

INTRODUCTION

What I remember most is the sound the tear gas canister made as it left the barrel of the gun. The low thunk, then the harsh crack as the canister broke the air. The echoes: off the flat stones of the protesters' barricade, the barred windshield of the soldiers' armored car, the coarse walls of the squat homes in the village. The vicious whoosh as it flew over the panicked crowd. The hiss of the gas as it spread. Coughing, retching, moaning. In the distance, the weak scream of a battered ambulance. The frantic slapping of rubber soles on concrete. The fearful shouts of people running away.

It was a cloudless January afternoon in the occupied West Bank village of Nabi Saleh, and I was standing on the wrong side of an Israeli soldier's gun. I had graduated college the previous summer. I had just turned twenty-four.

I was there to cover a protest—to bear witness, or so I thought at the time. One month earlier, the Israeli army had arrested Ahed Tamimi, a Palestinian teenager, for having slapped an armed soldier who approached the threshold of their home. The army had also arrested Ahed's mother, Nariman, for filming the encounter. The video transformed Ahed almost overnight into a tragic symbol: of courageous defiance in the face of power, and of the crushed dreams of successive Palestinian generations that have come of age under military rule.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, Nabi Saleh was the epicenter of an unarmed popular resistance movement. Every week for nearly a decade, the village's residents, accompanied by dozens and sometimes hundreds of international and Israeli solidarity activists, would attempt to march to a spring that Jewish settlers, backed by the Israeli army, had confiscated. But by 2018, when I was there, the weekly protests had largely ebbed. The toll—psychic, physical, human—had grown too high. This was the first big demo in a long time, a rally to demand Ahd's release and the release of other imprisoned Palestinians.

Nabi Saleh is a village disfigured by the violence of the occupation, marked by indescribable suffering and unthinkable sacrifice. The Israeli army has fired so much tear gas over the years that some villagers have hung the empty canisters from carob trees like macabre Christmas ornaments, mangled black rubber orbs swaying in the wind. Midnight raids at gunpoint pull fathers and mothers away from their screaming children, who awake suddenly from nightmares for years after. Nearly every journalist I know who has been to Nabi Saleh left the village in some way changed by what they saw.

I should not have been there in Nabi Saleh on that bright winter day. Everything in my life should have led me in the exact opposite direction, to the other side of the barricades. Like many American Jews, I was raised in a traditional Jewish community where Israel was the spiritual and geographic center of the universe. Every morning in religious day school, we sang the Israeli and American national anthems, then davened Shacharit, the morning prayer service.

We were an outpost of Israel in New Jersey's northwest Bergen County. Identification with the state of Israel was total, even if it was an Israel frozen in time, roughly the 1970s, the years of our Israeli teachers' childhoods. We observed Israeli civil holidays with an ardor we never showed for their American equivalents. On Israel's Independence Day, we marched in the town's quiet, tree-lined streets. On Is-

rael's Memorial Day, the entire school assembled to sing maudlin songs mourning the handsome young soldiers who had given their lives for Israel—for us. We rehearsed for days to give them a proper honor.

We learned we needed Israel because only a Jewish state could protect the Jews after the Holocaust. Our teachers, many of them survivors or their children, imparted to us the inhumanity of the camps, regaled us with stories of escape under impossible conditions, and stressed the importance of resistance—the doomed rebellion in the Warsaw Ghetto, the partisans camped in the Lithuanian forest. We learned that Israel not only constituted the Jewish people's rebirth out of literal ashes but also exemplified the only reasonable response to the Holocaust's most fundamental lesson: that the Jewish people must be prepared to fight if we are to survive. On Holocaust Remembrance Day, which we observed on the Israeli date, we wore all black, affixed stickers to our shirts that said "Remember" in Hebrew, and meditated on this terrible necessity.

