism smudges over its Eschatological promises, and stubbornly recurs to the problem of this life in this world—here-and-nowness.

One of Judaism’s central beliefs is that the Messiah will come in historical time and create happiness and holiness here on Earth. And Jews traditionally regard it as their own special responsibility to bring the Messiah on the day of God’s full and perfect emergence from the chrysalis of human history. When Israel will successfully have embodied God on Earth, then the way will be open for the Messiah. Jews believe that they themselves must bring him.

The Talmud in tractate Sanhedrin tells us a story: one day Rabbi Joshua ben Levi discovers the Messiah on Earth sitting among the wretched poor at the city gate as one of them. The Rabbi, asks, “When will you come?” The Messiah answers, “Today, if you will only listen to his voice.” Here-and-nowness means the daily expectation of the start of the Messianic age, conditioned on the right behavior of the Jews themselves, standing as they do between God and man – a position of the greatest peril, because for those who want to kill God, who don’t want to live under God’s eye, so-to-speak, in the full glare of God’s
expectations, God himself is not a candidate for murder but the Jews are always available as a proxy. Here-and-nowness means the Jews can’t postpone an inevitable confrontation. The central expression of here-and-nowness is Judaism’s view of life as God’s greatest blessing. “Today I call Heaven and Earth to witness,” as Moses says in his final discourse to Israel, “life and death have I laid out before you, the blessing and the curse; choose life and live, you and your children.” These words ring out in a great musical peal throughout Judaism.

An important blessing is called the Shehecheyanu, “Blessed Art Thou, Lord Our God, King of the Universe who has granted us life, sustained us and allowed us to reach this moment.” In other words, thank God I am alive to have this experience. The blessing is recited when the Shofar is blown on Rosh Hashanah, on New Years, at the start of the Festival of Sukkot, when lighting the first Hanukkah candles and at other holidays; and when you move into a new house, taste some fruit for the first time in its season and at other festive events. Practicing Jews recite it spontaneously when they reach some significant moment they’ve hoped to reach. Here-and-nowness means that life is measured out by a series of sacred and blessed occasions large and small. Shehecheyanu requires us to look life in the face and to acknowledge its beauty.

It’s well-known that the Aramaic doxology called the Kaddish, recited in memory of the dead, never mentions death; it petitions God only for peace – peace in the largest sense, peace of mind and soul. Even more important are the last words to be spoken by an observant Jew at the brink of death; they ask no forgiveness, pardon or absolution, have nothing to do with any hope of the afterlife – in fact, they don’t address God at all. They address the Jewish nation in the words of the micro-creed called the Shema: “Hear Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”

So I return to the question of political engagement. Judaism slants in the direction of engagement and confrontation face-to-face, right here and right now. These ideas and attitudes are, I believe, woven into the deepest layer of the Jewish mind and soul; the layer that expresses itself in words and looks and gestures that communicate beneath the level of rational language, at the edge of the subliminal.
Up to a point, Jews can’t help being liberal, but the problem is not so much liberalism today as obsessive liberalism. Today’s American Jews too often fail to evaluate liberal politics because liberalism has become too important to them. A drunk doesn’t care about the quality of the liquor. This obsession also has the ironic effect of making Jews feel less comfortable and at home in this nation, their own nation.

Why call it an obsession? American Jews have been overwhelmingly on the left, after all, for the last 100 years and more. This diagnosis of obsession is just my own impression, but it seems to me that there is less thinking and discussing and more asserting in American Jewish politics than ever before. It’s remarkable how unwilling so many people are to budge from – or for that matter, even argue about or discuss – approved communal opinions on global climate change, for example, or the Iraq War or the role of religion in American public life. There seems in the American Jewish community to be increasingly less excitement about the good to be gained by America’s going one way and more grim foreboding about the catastrophe that will follow if we choose the other; catastrophe for the nation or mankind or the whole planet. There seems to be more ethical posturing, as if to question the climate change movements’ questionable scientific conclusions were more or less the same as endorsing toxic waste and oil spills. As if to admire George W. Bush were outright treason.

There seems to be less and less good-natured derision for the other side and more grim, taken-for-granted contempt. And too often contempt seems to pass into outright hatred: causeless, baseless hatred for such heroes and heroines of the right as George Bush, Dick Cheney or Sarah Palin.

And forming the background to one’s worries about the dangers of obsession is the long, long history of the Jewish people, in which they’ve shown a gift for zeal and zealotry, for better or worse; and the rabbis remarkable verdict in Talmudic tractate Yoma on the ultimate reason why God allowed Rome to destroy the temple in Jerusalem: because, say the rabbis, of the Jewish community’s sin of sin’at cheenam causeless hatred within the community.

Of course, you see this anger and bitterness and sometimes hatred not just among Jewish liberals by any means, but among many liberals of all sorts. But the Jews, despite their miniscule numbers, contribute with their usual enthusiasm and spiritual intensity. It’s the
obsession with liberalism, not liberalism itself, that’s dangerous to the Jewish community and unhealthy for America-at-large. Bad for America insofar as it increases the bitterness with which politics is waged. Bad for the Jewish community in that you can’t evaluate liberalism properly when you’ve got it pressed in a bear hug, nor can you evaluate conservatism while you’re slipping all over the mat doing your best to wrestle it to the ground and jump up and down on its chest.

Where does this obsession come from? I think Norman Podhoretz is right to argue in his recent book that liberalism has, for much of the last century, played an increasingly religious role for the many American Jews who have allowed Judaism itself to languish, to grow fainter, paler and further away year after year. After all, Jews are naturally religious; a trait they share with all other human beings. And in an era of declining or disappearing faith among most Jews, it’s only natural then that an idealistic liberalism should step into the breach.

But there seems to be another component to the situation, another contributing source of the liberal obsession among Jews. Liberalism, it seems to me, is always made of two elements: idealism and hostility. An idealistic wish to make things better and hostility towards an establishment (as it used to be called) that’s apparently determined to keep things as they are. Jews, of course, have been important in many respects in the development of modern liberalism, and they have a special reason for hostility to the powers that be; namely, a long history of savage persecution.

Today’s liberal obsession has emerged, I think, the way the stars do at night, not because they brighten but because everything else fades. It’s not only the Jewish religion that’s fading out of most American Jewish lives. It seems to me there’s a simultaneously falling back of many other things that used to occupy American Jews – that used to occupy the public agenda, the public lives of American Jews. The direct emotional connection with Israel – the intense feeling of shared peril that the War of Independence, and later the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, brought about – is fading. Of course, younger people don’t remember these events.

The art world, painting and literature and music, which once generated such intense fascination and engagement among American Jews has fallen back also – a tragedy for
the country-at-large, and (I think) a tragedy for the world. At any rate, politics grows more important more or less by accident. Residual Jewish uneasiness and belligerence is concentrated in the world of politics by default as so many important topics fade from the public agenda of the American Jewish community.

Now, American Jews today are, of course, thoroughly integrated into the intellectual elite and into many different versions of the power elite. In modern America, Jews are the establishment, or at any rate, are members in good standing. Most Jews are no longer able to resist feeling at home in America. But touchiness or wariness or uneasiness with mainstream America remains; it’s stubborn, it has lots of history behind it.

Among Gentiles this attitude is something so illogical and unexpected, they often fail to see it altogether. But it makes perfect sense to Jews, although they don’t like to acknowledge its existence. This persistent uneasiness inevitably flashes over, sometimes, as outright hostility: hostility to the American mainstream, whatever that is exactly, and maybe to politicians who seem especially mainstream like perhaps George W. Bush or Sarah Palin. At any rate, this uneasiness, like chronic low level pain, is an important if subtle part, I think, of the Jewish liberal obsession.

How does the story end? How will the lingering proud belligerence, the hostility that feeds not healthy liberalism but an unhealthy liberal obsession, finally disappear?

