

# Biden and the Jews

## Will the new US administration be a catalyst for Zionism?

By Gol Kalev

**NEARLY 80%** of American Jews voted for US President-elect Joe Biden. Aspects of his victory provide tailwind to the realization that Judaism is transforming.

Through both positive and negative connections, Zionism is becoming the primary manner through which Jews relate to Judaism and the prism by which the outside world perceives the Jews. For many American Jews, criticism of Israel has become the primary Jewish-related activity – that too is a connection to one's Judaism through Zionism.

With the exception of Orthodox and non-Orthodox involved in Jewish causes (estimated to collectively be well below 20% of American Jews), Judaism is low on the American Jew's hierarchy of identities. Israel, on the other hand, is constantly in the American Jew's feed, in the news he reads and in water-cooler conversations he has. Israel invokes an emotional reaction for Americans in general, while topics involving the Jewish religion or culture do not.

This is certainly the case for religious Christians, many of which seek to relate to the life of Jesus in Judea, and view support for Israel in a religious context. In particular, African-American Christians, a core constituent of Biden, maintain an emotional connection to Israel that is reflected through gospels, prayers and core-beliefs. Biden himself shared his emotional connection to Israel in a conversation he had with *The Jerusalem Report's* editor-in-chief Steve Linde in 2014, saying that he backs Israel in his head, heart and gut. He tapped Linde in all three places to demonstrate this support.

Zionism invokes emotions also in the negative. In progressive circles, Israel is the most significant Jewish issue. When Sen. Bernie Sanders, a harsh critic of Israel's policies, was asked in 2019 about his Jewish affiliation, he chose to speak about the time he spent on a kibbutz.

Zionism has become the most relevant (or least irrelevant) aspect of Judaism for American Jews. Hence, it is only natural that a Jew would center his Jewish identity around

Judea – around Zionism. This is just like an Irish-American centers his Irish identity around Ireland, a Cuban-American around Cuba, and a Jamaican-American around Jamaica.

Yet for American Jews, the fear of dual-loyalty accusations had stood in the way. Whether driven by trauma or experience, such fear hindered the intensity of American Jews' embrace of Zionism. This in turn contributed to American Jews viewing themselves, not as one of the many ethnological national groups that compose the American mosaic, but rather as a "religious minority." As a result, Judaism, a nation-religion since its inception, had been reduced in America to a religion ("The Jewish Church").

With the Biden election, it is time for American Jews to end their dual-loyalty-phobia which is inconsistent with contemporary American realities.

US Vice President-elect Kamala Harris openly celebrates her Indian and Jamaican affiliation and certainly nobody accuses her of dual loyalty. Similarly, Republican Sens. Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz celebrate their Cuban affiliation and nobody suspects that this implies an endorsement of the Cuban government's policies.

Biden's election underscores that not only is America no longer homogeneous, but also that an individual American can have multiple identities: His profession, sexual orientation, race, college alumnus, and indeed his ethnological national affiliation. There is a broad bipartisan encouragement of the various branches of Americanism, as long as those are anchored in the strong core American trunk (in contrast to the European model of parallel societies in competition and mutual-negation of one-another – a zero-sum game).

Therefore, in today's America, for a Jew to artificially suppress his ethnological national affiliation (Zionism) would arguably be out of sync with today's Americanism. A Jew celebrating his Zionism, is a celebration of Americanism.

This reality received official recognition

in December 2019 when US President Donald Trump issued an executive order stating that Judaism is a nationality. Democrats and Republicans alike overwhelmingly supported this and were even in the process of drafting a bipartisan bill in Congress to state the same. With the new executive order, those seeking to discriminate Jews cannot hide behind the claim that Judaism is merely a religion and not a nation. The US government made clear what is obvious to Americans and people around the world: The Jews are indeed a nation-religion.

The Jewish state provides a physical point-of-orientation and tangible mechanism to relate to Judaism, for Jews and non-Jews alike. In a sense, replacing the synagogue as that Jewish point-of-orientation (85% of American non-Jews do not attend synagogue regularly).

The recent success of Israel allows a Jew to connect to his Judaism from America in a natural and willing manner. He can choose from the broad range of connecting-points that are suitable to him, such as consuming Israeli wine, speaking-out against the settlements, celebrating Israeli gay culture, following Israeli hi-tech and medical innovations or watching Israeli TV series on Netflix such as *Fauda* or *Shtisel*. An organic connection to Judaism through choice replaces the reluctant connection to Judaism through duty.

The election of Biden also symbolizes another aspect that should contribute to American Jews' ability to center their Jewish identity around Zionism. It dispels the myth that religion in America is associated only with the Republican party. In his victory speech, Biden said: "On eagle's wings, we embark on the work that God and history have called upon us to do." He went on to describe his mission to spread the faith and in the last sentence of his speech mentioned God three times. Harris makes frequent religious references, such as calling the current year, "The year of our Lord."

Indeed, America is a deeply religious country, but American Jews are not. In fact,

they are perceived to be flag-carriers of secularism in America and at the forefront of efforts to make America feel less religious.