At home as in school, Judaism and Zionism were synonymous. I had no sense of where one ended and the other began. At lunchtime, we belted out the lines from the blessing after meals—"May Jerusalem the holy city be rebuilt speedily in our days"—and imagined not the celestial Jerusalem but the real, physical place. At home for Shabbat dinner on Friday night, my sister and I would recite the blessings over the bread and wine in our best approximation of Israeli-accented Hebrew. For her bat mitzvah, we traveled to Israel so that she could read Torah at the Western Wall and prayed with our hands pressed against the ancient stone blocks, which glowed pink in the early morning sun. A few days later a guide took us to a firing range where we learned to shoot Uzis and emerged awed by the display of Jewish power.

An overly serious and earnest kid, I took this mix of religion and nationalism to heart. I relished spending much of the day speaking Hebrew, and when I got home, I fell asleep listening to long-unfashionable Israeli folk songs on cassette tapes. I proudly sported an olive-green Israeli army T-shirt until holes formed in the armpits.

The martial aesthetic was not coincidental. By the time I entered grade school in 2000, the cautious optimism that followed the Berlin Wall's fall in 1989 and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 had largely evaporated. War seemed omnipresent. September 11 soon exploded any illusions about a better, more peaceful century. America invaded Afghanistan and then Iraq. I came to awareness of the broader world, and of America, only after the skies had darkened.

In Israel/Palestine, the second intifada was in its bloodiest stage. Fear and grief contorted my small community and hardened it against the outside world. Everyone seemed to know someone who had been killed or wounded or nearly wounded in a terrorist attack. There were stark black-and-red posters with the faces of the "victims of terror" plastered on the walls of the school gym. I would stop on the way to the water fountain and look at their pictures and their names, so much like those of the people around me, so much like my own.

The Land of Israel, we were taught, was ours, and that meant we needed to defend it. To reinforce our sense of ownership, we learned to draw its outlines, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, almost with our eyes closed. On the chalkboard we practiced tracing the small nook where the city of Haifa sits, then the slope down the Mediterranean coast; the sharp V of the border with Egypt, separating the Negev from the Sinai; the small circle of the Sea of Galilee, and the longer, oblong loop of the Dead Sea on the southeastern border.

Ours was a *kishkes* Zionism. Blunt, passionate, reactionary: a religious nationalism but with history in the place of providence. It was not a liberal Zionism. Two states, negotiations, compromise—these were not part of the lexicon, let alone words like "occupation," "siege," or "military rule." I can hardly recall hearing the word "Palestinian" unaccompanied by the word "terrorist."

It was the bellicose nationalism of people who, bound together by the trauma of the Holocaust, having only understood themselves as history's ultimate victims, could not recognize that they now possessed power, who could neither acknowledge the means by which they had

attained such power nor contemplate the ethical responsibilities that its possession required.

Such rigidity and simplicity also made this ideology vulnerable to challenge. In 2008, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead, a massive aerial bombardment and ground assault on the Gaza Strip. TV news broadcast the brutal offensive for hours all day: images of maimed children, collapsed houses, entire families wiped out. I had no ability to understand how the country that I had been taught to love, that formed a part of my own self-understanding, could have done something like this. Worse, no one around me seemed particularly disturbed. If anything, my community's attitude seemed to be the reverse. Level the Gaza Strip, a friend's father said. Turn it into a parking lot.

But these were also the golden years of the internet: forums, Wikipedia, the blogosphere. I searched on Google for whatever I did not recognize or understand about Israel/Palestine: the Geneva Conventions, the Sabra and Shatila massacre, the civil administration in the occupied territories. Gradually, I started to encounter a very different Israel than the one I had thought I knew.

Late in my teenage years, I broke with the Zionist dogmatism of my upbringing. I became enraged by my community's open support for the occupation of the West Bank and siege of Gaza and its justifications for the brutality that this entailed. At first I tried to suppress my fury, but eventually, as a volatile adolescent, I ignited. I threatened to run away. I was forcefully asked to leave a Passover seder for calling Israel an apartheid state in a heated argument with close family friends. More than once I announced that I would burn my personal belongings on the front lawn in an act of protest. (Fortunately, I never did.)