One way is for the American Jewish community itself to disappear. And today it shows signs of melting like old snow into warm American earth. But there’s another way the story could end, an ending that leaves the community intact and stronger, that makes history pivot on a momentous event: the fundamental shift in attitudes in the decades following the Second World War of many Christian communities towards Jews and Judaism.

The connections between classical Israeli civilization and the creation of America are especially thorough-going and profound. America as the new Israel was a fundamental idea in colonial and again in revolutionary America.
For American Jews to be proud of America, specifically as Jews, as members of the senior nation of the western world, of the oldest continuous cultural thread in western history, for Jews to be proud of America as a nation inspired by and founded on classical Hebrew literature and civilization, to take a parents’ or maybe grandparents’ pride in the American nation – for Jews to feel this way has never been in the cards. But this sort of pride will come, I believe, and won’t necessarily change Jewish left wing tendencies but might well take the edge off; might lower the temperature by doing away gradually with the element of hostile obsession.

It would be even stranger for Jews to take a parents’ pride in Christianity. Christian persecution was a dominating fact of Jewish history for more than a thousand-and-a-half years. And to be absolutely frank, Jews never liked Christianity that much to begin with. Before the two communities were bitter enemies, they were intense competitors. But none of that changes the fact that Christianity is a dialect of Judaism; that wherever Christianity goes, Hebrew poetry goes – the Psalms go and Hebrew prophecy — and Jewish ideas and ideals.

This sort of future of wary and well-justified unease replaced by family feelings of pride in a noble child’s accomplishments would confirm Jews in their Judaism and Christians in their Christianity and Americans, all Americans, in their American-ness. It would lower the obsessive heat that’s forced Jewish liberalism to a boil. It would allow Jews to be, at any rate, more thoughtful and reflective leftists. It might even give them a kind of a permission they sometimes feel is lacking today, the permission of the nation-at-large and especially of their own Jewish ancestors to become Republicans and Conservatives. And that, I think, would be good for the country and especially good for the Jews.

MR. CROMARTIE: Rabbi Saperstein was named by Newsweek magazine in 2009 the most influential rabbi in the country. And he was described in the Washington Post as the “quintessential religious lobbyist on Capitol Hill.” He has a book coming out soon called Racing with God: The Uses and Abuses of Religion in American Elections.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: There are four points that David made and I’m just going to list them. Only one will I talk about in my formal remarks but I list them in case people are interested afterwards for a different take on it.
The first is, to what extent is liberalism a substitute for normative Judaism, for religion in the life of the American Jewish community? The second is a question of contemptuousness on the part of liberals towards conservatives. And maybe I’m too close to it. I simply don’t sense that. I’ve never sensed that in any manifestation that I’ve heard. It may happen individually but not as a phenomenon; whereas very often, perhaps because conversely we’re the victims of it, I hear it very often on the right, who out of their astonishment and disappointment in the blindness of the predominately liberal culture really does convey a sense of “they just don’t get it” heard in often contemptuous terms here. Third, and not clear to me, if religion is fading away in American Jewish life, why it is self-evident that ideological liberalism would substitute for that rather than ideological conservatism. I think that’s the question before us and I’m going to try to answer it. And the question about American Jewish involvement in art…it’s fading. I would only say that in terms of Jews being represented in the arts, there’s not been, I don’t think, any noticeable diminishment. And when you look at whether you’re talking about Jewish scholarship, the number of departments and programs in Jewish studies across the globe, Jewish art, Jewish literature, Jewish dance, Jewish music – this is a golden age here. We’re seeing things now that dwarf anything that we saw in the lifetimes of our ancestors. Yiddish stage perhaps, yes; but here in terms of where we are right now a century later from the height of this, it really is a golden age.

So the three questions that I’d like to address are: one, how does the Jewish tradition see how it ought to be applied to a non-Jewish state? Secondly, where does the Jewish passion for social justice come from, this passion that plays such an important role in providing the self-identification of many Jews, much to the chagrin of those who see that as a substitute for religion. And third, what is the source and implications of the Jewish passion for liberalism?

So let me start with the first question. When the Catholic bishops put out their pastoral letters, it seemed to me the power of those pastoral letters rested in the Catholic belief that there are two sources of authority. One is Catholic doctrine in dogma and the second is natural law. Those pastoral letters began by exploring what was the wisdom that Catholic doctrine and dogma offered to nuclear disarmament, protecting God’s creation, economic justice and its two letters on economic justice. It did not then suggest that
Catholic doctrine dogma should be applied to America, nor that there’s an inherent Catholic notion that it is binding upon a non-Catholic state like America; but rather, through natural law norms, it would be possible to take the moral values that underlay the Catholic view and apply it in terms that would be accessible to everyone, whether they were Catholic or they weren’t Catholic.

And they did this with, I thought, very strong compelling moral argumentation. But it was going to succeed – not because God ordained the Catholic doctrine on America, on a non-Catholic state, but because of the moral power and suasion in a free marketplace of ideas in America.

That is the approach of the Jewish tradition as well. Jewish law, *halakhah*— that’s the Hebrew term— comes from a covenant at Sinai. “Covenant” is a fancy name for a contract and a contract can only be binding upon those people who enter into it themselves directly or through someone designated as an agent.

The great organizing principle of Jewish identity throughout the ages traditionally was that those Jews who stood at Sinai stood in constructive agency for all the generations of Jews to come. And, therefore, every Jewish child is born into the covenant; others can voluntarily join it, but every Jewish child is born into the covenant that was accepted at Sinai for them. Yet when that child reaches maturity, that child has to affirmatively act to continue to accept the covenant in their lives. They do so either constructively by living in accordance with the laws, or in the last 1,000 years more commonly, through ceremonies that we know as Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah which literally means, “I am a child of the Commandments.” It is the affirmation of the Commandments in their lives.

Who wasn’t at Sinai? Everybody else. There is no concept in Jewish law that Jewish law is binding upon non-Jewish societies, non-Jewish individuals. That is not to say that the Jewish tradition isn’t a universal tradition. One can argue it is the great universal tradition with universal norms.

Where do they come from? Well, they come from many different sources, but not from the law itself. They come from other covenants that are binding.
Noah stood in constructive agency for all of humanity. And, therefore, we had the Noahide laws, the seven laws the rabbis read into the story of Noah (which I’ll return to in a moment) that were kind of like the first Geneva Convention in human history of how an ethical moral society should act.

But it is in what we call the *Aggada*, the interpretive philosophical stories, moral aphorisms, poetry of our tradition that we find the universal norms. And the truth is you know them all as well as I do. I’m just going to list them because it’s not the centerpiece of my remarks.

First, the inherent dignity and importance of all humankind, derive from the belief that we’re all created in the image of God – every human being, not just Jews, every human being.

Second, the equality of all people rooted in the aggadic stories that ask why were we descended from one couple, Adam and Eve, who was made of the dust of the four corners and the four colors of the Earth so that none of us could say that the *yichus*, the merit, of our ancestors was greater than anyone else’s; we’re all brothers and sisters.

Third, the belief in the perfectibility of individual human beings and of society. Not that we could make it perfect, but we could always do better and better. It’s why Judaism created the first system of universal education 2,000 years ago to which every Jewish boy, rich and poor alike, was guaranteed a school system run by the community, accessible to all. And the belief in this perfectibility is one of the distinguishing characteristics between normative Christianity and normative Judaism. David and I read the tradition exactly the same here: that in normative Judaism, (e.g. the prophets who were thinking about the end of days being something just over the horizon), it would be a part of the outgrowth of history. The *Rambam*, Maimonides, says you don’t need miracles for the Messiah to come. We would bring the Messianic age by creating the world of justice and peace for all people. Think about what you know in the Bible about those end of days: We would beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks – but we’d still be tilling the land. But now, everyone would be fed. We would create that world of justice and peace.
Fourth, the concept of wealth as belonging to God. “The Earth is the Eternal’s and the fullness thereof.” And the terms of that wealth require (a) we protect the corpus of the trust, like any other trust, we must protect God’s creation, but (b) also that we must share God’s wealth with those of God’s children who are less fortunate than we. And as many of you know, the Hebrew term for charity, tzedakah, doesn’t mean “charity,” it’s not “caritas”; here, it is “justice;” it is what is required. Again, I will return to that in a few moments.

