

IDEAS

I left the US fearing antisemitism under Trump. Oct. 7 has me rethinking my place in Canada, too.

Joe Roberts February 2, 2024



Joe Roberts wears a Remembrance Day poppy pin as he speaks at a Jewish communal event in Canada. (Courtesy Danielle Perelman Photography)

(JTA) — I am and always have been an American Jew.

But working in Washington, D.C., after the 2016 election, a shift in the city became noticeable. I found myself having more meetings in the lobby of the Trump Hotel, and with people now pardoned by the former president whose name it bears, than I was comfortable with.

Jews know our history. We know that when antisemitism surfaces in the public discourse, it's a sign of danger. And I felt it then. The rise of the Proud Boys and other groups like them, the tiki-torched neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, the refusal of the president of the United States

to call the shameful hatred of Jews what it was, all made my stomach turn. This wasn't the America I knew.

Most people who say they're going to leave the United States over politics don't do so. But the opportunity presented itself to me in 2018, when I had a chance encounter with a Canadian couple at Disney's Epcot Center. Over a cup of coffee in "Morocco," we spoke of the state of Washington and of the American body politic. He asked if I'd ever considered London, Ontario. I assured him I had not. But when I got back home and Googled the community, they were looking for a CEO for their Jewish federation. It was as if Hashem himself, the universe or divine intervention had opened a door for me. I listened, and I made the decision to leave Washington for Canada.

Canada, as viewed by Americans, is a country of tolerance, liberalism and multiculturalism. Canada views itself this way too.

I quickly found that there are caveats to that tolerance. There are limits to that liberalism. And there are boundaries on that multiculturalism.

Having been steeped in progressive politics my whole adult life, I naturally got involved in progressive circles in my newfound home.

Immediately, antisemitism reared its head. Upon learning of my Jewishness, I was almost always demanded to qualify my distaste for Israel's government and asked to flat out condemn Zionism altogether. It became clear that it was a bigger issue than just me when, in 2021, the first Jewish leader of the Green Party of Canada was purged over her support for Zionism, perceived or otherwise.

It was shocking. Having spent a decade working on progressive campaigns and organizing in progressive circles, I was never asked these questions in the United States. In Canada, I don't think it was ever not an issue.

Canada's Jewish community and societal challenges are different from American ones. On the surface the two countries feel the same — but

the shared language, proximate geography and cultural parallels hide significant differences.

For Jews, immigration patterns — American Jews coming predominately prewar and Canadian Jews coming predominately postwar — have significant impact on the communal ethos. In many ways, Canada's Jewish community is a community of survivors and their descendants — and the trauma that comes with it.

For Canadians at large, the concept of multiculturalism sets Jewish life in a different frame from the assimilationist view of the American ideal. We are encouraged to maintain our distinct cultures and customs, being a part of Canadian society, but also being separate from it. It's a strange duality that can be hard to reconcile, and it doesn't create the same sense of belonging to the greater whole as the American melting pot does.

Multiculturalism in the Canadian context is often referred to as the tossed salad to America's melting pot. That idea is on display in Canadian cities like Toronto where, driving from neighborhood to neighborhood, the signs on the roadside change from English to Farsi to Mandarin to Russian to Hebrew and then to English again when you get far enough away from the city's core. This cultural dynamic is so deeply ingrained that when people have asked where my family is from, and I reply that we're simply American, I get scowls and demands to know where we're from "before." It's not something that ever felt like an important distinction to me as an American.

For all the criticism leveled against it, the idea of the American melting pot is ingrained in the ethos of America. That one can arrive on America's shores and simply be an American, equal to all others, is surely rife with challenges and contradictions, but it does define how we see ourselves. And even for those who never truly feel American, their children and surely their grandchildren have an altogether different experience. This in many ways is the Jewish immigrant experience in the United States, after all.

These differences manifest themselves in ways that are hard to describe, but for a Jew having lived and worked in the Jewish community in both places, they are certainly felt. Sometimes they are nuanced, but often they are not.

Arriving in Canada, I found Jewish communal life to appear on its surface the same as in the United States, but the issues, debates and expressions of Jewishness under the veneer altogether different, reflecting Canadian multiculturalism in many ways. Jewish life in Canada is more religious, more concentrated and more conservative than what I was used to. According to the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada (akin to Canada's Pew Report), Canadian Jews more closely identify with nearly every measurable marker of being Jewish than their American cousins.



