

Zionist from Afar
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Louis Brandeis is best known as America's first Jewish Supreme Court Justice. Brandeis was also a passionate Zionist, president of the Zionist Organization of America at the time he joined of the Supreme Court. In 1915, before he was nominated, Brandeis delivered a landmark speech about his Zionism to the Eastern Council of Reform Rabbis.

His audience was not entirely friendly, as Zionists were in the minority among Reform rabbis of the day. Thirty years earlier, in the Pittsburgh Platform, the Central Conference of American Rabbis had declared: "We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of [the Jewish people's] great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor ... sacrificial worship ..., nor the restoration of ... laws concerning the Jewish state."ⁱ

There's a lot to unpack, not least that early Reform rabbis understood Jews to be linked to one another by religion only, a position that is awfully hard to square, not only with a contemporary reality in which what happens in Israel impacts Jews everywhere, but also with the pogroms our people were suffering at the time. What's clear, though, is that having a country for people of one religion sounded like a bad idea to these rabbis.

We would be wrong, though, to focus only on the statement's anti-Zionism. We should also note that these nineteenth century rabbis placed great faith in modernity. They believed that the messianic age was dawning. The Enlightenment had brought previously unknown liberty and opportunity to Jews in Western Europe and the United States, and the rabbis may be forgiven for believing that progress would continue, that humanity was on the precipice of a day when all people everywhere would find peace and freedom, wherever they lived.

While we may identify two subjects in that paragraph—faith in the future and anti-Zionism—they were one and the same for the authors. Jewish people would not need their own state, no group would, since everyone would live freely anywhere. Doubtless, Jewish experience in European ethnostates taught these rabbis that the proliferation of such entities would likely lead to oppression.

Brandeis knew his audience, and he sought to address their concerns, winning the Reform rabbis for Zionism, proclaiming: “There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry. The Jewish spirit, the product of our religion and experiences, is essentially modern and essentially American. Not since the destruction of the Temple have the Jews in spirit and in ideals been so fully in harmony with the noblest aspirations of the country in which they lived. America’s fundamental law seeks to make real the brotherhood of man. That brotherhood became the Jewish fundamental law more than twenty-five hundred years ago. America’s insistent demand in the twentieth century is for social justice. That also has been the Jews’ striving for ages. Their affliction as well as their religion has prepared the Jews for effective democracy.”ⁱⁱ

Brandeis discusses Zionism somewhat obliquely here. He’s speaking the rabbis’ language, though, to communicate that a Jewish State will be an American-style democracy. Michael Koplow of Israel Policy Forum explains: “Brandeis did not suggest that American Jews retreat into an enclave of their own creation in an effort to preserve themselves, either within American society or by emigrating to Palestine. He also did not suggest that American Jews shed the Jewish part of their identities. He was embracing the melting pot model that allowed Americans of all stripes to maintain ethnic and communal commitments without eroding their Americanness. Zionism was, for him, a defense of the rights of Jews, and it made sense to fight for that as an American concept. Rather than choose between these things, he argued that being an American required fidelity to Judaism and Zionism, and that fidelity to Judaism and Zionism required fidelity to America.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Brandeis was not the first to proclaim the possibility of being fully supportive of our people’s project in the Land of Israel while living outside it. In fact, it happens in our Torah portion. As the Israelites approach the Promised Land, two tribes announce that they would prefer to settle east of the Jordan, outside the Land. They have found greener pastures there, literally. Moses is enraged. He accuses them of disloyalty, abandoning the rest of the people to conquer the Land without their help. The tribes then signal their intention to join the fight before returning to their preferred settlement, and Moses approves of their plan.^{iv}

For as long as there has been a Land of Israel, there has also been a diaspora, and the two have always been connected. The Jewish diaspora has, like those two tribes in the Torah, always been at the ready to support the people of Israel—and, for the last seventy-eight years, the State of Israel—at times of need.

Most often, that has been through financial and political support. Israel's most important strategic alliance is with the United States, a relationship threatened these days from both ends of the political spectrum, so American Jews' support is important now more than ever.

These days, though, many American Jews look at Israel with increasing dismay, a feeling shared by a substantial number of Israelis, many of whom have repeatedly taken to the streets to voice their discontent. Brandeis's promise of a Jewish state that would be an ideal democracy, contributing to the welfare of all humankind, is at risk with self-proclaimed fascists in cabinet roles overseeing Israel's police and the Israel Defense Force in the Occupied West Bank alongside government refusal to abide by Supreme Court rulings. Our dismay grows when we see our values mocked at best, with the rights of the Reform and Conservative movements threatened and frequent assaults on women's equality as well as the rights of gay, lesbian, and transgender Israelis.

Yes, being Zionist from afar is more challenging now than ever, but there is much we can do. We can and we must support our Reform Movement in Israel, which is increasingly attracting Israelis to the Judaism we know, Judaism that emphasizes the prophetic call for social justice and equal rights for all. We can ask that our representatives in Congress support the West Bank Violence Prevention Act, which would sanction settler vigilantes as well as Hamas operatives there.

This Shabbat, we conclude our annual journey through the Book of Numbers. Whenever we complete a book of Torah, we proclaim, חֲזַק חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזַּק, which Dan Nichols translates, "Be strong, and let us strengthen one another." The State of Israel strengthens us simply by existing, a haven for our people whenever the need may arise. Israelis strengthen us, too, through their inestimable contributions to medicine and agricultural technology, the robust revival of the Hebrew language, and their laudable example of Jewish pride. We strengthen Israel with our advocacy and our generosity. We may strengthen Israel, too, as we support Israelis who work toward the messianic vision shared by our anti-Zionist Reform founders and by the most notable pioneering American Zionist, Louis Brandeis. Then, truly, will we have strengthened one another.

Amen.

ⁱ “Declaration of Principles,” popularly known as “The Pittsburgh Platform,” Cincinnati, Ohio, 1885, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>.

ⁱⁱ Brandeis speech, cited in Michael Koplow, “Judaism, Zionism, and the Promises of America,” *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, Shalom Hartman Institute, Summer 2026, <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/judaism-zionism-and-the-promises-of-america>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Koplow.

^{iv} Numbers 32.