And, fifth, the attendant special concern which God has mandated for the poor, the widow, the hungry, and the orphan; what one Protestant theologian referred to as “God’s pervasive preference for the poor.”

Six, the belief that a society or state is created to serve the needs of the people and not vice versa. That’s one of the reasons that Samuel warns about taking on a king because of the abuses that will happen.

Seventh, as I indicated, the existence of certain laws which are regarded as central to any civilized society, the Noahide laws: bans on murder, robbery, blasphemy, idolatry, sexual crimes, the eating of the living flesh, and, most importantly to our discussion, the requirement that every ethical society create courts of justice.

Eighth, the rule of law to which even the highest human ruler is held accountable, without which you couldn’t have democracy. When Nathan, the prophet, confronts David and says, “Thou art the one,” when Ahab is confronted by Elijah over Naboth’s Vineyard, we’re taught that no matter how powerful a human ruler is, they’re held accountable to law, just like others.

Ninth, the belief in freedom of choice. No limitation of the fates or predestination. “I have set before you this day the blessing and the curse, life and death.” But, ultimately, if we are to make God’s law live on Earth, it will be because of the choices that we make. God can tell us what to do and why but ultimately, will not restrain free choice: “therefore, choose life, that you and your children after you might live.”

And, finally, the mandate that every ethical society pursue justice and pursue peace.
These are universal norms applying to all society. So understand: the Jewish tradition does not mandate for non-Jewish societies, monarchies and democracies. It does not mandate conservatism or liberalism. It does not mandate capitalism or socialism. It does not mandate, despite what some of my friends think, food stamp programs; nor despite what some of the people in the Bush White House thought, supply-side economics.

These are human inventions and the role of the ethical person from a Jewish standpoint is to demand that they be tested by whether they further or impede those fundamental universal values. And good moral people can disagree over that. Every page of the *Talmud* is filled with majority and minority opinions because the rabbis say explicitly: what is a minority opinion right now may one day be seen to be the majority opinion. So that should give hope to conservatives about the direction of where the Jewish community might be going when they finally (shall we say) “see the light” on these issues.

The second issue is, from where does the passion for social justice come? In the history of Western Civilization, it’s always helpful to ask yourself: what’s the starting axiom, the postulate that the world view— that any civilization— has? In Western Civilization, for a long time, in many segments, it was God. What are the opening words of the Bible? “In the beginning, God.” Not: In the beginning, I can give you a rational proof that God exists.” And from that assertion, everything else flows: “…created the heavens and the Earth.” Everything else could be explained out of that fundamental assumption.

The great organizing idea of Judaism that came from Sinai was the belief in ethical monotheism: There is one God and that God demands a world of justice and peace and we are implicated in bringing about that world.

Now, just a word about Sinai here. We know that with many of the stories in the Bible you find similar stories in other cultures, in other religions and other civilizations across the globe. Save one. I know of no other story, in no other culture, any other religion holds, that says that at one time an entire people confronted the Divine and out of that confrontation were transformed forever. That is a distinctly Jewish belief. And the nature of that confrontation, that engagement, that covenant was precisely this belief in ethical monotheism.
And out of that came the 613 laws, and large numbers of those laws have to do with what it means to create justice. And that passion for social justice was built into the traditional Jewish system for the past 3,000 years. Skip the centuries to the Age of Reason. The fundamental shift from God to logic, rationality, science. And the Age of Reason philosophers asked: what is rational, what is logical about religion? It didn’t have to do with the rituals or the ceremonies; it had to do with ethics.

If only we knew everything God did, we could rationally decide what was good and what was bad, what was just and what was unjust. As the great Reform Jewish philosopher, Leo Baeck said, that was the “essence of Judaism”. That’s what Judaism is all about; everything else is just superstitious norms that developed in our culture.

Emile Durkheim’s argument was that in order for a group to hold its group identity, they had to have their own rituals, their own ceremonies, their own customs, their own literature, their own dance, their own language. This was part of what it means for a people to be distinct. And there was the rational explanation for wanting to do this. But this wasn’t a total rejection of it, downplaying of it, but the lifting up of it – that led to the social gospel tradition in Christianity, it led to Reform Judaism that built on the 3,000 year tradition of concern for justice. It lifted up that as the essential part of what Jewish expression should be.

It did so in distinctly religious terms, not in abandoning Judaism, but in lifting up what it believed to be the core of Judaism, the essence of Judaism, emphasizing that aspect. And that idea of Judaism, of course, was welcomed here in the United States in a way it wasn’t in other places around the world, precisely because of America’s sharing the common views of the Age of Reason. We built a political system based on the norms of the Age of Reason, and Reform Judaism resonated with that and it grew here very powerfully.

And then, finally, we have the self-interest manifestation of social justice. The Jews came to the conclusion that it’s good for us. Two thousand years ago, the rabbis created a rule called “mipnai darchei shalom” – the ways of peace. They argued wherever Jews and non-Jews lived together in the same society, they shared all social benefits equally because you could not have a society that was a peaceful society unless you did that.
The first kind of Jewish community relations effort was the recognition that we would never be safe and never secure unless we have ensured that all groups would be free of discrimination and persecution and oppression and deprivation. That our destiny was bound up with the quality of life for all in our society. In America that resonated deeply. This is the first country that welcomed us in our historic task of speaking truth to power of that prophetic witness that we believe we have, of being a light to the nations. And so it’s not surprising that in American Jewish life social justice played such a powerful role.

Against that backdrop, finally, why then this passion for liberalism that animates the Jewish community and the Jewish tradition here? Well, there are a number of reasons why that might be.

Norman Podhoretz in his book [asks] this question: should Jews be liberal? And for him it was always kind of over the horizon that we would see the light.

In his book he’s kind of recognized it’s not going to happen in his lifetime. And he’s musing on why it hasn’t happened. But, he indicates that there are a number of reasons. He talks about how in general Jews have done better in modern times, meaning the last 200 years, since the Age of Reason, in liberal societies. And they’ve done poorly in the most conservative societies because conservative forces often embrace the kind of ultra-nationalisms, xenophobia, pseudo-scientific underpinnings of Nazism that began in the late 19th century and grew into the Nazi era. It was the liberal forces in the Age of Reason that were more tolerant, more pluralistic, more welcoming to Jews and made it possible for Jews to move into the mainstream of human society.

Let me just say a word about context here. I’m often asked the question: but wait a minute, hasn’t there been a marked change to the right in the Jewish community? So I’m going to digress for a moment just to respond to that.

In point of fact, there hasn’t, but something important has changed. If you look at the polls, Jews are as liberal as they’ve ever been. If you look at the positions of most national Jewish organizations we’re as liberal as we’ve ever been. If you look at the voting patterns, we’re as liberal as we’ve ever been (equating Democratic voting in national elections and liberalism). We haven’t changed. And, yet, if you ask any Jew, they’ll tell you, of course, the community has become more conservative. So why is that?
Well, it has to do with the fact that during the height of liberal culture in the forties, fifties, sixties, liberalism so dominated Jewish life. Because you always had, since 1928, the Jewish community voting pretty much by margins of two-thirds to three-quarters in presidential elections for the Democratic candidate. One exception, Ronald Reagan and that had more to do with his opponent than it had to do with Ronald Reagan.

And so we’ve been pretty consistent on this. But during the height of the culture, if you’re in that 25 percent minority you never win the votes at national organizations. There was no place for Jewish conservatives and Republicans to be heard. And they were very much on the cultural defensive in the Jewish community. And they chose to do their conservative politics and Republican politics outside the Jewish community.

