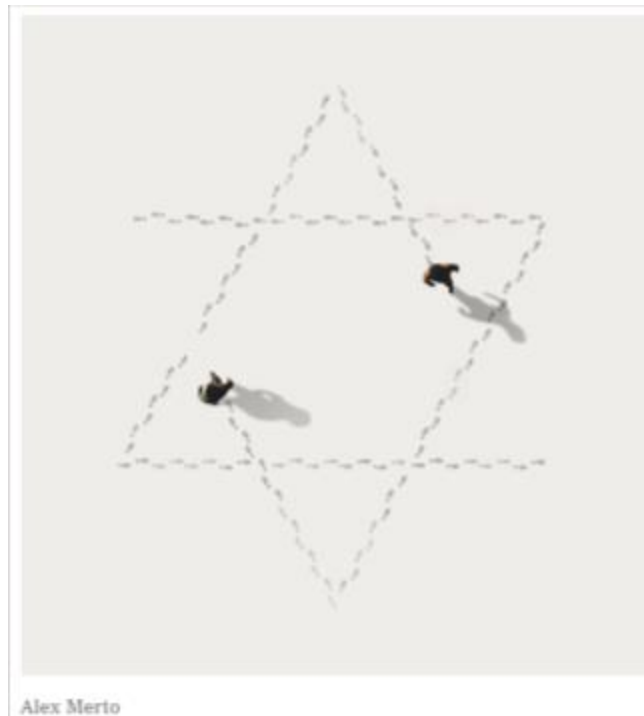


# *Is Israel Part of What It Means to Be Jewish?*

Some progressive Jews are embracing “diasporism” — reimagining their faith as one that blesses their lives in America and elsewhere.

By [Marc Tracy](#) Published Jan. 14, 2024 Updated Jan. 16, 2024



Last month, on the first night of Hanukkah, more than 200 people packed an old ballroom on the third floor of a restored synagogue in Brooklyn. A few came fresh off the subway from a [protest](#) in Manhattan that was organized by left-wing Jewish groups calling for a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war.

They were there to hear from Shaul Magid, 65, whose long, thin white beard and shaved head made him look more like a roadie than a rabbi. A professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth as well

as (yes) a rabbi, Mr. Magid was there to spread the message elucidated in a new book, “The Necessity of Exile,” that Jews today outside Israel — 75 percent of whom live in the United States — should embrace diaspora, the state of living outside a homeland, as a permanent and valuable condition.

“If there’s a diasporic reality where Jews have been able to live as Jews, flourish as Jews, not to be oppressed and persecuted — whether they choose to be a Satmar Hasid or Larry David, it doesn’t matter — if they’re allowed to live the Judaism they want, why would that be a tragedy?” he said.

Mr. Magid’s outlook is one of several burgeoning visions for the future of Jewish life that fall under the umbrella of “diasporism.” The idea has been getting a new look since Hamas’s horrific attack on Israel three months ago and Israel’s [pulverizing](#) bombing campaign and invasion in Gaza. Those events have forced Jews everywhere to reckon anew with what they think about Israel and the [central role](#) it plays in Jewish life — the kind of charged moment when members of spiritual communities can ask themselves what really matters, and sometimes reach radically different conclusions.



Rabbi Shaul Magid, a professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth, embraces diaspora, the state of living outside a homeland, as a permanent and valuable condition. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Some versions of diasporism are secular, [often hearkening back](#) to the un-religious, anti-Zionist Jewish Labor Bund that arose in late 19th-century Eastern Europe — the same time and place where political Zionism was born — to agitate for Jewish rights in the European empires of the day. The Bund’s slogan of “doikayt,” a Yiddish word that roughly means “hereness,” has been [adopted](#) by [younger left-wing Jews](#).

“This socialist, secular, liberatory philosophy,” said Molly Crabapple, an artist and writer working on a history of the Bund, “whether it was the Bund or the larger world of Yiddish socialism, is deeply interwoven into our heritage,” and “can provide a moral compass and help people reject exclusionary and violent ideologies.”

Other flavors are religious. The Berkeley professor emeritus Daniel Boyarin has called the Babylonian Talmud — a rulebook for living Jewishly, composed in exile — the true Jewish homeland.

Zionism, at least at its most doctrinaire, insists a Jew can achieve total realization as a Jew only by living in Israel. Shlilat ha-golah, Hebrew for “negation of the exile,” was an early Zionist slogan.