My parents suffered through all this. They wanted quiet normalcy. I gave them ceaseless friction. They are not ideologues, but they are conservative in disposition, and in a particularly Jewish way. Too young to remember the counterculture of the sixties, they came of age

in the Reagan years. They had little patience for protest politics. They had little acquaintance with protest at all. To them, a radical was simply an undesirable thing for a person, and certainly for a Jew, to be. I felt they wished that the arguments, the fighting, the shouting, would go away.

Eventually, my anger, confusion, and grief did lead me far from home. I went back to Israel and lived there, on and off, for a few years. Although I had rejected the ultra-hawkish ideology that said Israel could do no wrong, I had not given up on the place. I thought I could contribute to making it better. It was too fundamental to my Jewishness. It *was* my Jewishness.

Besides, it didn't make sense to spend so much time arguing about a faraway place when I could go there and figure things out for myself. I sought out new forms of religious expression in alternative communities where I would not have to conceal my politics or forgo the rituals I still treasured. In the Jerusalem neighborhood of Nachlaot, where mysticism permeates the streets, I dreamed of finding a charismatic rebbe who might teach me how to reconcile commitment to justice for the oppressed with the texts of the tradition, only to run up repeatedly against the hard walls of Jewish parochialism. In the hamlets south of Hebron, in the occupied West Bank, I joined Palestinian farmers and shepherds trying to reclaim their land, hoeing the rocky soil with my soft, unworked hands while Israeli soldiers brandished M16s on the hills above.

I'm not sure what my mother worried about more: that I'd come back to the States wearing the black hat of ultra-Orthodoxy, or that I'd end up in jail. The one night I did spend in the Manhattan Detention Complex, after protesting Israel's 2014 war in Gaza, nearly broke our relationship for good.

Over the last decade, I have moved between Jewish communities in the United States and Israel, initially as a young activist, then, and ever

since, as a journalist. During this time I have met many other young American Jews. Some grew up like me, within what one might call mainline affiliated Judaism, and were on similar paths out of it. Others endured far more dramatic breaks. They had lost their faith in God or Zionism or both. Many had lost much more than that.

I began to wonder if perhaps their stories amounted to something more than isolated cases of adolescent rebellion. Of course, the break with one's home is a foundational Jewish motif, ever since Abraham wrecked his father Terah's idols and set out for the Land of Canaan. But to me, the distinct contours of a broader phenomenon seemed to emerge: a widespread and profound disillusionment with the shape of American Jewish life and an intense yet unrealized desire for a Judaism awake to the injustices of the world, including, or perhaps especially, to those for which we, as Jews, were directly responsible.

It made sense to me why. Those of us in our twenties or thirties came of age in a world defined by the experience of turmoil and catastrophe. The September 11 attacks, the 2008 financial crisis, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, the election of Donald Trump, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ever-worsening climate disaster—these upheavals have given rise to a shared sensibility, mainly but not exclusively among young people, that our society and our communities require dramatic, fundamental transformation.

During this time Israel became the enduring source of the most intense intracommunal conflict. The emergence of new, youth-led protest against Jewish communal institutions' support of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and siege of Gaza reconfigured American Jewish politics.

But Israel is far from the only fault line in contemporary American Jewish life. In the last quarter century, American society has undergone profound changes when it comes to norms of gender and sexuality and notions of race and whiteness, and fights over these, too, have both divided and remade American Jewish communities. Once a source of unity among American Jews, the idea of America and its

history has become the source of often bitter contention. The binding trauma of the Holocaust is receding as those who lived through World War II pass away. At the same time, the broader cultural habits that once sustained the central institutions of mainline affiliated Jewish life—synagogues, federations, community centers, day schools—have shifted so dramatically that the future of these institutions increasingly appears to be in jeopardy.