The front doors of Congregation Beth Tikvah in the Montreal suburb of Dollard-des-Ormeau were hit with a firebomb, Nov. 6, 2023. (B'nai Brith Canada)

Questions on issues like intermarriage much more taboo and with rates much lower, 28% to American Jews' 50%. Connection to Israel is much stronger, with 79% having been to Israel at least once versus 43% for their American counterparts. Although it's changed somewhat in the past year, much of the debate about Israel and Zionism that

exists in American Jewish discourse is non-existent in the Canadian community.

Fear of antisemitism is extremely acute. Two out of three Canadian Jews report downplaying their Jewishness out of fear. Even in reasonably large Canadian cities with Jewish communal infrastructure like London, Ontario, there is fear of having a simple sign to identify the JCC — a fear that most would find incomprehensible in the United States.

The in-group dynamic of Canadian Jews is strong, and in some ways that is a blessing, while in others it is a challenge. Either way, the result is a significant difference in how Jews are perceived in public life. Our status here feels less permanent somehow, and the case to be included in Canadianess often feels like it needs to be made.

The nihilistic violence of Oct. 7 was shocking and painful. The brutality was incomprehensible. The wanton murder, the extreme depravity, and the fragility it exposed were felt immediately.

The fallout, as allies and friends on the Canadian progressive left seemingly lined up to announce their support for Hamas' nihilistic violent "resistance," was horrifying. While these challenges within the progressive left transcend borders, they are especially acute in Canadian politics where the left has more prominence, more impact and more reach.

Canadian polity is altogether different. Justin Trudeau's ruling Liberals, always seeking the political center, have been flailing in this deeply polarized environment. Unlike President Biden's clear stance on the Israel-Hamas war, the PM's office has tried to play both sides and only succeeded in angering anyone with stakes in this conflict. Government statements have vacillated wildly from day to day, and been so ambiguous that it's nearly impossible to know where the government stands.

The absence of clear moral leadership has left the field dangerously wide open. Canada's multi-party system creates a political discourse where the New Democratic Party, with a perspective akin to the

Democratic Party's far-left "Squad," are given far more airtime than their counterparts in the United States. Add to that the elements even further left, an active albeit electorally ineffective Communist Party, a Labor movement that has embraced those politics and a professional activist set that has made the Palestinian cause a centerpiece, you have a toxic brew that puts Jews in danger and moves the war 7,000 miles away to the center of the Canadian conversation.

I found myself, having left a country once to escape a perceived threat, facing the question of if I should do the same yet again.

One weekend morning, not long after Oct. 7, my wife and I sat sharing a cup of coffee while our two toddlers played in the room.

We discussed the gunshots fired at a Jewish home in Winnipeg, reportedly targeted simply because of the mezuzah on the doorway. The news of a firebombing of a synagogue in Montreal the night before was terrifying.

My wife asked, "Do you feel safe here? Should we leave?"

It struck me that this is a conversation that binds us to generations of Jews before us. In Germany. In Iraq. In Spain. Across space and time, this fear is real. And it is palpable.

We began our application for aliyah, to move to Israel, that day.

There's been nearly three months of distance between that day and now. The situation in Canada has only gotten worse.

Targeting of Jewish communities and businesses by protesters with the intent to intimidate has become the norm. In the first three days of the war, Toronto Police Services saw reports of antisemitic incidents nearly triple from the same period the year before. By November, they were reporting a 132% increase in hate related calls. A newly released report from Israel's Diaspora Ministry, the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency for the months following Oct. 7 shows a shocking 800% rise in antisemitic incidents reported in Canada — the second highest increase in the world.

There's been a rash of more firebombings, shootings and assaults of visible Jews. The discourse has become toxic and laden with open antisemitism. Municipalities canceled or limited public Hanukkah celebrations, a play set in Israel was nixed after protest, a prominent business leader and political donor has publicly stated that he doesn't "need" money from people who "support baby killers."

But while we are continuing our application for aliyah, our thinking has changed quite a bit.

We want the guarantee of safety for our family and our Jewish identity that the promise of Israel provides, but now we aren't willing to give up our home so easily.

We've built a life here. Our children were born here and are undoubtedly Canadian. Our friends, family and community are here. The idea of becoming refugees, thanks to the scourge of antisemitism in a country like Canada, is a forfeiture of everything that Canada promises. We recognize that the risks are real. But we also recognize that if we do not stay and fight for our people and our right to live in Jews in this place, we increase the level of risk for everyone we'd have left behind.

So for now, we'll stay and we'll fight for it. I worry every day, though, that it might be a losing battle. That the hatred that was once in the shadows is taking to our streets. That those bags we've metaphorically packed might have to actually be used.

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