Diasporism, by contrast, holds the inverse: that Jews must embrace marginality and a certain estrangement from Israel the country, and perhaps even Israel the place. “Anybody who cares seriously about being a Jew,” goes an epigraph to Mr. Magid’s book from the late American theologian Eugene Borowitz, “is in Exile and would be in Exile even if that person were in Jerusalem.”



A menorah-lighting ceremony in Manhattan on the first night of Hanukkah last month.  
Jonah Markowitz for The New York Times

## ‘Putting One’s Head in the Sand’

In 2024, anti-Zionism is the closest thing organized Judaism has to heresy.

The land of Israel is central to the religion, the foundational narrative of which is about returning from slavery to the Promised Land. Over centuries of exile, Jews have pledged, “Next year in Jerusalem,” and prayed facing that city. Places of pilgrimage dot Israel’s map — many in parts controversially annexed or occupied after war. Synagogues everywhere pay homage to the original, destroyed Temples in Jerusalem, the site of which remains sacred.

Seventy-five years after its founding in May 1948 — and decades following its victory in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, which captivated American Jews (while also initiating the occupation of stateless Palestinians) — the modern state of Israel continues to draw widespread support among Jews throughout the world.

This is true in countries, like France, where antisemitic incidents [have led to increases](#) in Jewish emigration to Israel. But it is also true in the United States, where many Jews have achieved historic levels of privilege and security — and Israel has functioned as a common flag, in a sense, for the community to rally around.

Diasporism, in other words, is a distinctly minority position. It is easily seen as dismissive of the more than seven million Jews in Israel — more than in any other country, and most of them refugees or their descendants from places from which they understandably fled, like 1930s Europe, or to which they may not be welcome to return, like elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. (Even the satirical diasporism in Philip Roth’s 1993 novel “Operation Shylock” envisions only Jews from Europe going back where they came from.) It can seem a willful blindness to the centuries of persecution and pogroms, culminating in the Holocaust, that convinced most Jews as well as the international community that Israel needed to exist.

“To posit the credibility of an early 20th-century ideology that had some impact on interwar Europe until much of East and Central

Europe was obliterated by forces diasporism could never have predicted, while ignoring the reality of millions and millions of people, is an exercise in putting one's head in the sand," said Steven J. Zipperstein, a professor of Jewish culture and history at Stanford University.

And for most Jews, Oct. 7, in which Hamas killed or kidnapped nearly 1,500 Israelis, provoked solidarity and viscerally reminded them of Israel's *raison d'être*. This is one reason most everyone in the American Jewish establishment, from the Republican Jewish Coalition to social justice-minded Reform rabbis, has steadfastly stood with Israel in the months since.



Jewish anti-Trump protesters holding a sign that says, "If Not Now" in Washington, D.C., in December 2016. Gabriella Demczuk for The New York Times

But some Jews have been repelled by Israel's military response, which has killed approximately 23,000, according to Gazan officials. Membership in IfNotNow, an American Jewish group critical of Israel, has more than doubled since Oct. 7, according to a spokesman. The weekly newsletter of Jewish Voice for Peace, an anti-Zionist group, went to 43,000 people on Oct. 4, said a



spokeswoman, and to 350,000 two months later.

Mr. Magid, a dual U.S.-Israeli citizen, favors one state for Israeli Jews and Palestinians, but he said in an interview that he also would welcome a negotiated two-state solution. More than its shape, Israel's centrality to Judaism elsewhere is what he hopes can be adjusted.

"Israel has become the substitute for Jewish identity," he said. "And we have at least a 2,000-year history — maybe longer, certainly 2,000-year. A robust history. We have to grab a hold of that and basically take it back from those who took it away from us."

## An Abstract Concept

For Mr. Magid, a thriving 21st-century Judaism without Israel at its core must include a return to religion — "always the thing," he said, "that's going to keep us together."

That religion is based around exile, largely arising after the Romans' destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70. (Ancient Jewish translators described the dispersion forecast in the Torah with the Greek word for "scattering": diaspora.) Rabbis fashioned substitutes for holy requirements that could no longer be performed: prayers instead of animal sacrifices; arks for Torah scrolls instead of the Temple's inner sanctum.