These processes began many years ago. Now the full force of their effects has begun to be felt. American Jewish life is perhaps more contentious, more incoherent, and more disorganized than at any point in the last seventy-five years.

American Jews have never agreed about everything. There is not and has never been unanimity on any issue, and especially not on religious matters: not about the strictures of Jewish law, marriage between Jews and non-Jews, or the place of women in ritual life. Unlike in most other countries, there is no chief rabbi of the United States, nor is there any organizational body designated as the official, government-recognized representative of the country's Jews. Though this decentralization has often frustrated U.S. politicians and Jewish communal leaders alike, it is arguably one of the reasons for American Judaism's persistent diversity.

Yet there *was* for a time a consensus about the core pillars of mainstream American Jewish identity. It began to emerge at the turn of the twentieth century. By mid-century, with the end of World War II and Israel's founding shortly thereafter, it had solidified.

The consensus was a product of the period that *Life* magazine founder Henry R. Luce famously deemed "the American century"—an era of national prosperity and optimism, of American stewardship of a new international order, and, for most American Jews, of upward mobility and integration. It was a time, in other words, very different from our own.

The first pillar of this consensus was Americanism. Most Jews today are the descendants of immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1880, when a wave of pogroms began in eastern Europe, and 1924, when the United States effectively closed its doors to Jews. They came to this place because they believed in America's promise: that even if they would need to work hard until the day they died, they, and certainly their children, would have a greater chance at a better life than in the old country.

America delivered on this promise. It provided the Jews who fled eastern Europe in the first decades of the century with a level of material and physical security that they had never known before. Although America was not free from antisemitism, and forms of anti-Jewish discrimination would remain legal until after World War II, the country's commercial and meritocratic culture offered Jews the opportunity to ascend through the echelons of the class structure. In the postwar period, the elimination of limits on Jewish civil rights in America made possible a once unthinkable level of prosperity and integration. At the same time, America's cold war against Soviet totalitarianism and support for Israel seemed to confirm America's role as guardian of the Jewish people on the world stage.

Such conditions produced a belief in the inherent and exceptional goodness of America, at home and abroad. It was, this Americanism, a kind of faith. Even as early as 1911, the German-born Kaufmann Kohler, a leading Reform rabbi, proclaimed "the concordance of Judaism and Americanism" and celebrated America as "the land of promise for all the persecuted." Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, prominent American Jewish intellectuals continued to formulate arguments about how the American spirit and the Jewish ethos were providentially matched. For much of the last one hundred years, and especially the last fifty, this faith in the unique benevolence of America as demonstrated by the singularity of the American Jewish experience has been shared across the American Jewish political and

religious spectrum: liberals and conservatives, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Irving Kristol, Reform and Modern Orthodox Jews.

But while Americanization gave much to American Jews, it also exacted a significant and ultimately devastating cost. The theorists of cultural pluralism might have hoped otherwise, but, in practice, fully joining the American project entailed the suppression and surrender of what had been the dominant forms of eastern European Jewishness: traditionalist Orthodoxy and left-wing Yiddish radicalism. These were the roots of eastern European Jewry; making it in America required that they be severed.

They did not disappear without resistance, and Orthodoxy would later be revived and reinvented. Their eclipse by the belief in Americanism was, however, as much the product of a consensual relinquishment as it was of cultural and state repression. With remarkable rapidity, American Jewish integration and upward mobility accomplished the wholesale destruction of older forms of life, organizations, languages, and cultural memory. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a collective act of willful self-denial fueled by the hope of a materially better and physically more secure life. That this hope was realized made the price seem reasonable for a long time, when it was perceived at all.