Commentary magazine changed all of that. It hit the American Jewish community with such intellectual force, making an argument how Jewish values, Jewish history, Jewish interests could be argued powerfully from a conservative viewpoint. This lifted up the intellectual Jewish conservative and Jewish Republican argument that had never really been heard before. So while 25 percent of Jews were always more conservative for the last century, the voices you heard were 95 percent liberal. Now, Commentary restored the balance in keeping with the actual views of the Jewish population. You heard this empowered, assertive voice – organizing new Jewish organizations, Republican Jewish Coalition, Towards Tradition, the Jewish Policy Center, — think-tanks, organizations, publications, that were making these arguments with an intellectual power and intensity that changed dramatically what you heard in the marketplace of political voices.

So there was a shift, but that didn’t change the way the Jewish community felt. The numbers didn’t change and we remain as liberal as ever. Since I am always asked this question, I wanted to set that change against the background here.

There are other reasons for liberalism as well. Not only did we do better in liberal societies, but the Jewish tradition has some powerfully liberal strands that accorded with the great debates of the 20th century. What was the great debate between liberalism and conservatism in the 20th century?
On one foot, conservatives argued there was an inherent justice that’s working in the capitalist free marketplace, and that government intervention, even when done for the best of purposes, inevitably caused more harm than it achieved good. While helping the poor was an important task that everyone had, in comparison to other goals, American security, projecting America’s interests abroad, protecting the free marketplace here — it was not at the top of the list.

Liberals argued there’s no inherent justice that is working in capitalist free marketplace; that wealth will function in a way to protect its own interests. It is not only the right but the responsibility of government to reshape the economic processes of our society to make them more just, more equitable for the vast number of people and to lift up the government’s concern on behalf of all of us — the government of the people, by the people, for the people — and to protect the poor, to help those who would otherwise fall through the cracks.

That resonated deeply with the Jewish tradition. The Jewish tradition always had this major emphasis on the poor. The prophets told us over and over again and Moses told us — the moral test of any society is what it does for the weak, the vulnerable, the widow and the orphan, the poor, the sick, the elderly, the children — that’s what a moral test of the society was about. It was a primary concern. That resonated with liberal politics of the 20th century.

Furthermore, in the debate over what was the role of the public sector (i.e. the government), the Jewish tradition was decidedly liberal. That is, if in the Bible it wasn’t clear who set aside the corner of the field for the poor and the hungry and the stranger, by the Talmud 2000 years ago it was absolutely clear. It was both an individual responsibility and a communal responsibility; in that sense, a little different from today — a mix of conservative and liberalism.

In other words, if a society still was protecting everybody that needed to be protected, you still had to give charity, you still had to give tzedakah and there were rules about if the poor in your community were taken care of you moved out in a circle further and further out until you reached a needy group of people that it would be given to.
But, if your personal charity helped everyone, the society still had to create in Talmudic times, at least five fundamental institutions of social justice and social welfare; a burial fund, a clothing fund, a money fund, a school as I talked about for all boys and a food fund. And that was the minimum. There were dowry funds, there were other funds that existed at that point.

And there was no idea of caveat emptor. There was extraordinary government regulation of the economy, of protecting the environment. By the Middle Ages this had grown into a veritable bureaucracy of welfare institutions matching our own in America, if not exceeding it. So Jews knew that this was something that they were very comfortable with. In the debates in America, the model they knew from Jewish history, on this question, (other aspects of the Jewish tradition did resonate with conservative views — but on this question, the tradition resonated deeply with liberal politics. So Jews were totally comfortable in terms of that as well. So this passion for social justice that was brought into liberal terms, had a profound impact on American Jewish life.

I think [David] holds the view that somehow liberalism is a substitute for religion or is a form of paganism for the Jewish community. I just believe he is wrong. The Jews that I know, the ones who are secular Jews, if you ask them, they believe they’re playing out their Jewish lives, their Jewish values. They don’t go to synagogue; that’s not their Judaism, but they believe this is how they play out their Jewish values.

The Jews in our synagogues that are bursting with social justice activities all believe they’re playing out their religious lives and can make the argument why this is in the Jewish tradition. Where do those values come from? Secular Jews, religious Jews, it is what they learned around the Passover table when they were told they were the slaves in Egypt. It’s what they were taught when lighting the Hanukkah menorahs in the fight for national identity and for religious freedom. It’s what they learned about the equating of the Sabbath and peace. It’s what they heard from their rabbis in their sermons. It’s what they learned in their study of the Bible and of the prophets. That’s where it comes from! They’re living out their religious lives. I happen to think that’s wonderful.

We know from the polls that by a 2-to-1 or 3-to-1 margin, Jews believe if you ask them what is the primary expression of your Judaism, 14 to 17 percent say support for Israel,
14 to 17 percent say Jewish ritual, 50 percent routinely answer commitment to our involvement in social justice or commitment to social ideals – depending on how the question is framed. That’s who we are. That is our identity; but it is deeply religious in its sensibility. And that means that the gateway to bringing Jews back to tradition has to be to meet them where they are and there are many efforts to do that now in organized Jewish life.

In the end, the bottom line is this: we believe that we’re called to be God’s partners in creating a better and more hopeful world for all God’s children. That is part of our religious mandate – to be a light to and of the nations, to be bearers of the flames of justice and weavers of dreams of freedom for all humankind. To be a light to the nations, to really work and not stop until that day when justice shall well up like waters, righteousness like a mighty stream and we’ll have created the world our ancestors dreamed about and our children so richly deserve. That is the Jewish religious task in the world at its deepest level. It is one shared by Jews across the spectrum today.

I celebrate that. I think that’s wonderful. It happens to take on a liberal manifestation right now. Perhaps someday it will change, but I hope that we never lose that essence. It is what we’re all about. Thank you.

**DR. GELERNTER:** Thank you. Just a couple of comments. I think we agree that there are Jews who see their deep passionate obsessive involvement with liberal, Democratic politics as an expression of their Judaism; we’re agreed that they do it out of religious motives, they regard it as being religiously motivated.

That’s what we mean when we say that liberalism is taking the place of Judaism, because I can say I am performing a social function as an expression of Judaism. Tolstoy said exactly the same thing: that he would perform the social functions as the expression of Christianity. But that has nothing to do with the substance of Judaism or Christianity as systems of belief about God and man. Systems of ritual and ceremony can’t possibly be dissolved into a set of social or communal obligations without dissolving the essence of Judaism into a matter of policy rather than a matter of religion.
Now, I think the issue of Jews having done better in liberal societies is one that one hears often, and it’s kind of interesting and curious. They’ve done better in liberal societies. Well, they’ve certainly done best of all in the United States. So I assume you’re asserting that the United States is inherently the most liberal of nations. Now, I would accept that assertion. Of course, we know it can be described in modern political terms as a center-right nation. But we know that in fundamental terms of human freedom and dignity, this is indeed the most liberal of nations in ways that far transcend current political issues.

As far as the substance of social justice, there is absolutely no conceivable doubt that justice is one of the most important words in Judaism. In the Torah and the Gomorra and the halacha, the word “justice” occurs again and again and there’s no conceivable doubt but that achieving justice and social justice is central to a Jew’s mission, so long as he doesn’t forget to do the mitsvahs, as long as he doesn’t forget to be a Jew and to do the Commandments, to carry out the rituals that join him to his people as opposed to his fellow man of other religious faiths.

Judaism was a nation that required certain rituals of identification and had it not, it would not exist today. Certainly I wouldn’t want to disagree with you that justice is fundamental. The words “justice, justice shall you pursue,” is as fundamental a verse as there is in the Torah.

