JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

Ideas

Josh Shapiro's 'dual loyalty' story shows a gap between how American Jews see themselves — and how they're seen

A classic antisemitic trope is not only about bigotry, but misconceptions that Jews need to address, writes a public policy expert.

Michael Koplow January 28, 2026

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Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro's revelation that he was asked by a member of Kamala Harris's vice-presidential team vetting him whether he had ever been an Israeli agent has reopened a wound for many American Jews — one that never fully healed.

Harris ultimately chose Tim Walz over Shapiro amid an ugly campaign mounted by the far left that dubbed Shapiro "Genocide Josh," despite his positions on Israel being nearly indistinguishable from Walz's. That campaign highlighted how the far left had successfully turned any personal ties to Israel into a disqualifier.

More disquietingly, the anti-Shapiro campaign subjected American Jews to antisemitic accusations of dual loyalty. Nearly a quarter century after Joe Lieberman became the first Jewish candidate on a major party ticket, the anti-Shapiro campaign raised the specter of Jewish identity posing an insurmountable electoral hurdle.

The Shapiro episode appears to confirm the worst of these fears. The fact that Walz was asked whether he had ever been a Chinese agent in light of his travels to China, or that every federal security background check seeks to establish whether any applicant has loyalty to a foreign power, does not ameliorate many American Jews' concerns. Questioning whether Jews can be loyal citizens is one of the defining features of classical antisemitism, and it is difficult to disentangle the Shapiro controversy from the myriad signs of antisemitism on the rise in the U.S.

But as upsetting as Shapiro's vetting experience is, it would be the wrong takeaway to conclude that antisemitism is now so rampant that no Jew could ascend to one of the highest offices in the land. The less worrisome, but more complicated, problem is this: what may be obvious to American Jews is not obvious to wider American society, and vice versa.

This lack of basic understanding must be corrected, and to do so, American Jews should reactivate a muscle that has atrophied, and explain why being American and supporting Israel does not create dual loyalty. At the same time, American Jews must try to understand why what seems unremarkable to us may not seem unremarkable to others.

To do so, they should look back a century to see a model that worked, and that should be brought back after having been abandoned in the face of unprecedented American Jewish success and acceptance.

When Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis gave his famous 1915 speech on Zionism to the Eastern Council of Reform Rabbis, his agenda was not to simply extoll the virtues of Jewish political liberation or to support the importance of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It was to make the case that Zionism made American Jews better Americans, and that loyalty to both Judaism and Zionism strengthened loyalty to American ideals. After

centuries of Jewish persecution, and in the midst of the great waves of Jewish immigration to the U.S., it is easy to see why Brandeis felt the need to defend his Judaism and his Zionism not only in their own right, but to explicitly connect them to the larger American project.

For decades, we American Jews have thankfully not had to make this case. Questioning Jewish loyalty to the U.S. has traditionally been far beyond the boundaries of acceptable social discourse, and most American Jews do not consider the need to couch community priorities or support for Israel in the language of larger American citizenship or patriotism. We have taken for granted that there is no contradiction between being American and being Jewish —which for an overwhelming percentage of American Jews also means feeling a connection to Israel as part of their Jewish identity — and that the rest of the country also does not see any contradiction between the two.

Unfortunately, there are signals that this is changing. But the answer is not to chalk it up to historically inevitable antisemitism.

Shapiro's experience as an American Jew who went to Jewish day schools and Jewish camps where support for Israel was an important value is common among Jews who are strongly connected to their Jewish identity. Spending time living and volunteering in Israel is also common, as even a fierce Jewish critic of the Israeli government like Bernie Sanders can attest.

For someone vetting Shapiro, it would understandably raise red flags to see not only that he spent time living in Israel but volunteered on an IDF base; not only that he identifies as strongly supportive of the Jewish state but worked for six months doing public diplomacy for the Israeli embassy in Washington. That doesn't make the questions that Shapiro faced automatically acceptable, but it does complicate the picture, especially for those from the outside who may not understand why few American Jews look at Shapiro's connections to Israel and see them as unusual, let alone something that should raise any suspicion.

Israel is unique because Judaism is unique. Israel is such a core part of Jewish identity historically, and the modern state of Israel such a touchstone for American Jews, that

embracing it is for many American Jews a natural part of their ordinary lives, not only as Jews but as Americans. Shapiro's story is replicated in untold numbers of American Jewish households with varying degrees of observance and affiliation. It is why we find it so bizarre and threatening that anyone would question his loyalty to this country.

Judaism is a blend of national, ethnic, religious, historical and cultural attachments; it is at the same time a peoplehood, a civilization, a religion and a tribe. Israel is a state that claims to not only be for its citizens but for Jews wherever they may be found. If it is hard for us to explain this complex web, imagine how hard it is for others to understand it.

The great blessing of this golden age of American Jewry has been feeling so comfortable and at home that we don't question how others see us, as our ancestors had to. In a sense, this has allowed us to live outside of centuries of Jewish history. But we don't need to go back more than one century to see that our predecessors were not quite so comfortable, and understood that they needed to more proactively make a case that we take for granted.

Antisemitism is not on Jews to fix; it is not "our" problem — it is the antisemites' problem. However, doing a better job of explaining what goes into Jewish identity, how we relate to Israel and why there is no contradiction between the two halves of the term "American Jew" is on us. Josh Shapiro's unpleasant experience should serve as a needed wakeup call that we should not assume others understand us as well as we think.

Antisemitism is rearing its ugly head and creeping out of dark corners on all sides, which makes it incumbent on us to do what we can to separate the genuine antisemites from those who just have a more difficult time understanding what is a genuinely complicated American Jewish experience.

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