The second pillar was Zionism. It emerged later and only became a dominant fact of American Jewish life in the years after Israel's founding in 1948. Zionism rescued American Judaism at the very moment, marked by mid-century embourgeoisement and suburban anomie, when a cultural and religious crisis appeared imminent. In the words of the socialist literary critic Irving Howe, Zionism enabled American Jews "to postpone that inner reconsideration of 'Jewishness' which the American condition required." Difficult questions about theology or the adaptability of halacha (Jewish law) to postwar realities diminished in significance or could be sidestepped with the material fact of

a sovereign state at the center of Jewish life. If meaning could not be found in liturgy or in synagogue, it could now be found in fundraising for the United Jewish Appeal, the American Jewish Committee, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). American Jews imagined Israel as a moral beacon and Zionism as the secular fulfillment of the religious faith in which they could no longer really believe.

Zionism was not unconnected to Americanism. The two reinforced each other, particularly after the 1967 Six-Day War. Since the places where most American Jews' families came from no longer existed, Israel provided American Jews with a stretch of territory with which they could identify and with an existential insurance policy for Jewish life in the Holocaust's shadow. American Jews would no longer be uniquely homeless among the other "hyphenated Americans," who could all point back with pride to some ancestral homeland. With the first wave of identity politics in the 1960s, the image of the Israeli sabra—assertive, militant, masculine—gave American Jews a new and inspiring archetype of Jewishness radically opposed to the weak and neurotic figure of the nebbish. And Israel offered not only psychological compensation; it also offered a pathway, aliyah, for the Jews of the diaspora to become like their Israeli counterparts, although it was an option that very few American Jews chose. At the level of politics, Zionism provided a unifying framework for American Jewish organizations to lobby, like other ethnic groups, for what they took to be their group interest. And as the Cold War brought Israel into the Western camp, opposed to the Soviet Union and its proxies in the Third World, American Jews came to see the United States not simply as Israel's most important guarantor but as an exemplar of the values Israel embodied in miniature.

Yet, if the adoption of Americanism required self-amputation, the enthusiastic embrace of Zionism has engendered a moral myopia. American Zionism, which imagined the Jewish state as the telos of Jewish history and the culmination of its religious development,

substituted an ancient ethical tradition of divine commandment with the profane imperatives of a modern nation-state. And whereas Americanism demanded the abandonment of older forms of Jewish being, Zionism degraded these older forms of diasporic Jewishness as inferior. In its classical political version, Zionism sought "the negation of the diaspora," to reinvent a "new Jew" who was the photographic negative of his older counterpart.

Worse, it did not take long for the violence that Israel's founding entailed to inflect Jewish life across the Atlantic. Today, Israeli nationalism threatens to transform Jewish ritual into something hard and violent: into a weapon. It has buoyed chauvinist, selfish, even racist forms of Jewish expression. From the late 1950s onward, Israel's reliance on U.S. military backing has imbricated Jewish flourishing with the exercise of American power as oppressed people around the world began to throw off empires' chains.

The third pillar was liberalism. When the great masses of European Jewry arrived in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, America's liberalism enabled their flourishing. The old ecclesiastical barriers to Jewish political participation—exclusionary oaths and religious tests for public officeholders—had long since fallen away. With no established church or state religion, the modern liberal constitution did not make citizenship contingent on confession or creed. With its emphasis on the rights of the individual, liberalism claimed to diminish the significance of ethnic or religious background and group belonging. (Race, of course, was an entirely different matter.) And with religious observance considered, for the most part, a private matter of personal choice—in no small part due to advocacy efforts of American Jewish organizations—American Jews could fully realize the emancipationist goal, as the Russian Jewish poet Yehuda Leib Gordon famously put it, of being Jews in the home and men on the street.

Beneficiaries of the country's pluralism, individualism, and volun-

tarism, American Jews quickly adopted these liberal values as the basis for Jewish life. By the early postwar years, sociologists began to observe that most American Jews had relinquished whatever vestiges of traditionalist Judaism they had inherited from earlier generations. They no longer heeded divine authority as the arbiter of Jewish practice. Instead, as historian Stephen Whitfield put it, they surveyed their "vast sacramental heritage" and selected the practices that they found "subjectively possible to accept." They fit Judaism into the mold of their suburban, middle-class lives, and whatever could not fit they cast aside. American Judaism's most fundamental axiom was not sacred obligation; it was now reduced to personal choice.