But one has to keep in mind that the Jewish approach to justice is an approach in terms of duties, not of rights. The idea of rights or human rights is not a Jewish idea. The idea of duties is a Jewish idea. You have a duty to give charity. There is no such thing as a right to charity or a duty to have charity given to you or something like that. These are obligations that we put on a person to perform. You have a duty to give charity. You have a duty to be judgmental. You must rebuke your neighbor so that he does not bear a sin on your account. You must be judgmental, you must give charity. Just as you have a duty to be kind to animals. It’s not that the animal has a right to have people be kind to it, it’s not an ethical agent, it’s not a moral agent. We have a duty not to be cruel to animals.

To wrap up, I don’t want to claim that there’s anything inherently conservative in modern policies in terms of the Jewish tradition or any other tradition. And in a sense I’m not sure that you’re claiming that either. But we go too far if we interpret the content of normative
Judaism as being any kind of political prescription for liberalism any more than for conservatism. Judaism is absolutely in harmony with those who seek justice on both sides of the political divide.

**LAUREN GREEN, FOX NEWS:** David, you kind of referred to this as well, but I’m a little confused with a sort of schizophrenic understanding of Jewish politics. Can you put that in context, both of you?

Also a question I wanted answered, how much is this historical blaming of Jews by white Christians as the killer of our Lord kind of thing and the things that it allowed like the Holocaust...how much of that is part of Jewish thought of keeping with liberalism? That they perceive conservatives as this element of blaming the Jew for everything?

**RABBI SAPERSTEIN:** That has been the source of much dispute--has the Jewish covenant lapsed and been superseded by the Christian covenant? And secondly, are Jews responsible for the death of the Christian savior? It’s been a source of some of the greatest conflicts and problems between Jews and Christians throughout history.

It’s really debatable to what extent Christian anti-Semitism actually led directly to the Holocaust. It may have provided a fertile field in which the ideas of that pseudo-scientific racialism that I talked about were nurtured in, but I think it’s a really debatable assumption about the direct involvement.

We’re living in a remarkable moment in history in terms of Christian-Jewish relations. And that is regarding the problems that have plagued us for 2,000 years we have made significant progress since the end of the Holocaust, in the space of two generations, with Vatican II clarifying some of these issues: that the Jewish covenant did not end here, the factual basis that the Jews were not directly responsible for the killing of Jesus. Similar rapprochement with many of the Christian communities in the world. This is an extraordinary moment. Nothing changes overnight. It will take generations to wring out a lot of these things, but we’re really at an extraordinary moment here.

**DR. GELERNTER:** It’s that Judaism and Christianity are fundamentally contradictory. They’re never going to be in harmony. Just as it’s necessary for a Christian to believe that
certain parts of the Hebrew Bible are simply superseded—otherwise you wouldn’t be a Christian—it’s necessary for a Jew to believe that certain parts of the Gospel accounts are wrong, or he couldn’t be a Jew. So, there is no future in ecumenicism, but there can be respect in the absence of logical consistency or harmony.

Of course, Christian anti-Semitism has been implicated in many ghastly crimes over the centuries. However, the issue of its specific complicity in the Holocaust is a huge issue. You see so much of the post-war unraveling of Christianity in Europe referred again and again to the idea that Christianity showed that it was worth nothing, because it allowed the Holocaust to happen, or it created an atmosphere in which the Holocaust came about.

Now, we tend to forget how bitterly and viciously anti-Christian the Nazis were. I mean, not only in a personal sense on the part of Hitler and the leadership, but as a movement, they despised Christianity, they did their best to suppress the German churches, Protestant as well as Catholic, and they substituted state paganism. So I think this is important not so much from the standpoint of exculpating Christian anti-Semitism but for remembering that this is not a sufficient reason to dismiss Christianity from the annals of history; because its connection with the Holocaust is by no means clear.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Anti-Semitism in the United States and anti-Semitism in Europe have connections with each other, but happened in very different climates. You know, if we were the governing board of the National Organization of Women and someone came in the room and said, I want to join your organization. And we said, well, great. Yeah, I want to join your organization, I just want to straighten out a couple of things. Women are actually biologically, morally, and intellectually inferior to men. Other than that, I want to join your organization. What would our reaction be?

Our reaction would probably be: you can’t really believe that. This isn’t a place for you, go somewhere else. That was the classic response. What was the story of Judaism? This is your point about it, irreconcilability of certain things. It was: oh, yeah, we want to live in Christian Europe, we want to be part of Christian Europe, we think you people are wonderful, you have just a couple of things wrong. Jesus was not the Son of God. Redemption does not come through Jesus. Other than that, you got it all right, let us in and share equitably. Their response was to try and convert us or when we didn’t do that,
to set us aside in ghettos so we wouldn’t end up contaminating the society. This rejection of fundamental postulates provided a rationale that let to a church-based, government-based, academically based anti-Semitism.

The Age of Reason changed all that. We shared America’s assumptions and could compete equally in such a society. On both scores, there are things that kept us apart, but there’s been significant improvement and that’s a reason for optimism.

REIHAN SALAM, Forbes: I wonder if one can argue that the premise of Jewish exceptionalism or Jewish uniqueness is actually a little bit flawed. We could create a narrative around it; there are these historical reasons why this community kind of trends to the left or not, but actually it reflects these very basic things about who lives in high cost versus low cost metropolitan areas.

DR. GELERNTER: You can say on the basis of a finer grain or a more intelligent or a more nuanced economic analysis, those who say they are voting against their class interest are really optimizing their incomes over the long-term or their security holdings or their communal value.

The question is not whether such an analysis is right, but whether Jews do it, or whoever you’re interested in. And my observation is they don’t. They don’t cast the liberal vote on the basis of a calculation of that sort. I don’t know anybody who does. They cast votes on emotional bases, and the fact that you might be able to justify it one way or another is not really the question. The question is how to do they justify it? And they justify it on emotional grounds, on social justice grounds, on much vaguer and less well-defined grounds.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: First, economic interest is not the only interest that Jews have. There are a lot of other interests they have on social issues, on legal issues, on a whole range of issues that is going to affect their vote. So even if there are economic interests, that’s too limited. There are all kinds of interests that we have, most particularly when survival issues kick in. You know, it’s when Israel or anti-Semitism get involved. It’s one of the reasons that Jews are so influential politically in America.
I’m not sure that Jewish exceptionalism means that all Jews have to act alike. If you look at Orthodox Jewish attitudes on abortion, stem cell research, they strongly support those issues. Gay rights outside of the gay marriage context, they’re not against it. If they took the Catholic view on abortion, they wouldn’t be able to follow Jewish law that requires abortion in certain circumstances. I think it was the survival issues that kicked in and it’s more complex than just looking at what the vote totals were in the last two elections. And don’t forget, the Orthodox community still makes up only 11 percent of the American Jewish community.

RACHEL MARTIN, ABC News: Concerning the relationship between Evangelicals in recent years and certain segments of the Jewish American community, specifically on the issue of Israel and Zionism—what is to account for this impassioned interest in what seems to be a one-way relationship? What has been the response from Jewish Americans with this very impassioned bear hug that Evangelicals seem to be wanting to give?

DR. GELERNTER: We should keep in mind that over the long centuries of anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism issued in violence more often than anti-Christian feelings among Jews, because of power relationships. But Jews were no fonder of Christians than vice-versa. I think nowadays it might be true that in some parts of the community, Jewish hostility towards Christians as such, and Christianity, is at a higher level than the Christian hostility towards Judaism.

And I think that the lack of response even of a word of thanks, let’s say, in the Jewish community-at-large for the strongly Zionist position of so many Evangelical communities is at least partly an expression of bigotry which has good historical grounds. I’m not saying they’re irrational, but it doesn’t change the fact that there’s bigotry at work.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: So, why this one-way embrace? First, enormous suspicion about the far right in general, secular and religious far right about what the motives are in terms of their embrace of Israel. How much of this is kind of a vision of an apocalyptic Armageddon over the horizon and to what extent, the forces of good and evil clash, and Israel is going to be destroyed and the remaining Jews will all be converted.
And then also the meddling of a number of those folks in peace process politics – urging Israel not to take steps towards a peace process that so many American Jews support. Third, those who believe that that embrace was important an effort to convert Jews. I would point out also, you’ve got to look at the history a little broader here. If you look at the right in America, they were the ones who for a long time tended to be anti-foreign aid, and not so sympathetic about protecting Israel.