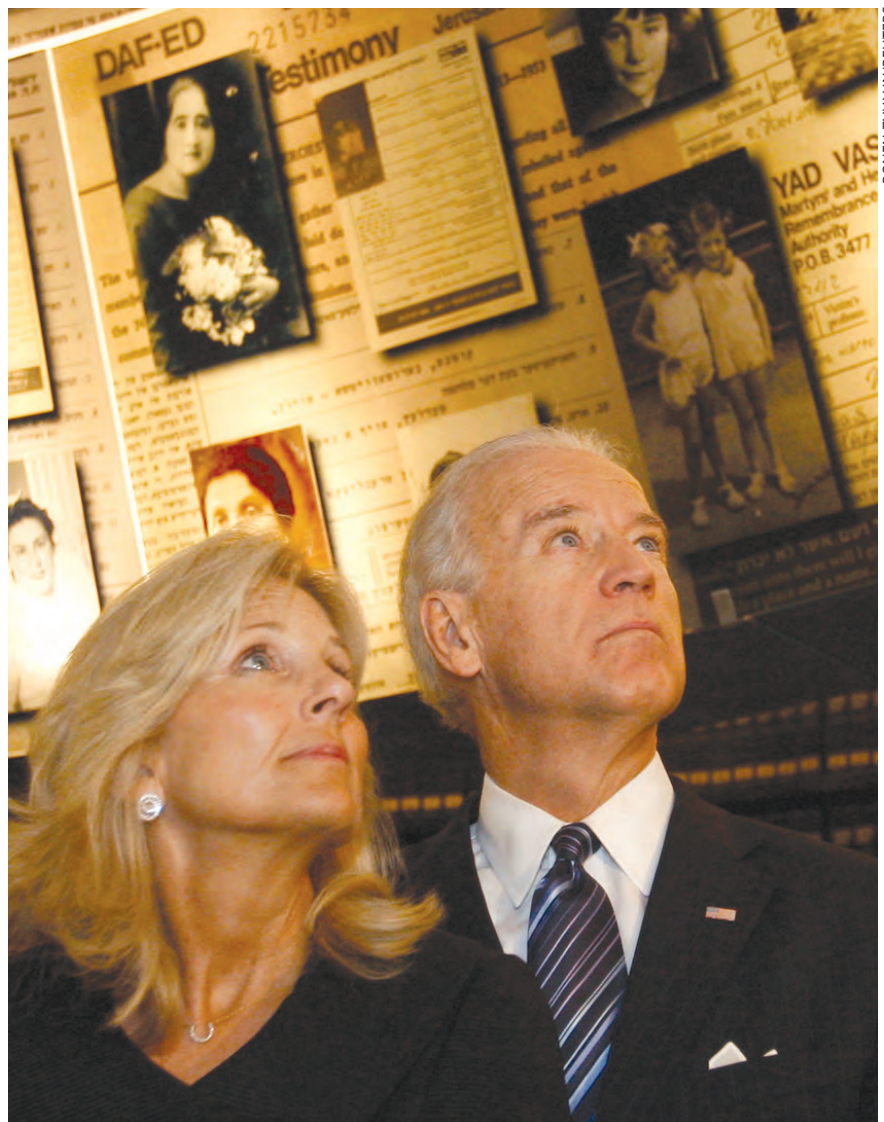
Israel, like America, is a deeply religious country as well. For example, 63% of Israeli Jews fast on Yom Kippur and 93% attend a Passover Seder. The majority of Israeli Jews self-describe themselves as haredi (ultra-Orthodox), national-religious or traditional, and even the secular minority increasingly consumes religious experience a la carte.

Indeed, *Datlash* – Hebrew acronym for sometimes religious – is arguably the predominant stream of Israeli secularism. Zionism allows the American Jew, not only to have a relevant conduit to his Judaism, but also to be associated with a religious society (Israel), even though he himself is not.

It is not only that Americans are religious, but as reflected through Biden's religious messages, Americanism has been and remains a religious ideal. Notwithstanding the sacred separation of church and state, America was established as "One nation under God." On its currency an American motto is clearly stated: "In God We Trust."

Hence, there is a perceived structural disconnect between American Jews' secular-philas and the American ideal. Yet once Jews would stop defining themselves as a "religious minority" – that is, as a religious minority that does not practice religion - and instead redefine themselves more naturally through their ethnological national affiliation - Zionism, they will be in greater unison with the predominate American ethos. Judaism as Zionism is much more in-tune with Americanism than Judaism as secularism.

Biden labeled his campaign as a "battle for the soul of the nation." Indeed, from the beginning of America, that soul was about the renewal of an ancient promise: The establishment of new Jerusalem, the return to new Zion, the return to God, the freedom to worship, the rejection of the oppressive dogmas of Europe, including of European chronic and rigid opposition to Judaism. From the onset, Americanism was a form of abstract Zionism. When tangible Jewish Zi-



RONEN ZVULUN/REUTERS

Then-vice president Joe Biden and his wife, Jill, visit the Hall of Names at Yad Vashem on March 9, 2010. Quoting the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, Biden wrote in the visitors' book: 'Every day Israel makes a lie of the poet's words – too long a suffering makes a stone of the heart.'

onism began to take shape, it was philosophically synergistic with the American version of Zionism.

The US and the State of Israel are rooted in a bedrock of related ideologies: the US in Americanism, Israel in Zionism. Those solid roots allow both countries to safely weather intense polarizing environments, such as the ones experienced throughout 2020.

The year 2020 also challenged conventional thinking and gave us better tools to comprehend change. The confidence that the Biden victory provides to American Jews allows them to now delve into an inevitable conversation about Judaism and Zionism that has been brewing under the surface

for over 120 years, ever since Theodor Herzl planted the seed for a Jewish transformation.

"America is an idea!" These were the first words that Joe Biden uttered when announcing his run for president in 2019. Indeed, the US is not just a place where its citizens live. It is an idea that is innately intertwined with Zionism. Biden's election marks a great time for Jews to return to Judaism through Zionism. ■

*The writer is the author of upcoming book 'Judaism 3.0 – Judaism's transformation to Zionism' (Visit [Judaism-Zionism.com](http://Judaism-Zionism.com)).*

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