But it soon turned out that what worked for liberal America could not work for Judaism. The idea of obligation—the meaning of *mitzvah*, the core of Jewish life—fell out of fashion in a liberal capitalist culture that sacralizes individual self-expression and self-gratification. The logic of the market reduced all aspects of life to fungible value, and religious practice became, like Pilates or yoga, just another consumer good. In a world of infinite choice and limitless growth, the kind of commitment and restraint required to sustain community increasingly appeared as an unjustifiable and unpalatable anachronism. By the late twentieth century, American Jews had become such good liberals that they could no longer give themselves compelling reasons for why they should live Jewish lives in terms other than those American liberalism furnished for them.

In the political realm, American Jewish liberalism also reached its apex during the postwar years. Liberalism both absorbed and outlived the energies of the immigrant radicalism that Jews brought with them from the Pale of Settlement. With the start of the Cold War, Jewish intellectuals began to articulate a more conservative liberalism that saw in almost all forms of mass politics the threat of totalitarianism or the risk of another Auschwitz. Many American Jews, now newly middle-class, arrayed themselves fully behind anti-communism, which would remain a dominant tendency in Jewish life until the Soviet

Union's fall. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, most Jews supported the civil rights struggle in its heroic period, when its goals remained the full realization of procedural egalitarianism and the elimination of discrimination. But by the early 1970s, the rise of Black Power and the demands for reparative and redistributive measures such as affirmative action and busing met resistance from many American Jews. For some, like the neoconservatives, the appearance of a more assertive Black politics precipitated a break with the postwar liberal consensus entirely.

Now, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, the pillars that once defined American Jewish life have ceased to be viable. The re-emergence of antisemitism in U.S. politics, crystallized so brutally with the 2018 massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue—the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history—has ended any last illusions about America's exceptional goodness. So, too, has the eruption of antisemitic sentiment against the backdrop of the 2023–2024 Gaza war. At the same time, the so-called national reckoning on race has prompted a reconsideration of once overlooked parts of American history, casting new light on past injustices that continue to shape the present, blemishes now thought to be irrevocably woven into the national design. At home, a divided, polarized polity has begotten new species of collective delusions and violent extremisms; each attempt to reform a broken system is met with a more ferocious backlash. Abroad, two decades of a disastrous war on terror revealed the projection of U.S. power to be not a heroic and liberatory force but a deadly and destructive one. The world that gave rise to Americanism in the twentieth century is gone.

Zionism, likewise, is cracking. For an older generation of American Jews, a mythologized vision of a progressive, social democratic Israel served as a source of moral inspiration. That view is much less preva-

lent today. While there are still young Jews—mainly those who grew up in mainline affiliated communities like mine—who continue to view Israel as a spiritual beacon, increasing numbers of young American Jews have only known Israel as an authoritarian state and regional military power hurtling down a path of ever more extreme ethnonationalism. At the same time, Palestinians have found new platforms for describing their ongoing dispossession and oppression after having long been denied what Edward Said called the “permission to narrate” their own experiences. Among the non-Jewish public, too, the Zionist narrative is weaker than at any time since the 1960s.

The imagined perfect compatibility of Judaism and American liberal capitalist culture is also unraveling. Unadulterated liberalism has begun to erode the Jewish communities whose flourishing it once enabled. Jewish organizational leaders lament endlessly about rising rates of disaffiliation and intermarriage, seemingly unaware that the decline of religious participation is not a unique Jewish phenomenon but a feature of life in most postindustrial Western democracies. Desperate to reverse these sociological trends, they propose futile and shallow outreach efforts—singles events, Birthright Israel—that reduce Judaism to a frivolous ornament. They plow vast sums of money into superficial programming in the hope that pro-Israel hedonism can restore the mid-century status quo.