Finally, the Jewish community is passionately committed to separation of church and state. This is as close as you’ll have to a domestic survival issue for the Jewish community. And the Jewish community I think believes overwhelmingly that the religious right has foisted a myth on America that somehow separation of church and state is anti-God or anti-religious. We believe nothing is further from the truth. It is that wall that has kept government out of religion, that has allowed us more religious freedom than we’ve ever known in our history, more freedoms than we’ve ever known in our history; and it has allowed religion to flourish with a diversity and strength unmatched anywhere in the democratic world, including every nation that has government sanctioned, government supported, government preferred, or government established religions.

It is precisely those three prongs of the Constitution — no religious test for office, free exercise of religion, no law even respecting an establishment of religion — that created, for the first time in human history, a nation that said your rights as a citizen would not depend upon your religious beliefs, on your religious practices, or your religious identity.

That is the liberal vision that has resonated so deeply for Jews and the religious right is seen as being against that. So it’s not surprising it would be a one-way embrace.

**DR. GELERNTER:** It’s easy to say the religious right is seen as being against it. The question is, is that true? There’s absolutely no evidence that it is, like the contention that the Warren/Burger court brought Jews more to the center—that seems to me ridiculous. The collapse of anti-Semitism in this country had nothing to do with judicial rulings. And the claim that it was in some sense associated with the left, not with the Christian establishment, seems to me *a priori* false because it was the Christian establishment that had to allow Jews in. They were the ones excluding Jews; they were the ones who had to change their social attitudes to allow Jews into the banks, into the corporations, into the
universities. There was no law that forced that on the Ivy Leagues, that forced that on the universities, that forced that on the entire Christian power structure.

ELIZA GRISWOLD, The New Yorker: I have two questions. In terms of “face-to-faceness”—what that means not in terms of political engagement today but what that means as a spiritual experience in contemporary Judaism. The second question is, if we have moved far from contemporary Judaism defining itself in terms of the Six-Day War, the Yom Kippur War, what we haven’t moved very far from war with Hezbollah or Lebanon or the threat that Iran poses. I’d be interested to hear both of you talk about how those political contexts inform contemporary Judaism here in America but abroad also.

DR. GELERNTER: Face-to-faceness, I should be clear, is not an accepted nomenclature; I’ve made it up for this occasion. I think it probably does resemble some current trends in Christianity. I’m more hesitant to say it resembles anything in Islam, but it’s conceivable. It’s a very old thread in Judaism because of Judaism’s insistence, on the one hand, on the absolute transcendent and ineffable character of God who never steps forth in human form; the veil, so-to-speak, separating the divine from the human that transcended from the finite is never ripped and can’t be ripped.

On the other hand, when Judaism invents a phrase such as “Our Father who art in heaven,” which we use constantly in Hebrew prayers, it does so in order to emphasize the ever-present intimacy with which a Jew is to regard the presence of God, especially in moments of prayer and the most important prayer that’s in the Talmud — it says one is to be particularly mindful of being directly in the presence of the Divine before you launch forth upon this, this ritual act.

But it’s also a dialectal tradition. Jews have always regarded it as their duty and responsibility to carry out God’s Commandments and laws, and equally their responsibility to argue with God when they think He’s wrong, not from the standpoint of correcting the divine behavior but as their ethical responsibility to say: this seems unaccountable, why are You doing it this way? Why don’t You do something else?

DR. GELERNTER: I will say, it is fair to say of Islam that like Judaism, it insists on the transcendent ineffability, indescribability, uniqueness of God versus a Trinitarian or Christian view. So Islam too has the need to overcome what seems to be an absolute
chasm between the finite and the infinite or the human and the divine by coming up with rituals, formulas, ideas, that help a human being to feel close to a God who nonetheless will never be human-like in any way.

DR. JAMES HUNTER, University of Virginia: It seems to me that we need to make a distinction between liberalism as a philosophical tradition and liberalism as a political ideology. And it seems to me that, Rabbi David, in a way you are conflating these more. Clearly conservatives operate under the umbrella of philosophical liberalism. They care about justice, they care about the common good and so on. At the ideological level, of course, they’re very different, they take very different tactics and so on with different emphases.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: Yes, a very important observation. I would actually draw the distinction differently here. I’m really talking about liberal programs here, which is yet a third category. And my argument is, I don’t think the Jewish tradition is inherently conservative or liberal. I think in some ways it accords more closely and analogously to liberal policies as they are played out in 20th century America in the economic justice realm, and I think it leans towards conservative policies and ideas on a number of other things.

David mentioned one: the difference of a system based on duties and rights. There is no word in classical Hebrew for “rights.” I’ll give you a couple of others. If you look at the spectrum of views on the social issues — abortion, gay rights issues, et cetera, — and certainly religion in public life issues, from where Judaism would be (that it’s more moderate than fundamentalist Christian views are), those views accord more closely with conservative political policies on these issues today than they do with liberal policies.

Yet another one, moral relativism that liberals are so comfortable with. There’s no idea in Judaism of, “hey, you do your thing, I’ll do my thing; what works for me is right; what works for you is right.” There is an absolute right or wrong.

There are areas of the tradition that I think can help infuse, and argue for, conservative views and some that I think argue for the model of liberal views. But not because Judaism
is binding upon America. Only because it is the way that rabbis over the centuries, trying to understand how to apply those universal norms in an ethical manner, to an ethical society sought to do it — and those applications may or may not be helpful to America in solving its problems, depending on how persuasive they are in the free marketplace of ideas. I’m really focused on the policy analogies to this rather than to either of the broader ideas you referenced.

MICHAEL GERSON, The Washington Post: I just wanted to react to where [Rabbi David] talked about a principle of Jewish political philosophy, a certain definition of justice that’s not formal, and not procedural. That it has to do with the treatment of the weak, the vulnerable, the lowest levels of society, and the kind of prophetic tradition. Because this does seem to be a definition of justice that has a huge political implication. I’m just interested in whether you [Dr. Gelernter] agreed with that analysis of the Jewish tradition and what the implications might be.

And then, you made a very interesting analysis the way that Jewish theology affects a certain view of the world that includes politics, face-to-faceness, the importance of the present moment. How does that contrast with Christian theology?

DR. GELERNTER: I think in one respect it’s profoundly different from the Christian worldview and in another respect it’s similar in aiming at the same thing from a different point of view.

The Jewish tradition of face-to-faceness, intimacy with God is very much part of the Christian tradition from a separate point of view. The fact that God chooses to become man and is embodied in a human being, in human life, is for Christians, a vehicle for allowing intimacy, contact, understanding between the divine and the human.

Obviously Jews reject the idea that Jesus was the Messiah. They don’t reject the idea of Son of God per se. The Bible says explicitly that Israel is the first born Son of God. Speaking metaphorically, the prophets use the phrase Son of Man in a similar type way. The metaphor of the Son of God, the idea of God having that kind of relationship to a human being is by no means unknown to the thought of Judaism. And the idea of allowing intimacy between human and divine is central both to Christianity and to Judaism.
On the other hand, the idea of here-and-nowness has played an absolutely central role in Christianity that simply has no equivalent in Judaism. Not just the idea of the second coming, but the developing idea of the afterlife in increasing detail in the thought of Catholic thinking, but also the idea of predestination as fundamentally deciding the nature of human life in society. In Calvinist thinking, in reformed Christian thinking, the idea of where you will be after you die and the judgment that will be decided upon by the Lord as a determining factor in how you live your life, is central in Christianity and absolutely tangential in Judaism.