"One of the crucial things diaspora does is shape this idea of Judaism as a portable identity, not wedded to land — you can maintain a vibrant Jewish culture and religion, remain a faithful and observant Jew," said Daniel B. Schwartz, a professor of Jewish history at George Washington University. Even if this Judaism "incorporated a longing for Zion within its liturgy and law," Mr. Schwartz added, "how messianic was your average Jew in the Middle Ages? Probably not that much."



A Babylonian Talmud text at Bard College. Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

But a fully diasporic Judaism — especially in a world in which Jewish exile is, thanks to Israel, no longer involuntary — remains an abstract concept. Mr. Boyarin, the Berkeley professor emeritus and Talmudist, conceives of a diaspora that values its connections to other Jewish communities — including Israel's, but not privileging it. Mr. Magid in his book examines some Hasidic sects that avoid encouraging emigration to Israel, believing it heretically pre-empts the messianic redemption.

Younger American Jews have their own ideas. Relaunching the left-wing journal Jewish Currents in 2018, then-publisher Jacob Plitman [described](#) “an emerging diasporism” that balanced “a critical awareness of Israel” with “a commitment to struggling primarily in the communities in which we live.” The magazine has been forthrightly left-wing, as likely to center the Palestinian as the Jewish perspective.

Simon Schama, a university professor of art history and history at Columbia who has published two volumes of “The Story of the Jews,” rejects diasporism, arguing that longing for the land of



Israel is an inescapable aspect of Jewish texts, from poetry of medieval Spain to everyday religious liturgy sung in 2024.

“They would all have been astounded to learn of ‘diasporism’ as somehow the ‘fulfillment,’ as you say their champions put it, of Judaism,” Mr. Schama said in an email of earlier Jews. “And so would most Jews singing of next year in Jerusalem towards the end of every Passover Seder.”

## ‘The Promised Land’

Diasporism’s limitations emerge starkly when one applies the concept to another people: the Palestinians. The statelessness of the Jewish past, after all, still describes the Palestinian present. The notion that Palestinians ought to accept their lot in the name of a high-minded ideology would strike Jewish diasporists, who tend to favor Palestinian self-determination, as noxious.

“The Jewish refugees from Europe — I think about them stateless, helpless,” said Sayed Kashua, a Palestinian-Israeli writer who now lives in the United States. “This plan of having a state, the modern national state that I’m not a huge fan of, was the only protection. So now it’s the majority of the Palestinians who have replaced the Jewish stateless, defenseless people.”

Citing Hannah Arendt, a Jew born in Germany in 1906, Mr. Kashua argued that talk of human rights by itself was insufficient to protect people. “She writes about how we talk a lot about humanity,” he said, “but when you strip out everything and remain only with humanity, you’re the most vulnerable creature on earth.”

Most likely, diasporism will not triumph among Jewry worldwide or even in the United States. But neither does a return to the monumental stature Zionism enjoyed here after the 1967 war

seem inevitable. Instead, a sharp divide is emerging between two increasingly distinct Jewish communities: one in Israel, one not.



A rally by members of the Jewish Voice for Peace and the IfNotNow movement in a federal building in Washington, D.C., in October. Alex Wong/Getty Images

If Oct. 7 inspired closer feelings to Israel for some Jews, for others its aftermath left them alienated from nationalism altogether. Confronted in the days after Hamas’s attack with the notion that dying as a Jew in Israel represented a nobler death, the writer John Ganz [said](#) in a newsletter post, “When I die, I hope it will be here in New York, the promised land, surrounded by my brothers: all the different peoples of the world.”

Still others yearn for a more moderate diasporism, with the two Jewish communities in productive tension.

Alan Wolfe, a Boston University professor emeritus of history and author of “At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews,” said that last year — as a far-right Israeli government [sought](#) to diminish the judiciary’s independence — Jews elsewhere served valuably as connected critics. “The diaspora can provide what

Netanyahu and his extreme right ministers can't," he said, referring to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "There's a great Jewish conscience that has kept the Jew surviving so long being risked by the current political trends in Israel."

But he criticized non-Israeli Jews who did not understand that diaspora is "as much a mental as a geographic concept" — a status that links disparate people — and so failed to perceive the Hamas attack as an assault on Jews everywhere. It is a lesson, he argued, Israel could help teach them.

"If I could create the ideal world, it would be one in which half the Jews live in Israel and half the Jews don't, and that's pretty much what we have," Mr. Wolfe added. "They need each other — especially now."

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