What these Jewish establishment leaders fail to realize is that their institutions are declining, not because Judaism has been insufficiently liberalized, commodified, or sanitized, but because individual fulfillment, gratification of the sovereign self, has replaced communal and familial obligation as the basis for the good life. A live-and-let-live relativism has made it impossible to justify commitment to one form of life over another. The cultivation and pursuit of endless options have become obstacles that fatally impede the long-term work of creating and sustaining community. Most establishment Jewish leaders still believe that Judaism ought to be in harmony with America's individualistic and

liberal capitalist culture, rather than an alternative to it. They do so, I believe, at their institutions' peril.

Finally, two of the most fundamental anchors of mainstream American Jewish life are also falling away. More than seventy-five years after the liberation of Auschwitz, the memory of the Holocaust grows ever more attenuated. Soon there will no longer be any living survivors.

In the American Jewish collective consciousness, the Holocaust has functioned as the historical glue of the postwar synthesis. The Holocaust illuminated America's exceptional goodness by contrast to European barbarism and by virtue of America's defeat of the Nazis. It confirmed the absolute necessity of Israel as existential insurance policy. It reinforced the necessity of the open, liberal society for Jewish flourishing. Holocaust memory concretized a shared sense of victimhood, a sensitivity to the historically precarious nature of Jewish survival, and a filial duty that, for many American Jews, is often the primary reason they give for their continued Jewish identification. But this is a role the Holocaust can fulfill for only so long. While creative opportunists continue feverishly to mine the event for content, this is just another indication that the Holocaust is leaving the realm of present memory, transforming, like the Spanish Inquisition, into a matter of the distant Jewish past.

An equally seismic shift will have been completed within the next two decades. Contemporary American Jewish identity took shape during the half century when the United States boasted the world's largest and most affluent Jewish population in the world. Today, not only has Israel already overtaken the United States as the largest single locus of global Jewish life; by 2050, demographers predict, the *majority* of the world's Jews will live in Israel, an estimated 8.1 million, compared to the estimated 5.4 million who will remain in the United States.

For the first time in two millennia, diaspora will not define the condition of Jewish life. Instead, most Jews will live in a sovereign nation-state, led by Jews, where the language of the Bible is spoken as

the vernacular, where Jewish holidays set the calendar, where an Orthodox rabbinate rules on all matters between birth and death, and where Jews constitute the privileged class within a regime that denies equal rights to all who live under it. The Israeli Jew, raised to live by the sword, his Jewishness taken for granted, will become the norm. The diaspora Jew, the American Jew, defined by a certain double consciousness, by the ambivalences of past exclusion and tentative inclusion, has begun his slouch off of Jewish history's center stage.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the prevailing emotions of contemporary American Jewish life are anxiety and division. American Jewish life is more conflictual than at any point since the first half of the twentieth century because the foundations of American Jewish life that were built in the last century have begun to crumble.

But, perhaps counterintuitively, this is also a reason for optimism. "Destruction," the great scholar of Judaism Gershom Scholem once said, "is both liberation and risk." There may be opportunity in the collapse of an ossified and fatally obsolete consensus.

Traditional Jewish sources teach us about the necessity of destruction for the sake of preserving the sacred community. In Tractate Shabbat of the Babylonian Talmud, the compendium of Jewish law completed in the fifth century CE, a well-known passage comments on Moses's destruction of the first pair of stone tablets when he discovered that the people of Israel had begun to worship the golden calf. "Moses did three things of his own accord that God agreed with," the sages write. "He added one day ahead to the preparations for receiving the Torah, he instructed the Israelites to separate men from women before it, and he broke the tablets." How do we know that God agreed with Moses's breaking the tablets? the sages ask. "Because it says the tablets *that you broke*"—in Hebrew, *asher shibarta*. To which the sage Reish Lakish replies, punning on the line "*Yasher koach she'shibarta*": "Congratulations that you broke them." The rabbis of the Talmud

took the implicit rhyme to show that Moses's actions and God's intentions were in sync.

For Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, a powerful and enigmatic Orthodox thinker, this was a remarkable text. It testified to the recognition, deep within the tradition, that received wisdom sometimes requires a radical challenge: that "sometimes," he wrote, what appears to be "the nullification of the Torah may in fact be its upholding." In the same way, if the pillars that once sustained Jewish life have lost their power, if they have become pernicious idols like the golden calf, then letting them fall—or, better yet, bringing them down—is not a betrayal of Judaism but the first step to its renewal. If today the old assumptions of American Jewish life are shattered like the first pair of tablets broken by Moses in the shadow of Mount Sinai, that may not be a bad thing at all.

This book is about the fracturing of American Jewish life in the twenty-first century. It is also about attempts to reconstitute Jewish life amid the ruins. It traces how the pillars of the postwar Jewish consensus were built and why they began to crumble. It seeks to provide a tour of the contemporary Jewish landscape and illuminate the diverse and sometimes contradictory attempts by American Jews to find new foundations for their religious identities and communal lives. It surveys the shifting center of global Jewish gravity—from the United States to Israel—and assesses the conflicts that are already arising between the two countries' vastly divergent forms of Judaism and Jewish identity. Lastly, it charts four paths for the future of American Jewish life.

Over the two years of working on this book, I interviewed more than one hundred people. They are communal leaders, Jewish educators, and Torah scholars; anti-occupation and Palestine-solidarity activists, advocates for racial equality, and defenders of immigrants' rights; pathbreaking gay and lesbian rabbis, innovators of queer Talmud

study, and Jewish ritual entrepreneurs; Haredi community leaders, Orthodox education reformers, and whistleblowers; and Israeli journalists, politicians, and former peace negotiators.

Naturally, this book is also personal. I am a product and symptom of nearly all the historical and sociological processes that I cover here. I am implicated in the collectivities that I analyze. Born within a main-line affiliated community, I married into a Haredi family. My children will have Israeli citizenship. I live "al hakav"—on the line, as Israelis say—between New York and Tel Aviv.

The history of the last century of American Jewish life is the history of my family, which I chart here, beginning with my great-grandmother Bessie's arrival to New York. The construction and collapse of the postwar consensus has conditioned the course of my life. I, too, have been guided by my individual conscience and have tried on different modes of life in search of one that fits.

Tablets Shattered is the result of my past and present grappling with Jewishness, America, and Israel, and it is informed by, and indebted to, the many people I have met, debated, and befriended in the process. I have felt this wrestling with Jewish politics and identity to be an urgent task, not only because of the sense of crisis that has pervaded my entire early adulthood, but also because the future of Jewish life, in the United States and in Israel, is of the utmost significance to me.

How to reconstitute Jewish life amid the unraveling of American society and the moral bankruptcy of contemporary Zionism. How to build community in an age of widespread alienation and atomization. How to live justly in a culture that often prioritizes selfishness over compassion. These are the questions that motivate this book. They keep me up at night. As this book shows, they sit at the center of many people's lives too.

Although my adolescent break with the community in which I grew up first turned me into an activist—and this is largely how I spent my early twenties—I ceased to view myself as an activist long ago.

Instead, I am by trade a journalist. While I have made no secret of my political and religious commitments here, I have endeavored to be fair to those with whom I disagree. It is not possible to write from the perspective of “no place” or with the voice from “nowhere.”

It is my hope that the story of modern American Jewish life, the disintegration of the consensus that once defined it, and the efforts by American Jews to reconstitute communal life anew appear here in a new light. While parts of this story have been told before, the act of retelling and reinterpreting is at the core of Jewish practice. The perennial return to and reimagining of common narratives, which renders them at once strange and familiar, is perhaps the essence of what it means to belong to a particular tradition.

So we begin at the beginning, with the dawn of the American Jewish century.

PART ONE