So I think face-to-faceness is an area in which Judaism and Christianity come face-to-face, but here-and-nowness is really a deep distinction between whether you live life with a view towards a final judgment, or whether you live life with a view to being satisfied at your death that you have lived well.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: It was in medieval times that Jewish systematic theology and philosophy developed. In the Bible and in the Talmud, that really doesn’t exist. There is no systematic theology and philosophy of justice the way we talk about “the liberal tradition” today.

Everything is specific. There may be moral aphorisms: “Justice, Justice shall you pursue.” Or, “what does the Lord require of you? Only to do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.” There’s no systematic philosophy or theology in those systems. It is all based on specific tasks of helping people. Thirty-six times — the most common commandment of the 613 commandments, is the commandment to treat the stranger as ourselves; and commandments to feed the hungry, to take care of the widow and the orphan. To observe the Sabbath; to eat these kind of foods and not those kind of foods. It was the very specifics of doing justice that is the focus.

I would argue that at its core, liberal politics and political programs of the 20th century were far more concerned about what actually happened in the end to the poor than conservatives were. It doesn’t mean conservatives didn’t care about the poor and didn’t believe liberal programs were going to have the wrong effect and their programs would have the right effect. As a priority in society, however, that really was at the core of the liberal program. Not just having an abstract equality but actually seeing that the hungry
were actually fed, that they were actually taken care of—not create a system that they should be able to stand on and provide for their own. That liberal view seems to me to accord much more with the historic Jewish views on this issue.

ROSS DOUTHAT, The New York Times: My question for Rabbi David is about your perceptions of the Obama Administration’s approach to Israel; what do you think about them and so forth? Is there a point at which you would become disillusioned with the Obama Administration’s friendship to Israel?

And then the question for the other David is, do you have any sympathy with the sort of liberal Jewish sense of distance from some of the military campaigns that Israel has undertaken recently? A sense of disillusionment with what they see as a lack of commitment in Israel’s government to the peace process? If you don’t have sympathy, is there a point where you might become sympathetic to the sort of liberal Jewish critique of Israeli policy recently?

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: The wording of your question conflates two different issues that the polls show exist right now. One is the growing distance from Israel, particularly of younger Jews in the United States and the Jewish community as a whole. Part of it has to do with how Reform and Conservative Jews, who make up two-thirds of American Jewry, feel about not having their rabbis being recognized in Israel, feeling like second-class citizens in many regards. We know that there has been an ebb and flow of a sense of attachment to Israel in the past as well, depending on what was going on in the world and what was going on in Israel. During the times there’s a peace process that’s really active, American Jews feel more connected and committed to Israel because it kind of fits their Exodus image of what Israel is all about.

American Jews, believe in Israel because they believe in the justness and rightness of Israel’s cause. And when Israel engages in policies that are problematic, which is the second part after distance, it does have an effect.

But it doesn’t necessarily mean distance. Think of J Street; think of all the doves in Israel and in the United States. We [the Reform Jewish Movement] are extraordinarily dovish.
We run more trips of people to Israel than any other Jewish organization does. We’re deeply engaged with Israel.

You can be critical of policies. Whatever you think of J Street or Michael Lerner, they are engaged with Israel all the time. So the fact that that you may have qualms with policy e.g. in the United States government or in the Israeli government doesn’t mean you’re any more or less committed to the U.S. or to Israel or less engaged with Israel. So, those two issues are at stake in this question.

As to Obama, he made two major errors that have taken on symbolic, emblematic significance in the community. The first was in what I thought was an extraordinary speech in Cairo, in which he confronts the entire Muslim world in the center of the Muslim world about Holocaust denial. He uses one line about Israel’s justification flowing from the Holocaust, which is often used by Israel’s enemies to say: “we didn’t do the Holocaust, why blame us for that? That has no legitimacy.” This really struck a terrible chord in the community and he did not move effectively to redress that and to clarify this. Where almost all Jews believe it is our 3,000 years of attachment to the land, hat it’s our historic homeland that is at stake here.

In terms of negative campaigning, there were people who were looking for an array of things to hurt him during the campaign, including any anti-Israel stuff. And when they spoke to people in his undergraduate years, in his community organizing years, in his law school years, (ostensibly before he thought about being the President of the United States), over and over again, even people who are Republicans and others who differ with him said they never heard him say anything other than positive things about Israel, the Jewish people, the Jewish community and Judaism.

If there’s any reflection of his heart, that would be it. And since he’s been President, they stood tough on Durbin [the follow-up to the Durbin anti-racism conference that had turned anti-Semitic], which was crucially of concern to the Jewish community. When Turkey said Israel couldn’t participate in the regional maneuvers, we withdrew immediately from that. He authorized one of the largest military joint exercises in the history of Israel’s existence. and what a lot of people missed were other military exercises that included refueling, which, if you’re sending a message to Iran, it’s as strong as he can
send a message. He stepped up our pressure on Iran, really trying to make a huge campaign to get international cooperation to put pressure on Iran. I mean, there’s a litany of things he’s done that if George Bush had done, would have been absolutely acclaimed as being unabashedly pro-Israel.

And, of course, he’s moved consistently to try and make progress on the peace process. You either believe that a peace process with two viable states willing to live in peace with each other is indispensable to Israel’s long-term security, or you don’t. But if you do, that’s an extraordinary pro-Israel thing that both President Clinton and President Bush failed to do until their last couple of years in office.

So I think you can make a very strong argument for why he is strongly pro-Israel. He picked a vice president that’s arguably the most pro-Israel Senator in the United States Senate [and a strongly pro-Israel Secretary of State].

And what a wonderful country this is that we elect Barack Hussein Obama and his first appointment is Rahm Israel Emanuel.

**DR. GELERNTER:** There is a reason why the Israeli public felt so much sympathy, felt so strongly, sympathetic to George W. Bush and is so hostile to Obama. Joint military exercises are nice. Of course, it would have been nice if Israel had been allowed to participate in the continued development of the joint strike fighter which they were supposed to also. I mean, these things go both ways. But Iran is the important issue.

I don’t think there has been any doubt in anybody’s mind that the Obama policy was appeasement. Appeasement was a perfectly respectable word in former times, and is a respectable idea in principle. But Israelis feel and felt toward the whole the same way they feel towards the idea of the peace process. Israelis will certainly do everything you ask them to do on behalf of the peace process. I think most Israelis regard it as a grossly naïve piece of American utopianism not to understand the fact that peace between bitter enemies is achieved step-by-step, incrementally, in terms of a series of one modus vivendi after another, a series of small agreements—rather than gigantic earth-shattering treaties, which in the case of the Palestinians, is not going to happen.
And the idea that Obama’s manifesting toughness on Iran by organizing global sanctions, I don’t think it has a lot of credibility, certainly not in Israel, though it does in the Jewish community here.

Growing disillusionment or a certain amount of disillusionment in the American Jewish community with recent Israeli policies, the military policies, policies towards peace—I don’t think it’s so much disillusionment, it’s giving in to peer pressure. Things like the Goldstone Report and other items of, in some cases well-intentioned, in others badly intentioned nonsense, encouraged the international community to pile up on the Israel Defense Force. This became even more a fashionable point of view than it usually is. It’s very tough.

It’s a very difficult position to be in to say, as I now say, as many American Jews have said, I’ve never been prouder of the Israeli Army than I was after the Gaza Operation. The extent to which the Army went, the extent to which Israeli society went, to postpone that operation to be conducted, putting their men at risk again and again in order to minimize civilian casualties is a standard that will stand for centuries. There is no other Army on Earth with the exception of the American Army that’s ever gone about a military campaign in that way. I think it was a remarkable, a remarkably noble performance.

Insofar as there are Israeli friends in the Palestinian authority, Israel is happy to talk to and work with them. It’s a policy that moves away from big utopian goals towards small pragmatic steps. And I think Israel has had no choice.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: In terms of the list of things I indicated about Barack Obama and Israel for our community, I would add the immediate denunciation of the Goldstone Report, the fact that when Gaza was going on, he supported Israel on Gaza: what more in terms of a pro-Israel stance could you expect? He’s disaffected many of his liberal friends here who think he’s too pro-Israel in this regard. But on an objective basis, this was pretty powerful stuff in terms of what the Jewish community would have wanted.

And finally, we just have a respectful difference on Iran. When George Bush took office there wasn’t a single Iranian centrifuge. When he left office there were 3,000. When he took office there was not a single ounce of enriched uranium. When he left office, there
was enough to create a number of bombs. When he took office, there were slow steps to impose U.S. sanctions and ineffectiveness in imposing international sanctions. [Today these efforts are in high gear.] Barack Obama is trying to mobilize that international cooperation.

DAN GILGOFF, CNN: In recent years the issue of pledges or vows of unstinting support for Israel have become such a bedrock of Republican or conservative rhetoric. I’m just wondering if there’s any degree of anxiety or nervousness among mostly liberal Jews that that issue is becoming so closely associated with the right, especially to considering that to the degree that campus activism is critical of Israel, it’s mostly coming from the left.

DR. GELERNTER: If there isn’t some growing unease on the left there certainly ought to be. What you say is very true, that not only in recent years but in recent history, the president who have been most strongly identified with powerful pro-Israel gestures is Ronald Reagan, above all. And as you say, it is the Republican conservative community rhetorically that has more and more become associated with Zionist views.

And by exactly the same token I think you’re absolutely right that on campus, American universities are overwhelmingly left wing in their mono-mania; of course. And it used to be that there was a sort of special grandfather clause for Zionism but in recent years I have found campus political thought ripping into Zionism just the same way as the left in Europe does, maybe not exactly to the same extent but falling into line with left wing thought in general, which has been harshly anti-Zionist and Anti-Israel.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: I spoke before about the religious right and its embrace in Israel. It’s a lot of nervousness about that. But, if you look at Republican and Democratic Senators and Congresspersons, they’re almost all pro-Israel. People don’t see a difference and where they do, it might shift someone on a specific candidate without shifting their politics in general.

PERRY BACON, The Washington Post: A question for the professor. You talked about the “liberal obsession.” What impact would there be if the Jewish community was more of a 50/50, 55/45? What impact would that have on policy or politics if the Jewish vote was more divided?
And then a question for both of you. It seems as if the parties are both so pro-Israel to the point where it’s not clear to me how Republicans can gain anymore. Will Jewish voters become sort of like African-Americans in some way, a group that is very defined for being part of the liberal coalition and then if Republicans try to really co-op them, the Democrats would immediately hug them on an issue and they would be the same again?

**DR. GELERNTER:** What difference would it make? Suppose the American Jewish community were split 50/50, what difference would it make to American politics? Very little I think. There aren’t very many Jews and it’s no longer true that they are carefully arranged in strategic positions in key states that would give them so much leverage. It’s true to some extent but it’s by no means as big a deal. I think that the Jewish community would be happier, the Jewish community would be less fraught with ideological bitterness.

**RABBI SAPERSTEIN:** Jews are opinion-makers. Look at how Jews are disproportionately represented in every political cause, conservative and liberal, in America. If you begin to shift where that intellectual fire power goes and where the opinion makers are going to go, I see the impact greater than you do.

If they’re okay on Israel, if both parties are okay on Israel, then other things fill it in. Then you come back to the point I made before. Jews remain, according to the public opinion polls, looking at religious, ethnic and racial groups in America, the most liberal in its attitudes and beliefs of any group. There are a couple of very small religious groups that are up in the same ballpark, but generally, of any major group, far and away, the most liberal group is Jews. Then those other concerns will take over. So you remove the difference on Israel issue and that’s what allows Jews to vote liberally.

If the survival issue got in the way in terms of an anti-Israel stance of a party or a candidate in any given election, it will shift the vote. And if you do it long enough, I think then the pattern is that you’ll see a change. But, so far, the parties are close enough that it just hasn’t happened.
CARL CANNON, PoliticsDaily.com: I wanted to ask about Jewish attachment to the Democratic Party irrespective of liberalism. I’d like both Davids to address this. What I don’t understand about this attachment is that it predates the Civil Rights Movement. Jewish affection for the Democratic Party predates the identification of the Democratic Party as the party of civil rights.

And before the war, it was Republican presidents who came out against lynching laws, not something FDR wouldn’t do.

DR. GELERNTER: I think you’re absolutely right about a Jewish post- or transfactual attachment to the Democratic Party. It is really associated with FDR. There was an enormous outpouring of Jewish sympathy for Franklin Roosevelt during the early years of the war in Europe when Franklin Roosevelt positioned himself in opposition to isolationists both in the Democratic and the Republican Party, and didn’t go nearly as far as many people wanted him to go but was consistently publicly describing Nazi Germany’s threat to the whole world, and by taking America almost to the brink of war, he generated an enormous emotional response.

Harry Truman generated an enormous emotional response in the Jewish community by being the first head of state to recognize the new State of Israel. And, of course, he did that in opposition to the Washington bureaucracy and no doubt to many other Democrats. The Democratic foreign policy establishment was certainly not Zionist, but Harry Truman was profoundly so.

I think when you’re talking about Eisenhower, it’s somewhat an anomalous situation. For some reason, the Jews were crazy about Franklin Roosevelt.

RABBI SAPERSTEIN: You must remember that from Abraham Lincoln even through Woodrow Wilson, who began to pick up Jewish votes—more because of his internationalism and peace efforts and things that the Jewish community generally was in favor of—the majority or plurality of American Jews, in presidential elections, voted Republican. And it was really only at that point that you began to get majority democratic support, and it was a number of factors here. Labor—so many Jews were affected by labor and the Democratic Party being more supportive of the labor issue and the Republicans
having to do with big money interests, et cetera, in which there weren’t very many Jews involved in at that period of time.

And then when Roosevelt came along, this social justice aesthetic that permeated everything that he did and his support for the labor movement in a way that presidents before hadn’t done — he really won them over. The New Deal was hugely popular in the Jewish community and then his confrontation obviously with the Nazis in those first years of the war led to enormous overwhelming support; but those things aren’t surprising. Lincoln represented those values to Jews, about equality and justice and Franklin Roosevelt did too. I think, it’s self-evident why it might have been justified for Jews and it left strong feelings.

I just want to reiterate once again we have a respectful difference over this question of substituting liberalism for religion. It seems to me totally illogical to say that because Jews are so fixated on liberalism, it must be instead of religion, whereas I think it is the natural outgrowth of religion.

Even in the Orthodox community, I believe deeply that conservatives care about the poor and care about justice as much as liberals do. That animates everything that I do. It’s one of the reasons I’m trying to work with elements on the right to talk about how we can work together dealing with the poor and protecting God’s creation and a range of issues helping women, the victims of sex trafficking, religious liberty—so many of the issues that we work together in coalitions.

David, we differ over which policies can best do that. You think that liberal policies are counterproductive. I think that they’re the best way of doing this work; they have transformed America into a far more decent, fair and compassionate, just, and equal society and I think these policies resonate with Jewish values. Jews they truly believe that it is their tradition and observances that lead them to this commitment to engage in this liberal view. And the fact that they see it that way doesn’t delegitimize that as being an expression of their authentic Judaism.

In the Jewish community today, social justice is an organizing principle of Jewish identity, including somewhat liberal forms of it. It’s becoming more and more a norm. The
environment, the way workers are treated–these are things associated with the liberal agenda when they first arose on the scene. But now we’re seeing movement towards the middle in many ways, and a consensus of the importance of social justice from all elements of the Jewish community. And I say, thank God for that because I think we’re living up to who we truly are.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Ladies and gentlemen, let’s thank both of our presenters.