

Purim 2025

“Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its own being.... [That] striving ... is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.” There you have two of Spinoza’s foundational principles, which together comprise his “conatus” doctrine. They appear in his magnum opus, the *Ethics*, forming the bridge between his philosophy of God, metaphysics, and epistemology, and his writings about psychology, ethics and politics. The *conatus* doctrine is truly a statement about all things in nature. Yet to make it more intuitively appealing, just take it to be a fundamental statement about biology. All living things strive to exist, and that basic biological impulse is fundamental. For Spinoza, such striving gives rise to related impulses, such as this one: “The Mind ... strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the Body’s power of acting.” So, we don’t simply try to exist, we try to thrive, to expand in power. This is fundamental to any biological form. And while we may see people engage in self-destructive behavior like drugging themselves to oblivion or shooting themselves in the head, we must recognize that what is fundamental, what is intrinsic to each living being, are the drives to persevere and thrive.

For years, when I read about the *conatus*, I assumed Spinoza was talking simply about an individual body and its corresponding mind. Then, I wondered, how does Spinoza – the man who Bertrand Russell called the “most noble and lovable of the great western philosophers” – account for something like altruism? The answer is that a person enters the realm of ethics as more than an individual body and mind. We’re also members of groups, some of which forge indelible marks on our identities. Spinoza makes room for that notion when he defined the concept of a “singular thing,” saying that “if a number of Individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.”

Whenever we as individuals decide to conserve energy for the good of the planet, we act as a singular thing – a team of Earth custodians. Whenever we decide to drive on the right and not the left side of the road, we act as a singular thing – a group of sane Americans. And whenever those of us who are Jewish reflect on the story of our people, identify with it, and shape our values based on this story, we act as a singular thing – the Jewish people. These roles all help to forge our sense of identity in profound ways.

Just as Spinoza’s magnum opus had a bridge – the *conatus* doctrine – so too does Judaism. I am referring to the connection of folk and faith known as the Story of the Jewish People. Our holiest book consists primarily of a narrative. After the Five Books of Moses, the narrative continues through the so-called historical writings of the Tanakh – the tales of Joshua, Hannah, Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon, and the various tribes of Israel – their trials, tribulations and victories. Jewish holidays build on the Story. Purim speaks of Haman, Hitler’s forerunner. Hanukkah speaks of the Maccabees, the forerunners of the modern Israeli soldiers. And of course, the Jewish identity relies on the Story far beyond its religious teachings. We learn that

for nearly two millennia we were exiled from our homeland and possessed no land where we lived as equals with the ruling ethnic group. Indeed, the Jewish Story tells us that people who outwardly identified as Jews were banned in England from 1290 to 1656, in France from 1394 to the 18th century, in Spain and Portugal from the 1490s to the 19th century, and so on. After the Jews became more successful in Germany in the 1920s than they'd been in any country on the continent, the Story tells us that the German regime exterminated them. Two out of three Jews on the continent were murdered due solely to their Jewish identity. Some parts of this Story were surely myths, but not that part. That fact helps to forge our identities.

To have a Jewish identity is to be someone who not only tries to act as a Jew but who strives to see the world largely through a Jewish lens. Growing up when I did, in the 60s and 70s, that sense of identity was a source of great pride. In America, Jewish children noted that the Ivy League was disproportionately Jewish. And that our people were disproportionately liberal despite being generally well off financially, supposedly a testament to our concern for others. Jews were more likely to be Nobel Prize winners – more than 100 times as likely as gentiles, worldwide. Most importantly, Jews saw themselves as relatively guiltless as a people; often victims, but rarely if ever perpetrators. Fighting for knowledge, for justice, for achievement, for the little guy. The so-called “yiddeshe kop” – or Jewish head – was epitomized by a clever, careful and socially-conscious mind. What's not to feel proud of?

Even during my adult life, American Jews have continued to walk a path of contentment and comfort. Living in a land with the most robust economy, most powerful military, a strong bill of rights, two oceans to block out invaders, and few questioning the legitimacy of the enterprise, the Jewish-American community could have its cake and eat it too. We could avoid major personal sacrifices or risks and still prosper, while viewing our community as just and constructive. Such is the prerogative of the most privileged Jewish group in history.

The Israeli-Jewish experience is different. In our land, there's no war; in theirs, no peace. Our nation's legitimacy is generally assumed, whereas much, if not most, of the world questions Israel's right to exist. To the extent Americans have oppressed their indigenous people or created a de facto caste system, that is seen as a thing of the past. But with Israel, the idea of Jews ruling gentiles, depriving them of equal rights, and making them live in so-called “open air prisons” or “apartheid bantustans” has come to epitomize the way the country is viewed by much of the world. And that was *before* Israel's counterattack on Gaza in the past two years. Since then, the slurs have grown louder and more ubiquitous. Now that the Jews finally control a state of their own, their Story contains an indictment heard around the globe. It reads that Jews have handled their power like bullies, reflecting the psychological insight that victims of abuse frequently become abusers. According to this indictment, the Israelis have gone from being the Nazis' victims to Nazi-like oppressors in how they treat their land's indigenous people. It is an indictment we, across the Atlantic, frequently hear. No longer can American Jews consider what it means to be Jewish without confronting the accusations that our people have come to resemble our worst enemies.

To place things in Muskian terms, American Jews find ourselves at a fork in the road. We could travel in a number of directions, but most of us would recognize two primary paths. One path is to embrace the “Israel right or wrong” perspective. It focuses on the impossible neighborhood in which Israel finds itself, surrounded by hateful, and often savage antisemites who can be trusted only when effectively caged. According to this perspective, Israel is acting as justly and considerately as it can under the circumstances, and to argue to the contrary is to apply an antisemitic double standard. This perspective sees Israelis as clever and courageous models of the post-Holocaust Jew, who will do whatever it takes to retain Jewish autonomy in a world that has never allowed their people the same basic rights that it has allowed others.

The other path is to embrace the anti- or *post*-Zionist perspective, which sees Israel as a failed experiment that should be jettisoned as soon as possible to allow the land to return to its equilibrium state of Arabs and Jews living together but with an Arab majority. This view highlights that Jews comprised only a minority of the land’s inhabitants before they engaged in ethnic cleansing, seized power, and failed to propose peace plans that comport with basic principles of justice. This view also sees the Israelis as oppressors who have allowed PTSD to infect their judgment, if not their humanity, and sees the Palestinians as victims whose resistance is just, and whose occasional excesses are understandable.

Many, if not most, American Jews subscribe to one or the other of those perspectives. They both offer the least cognitive dissonance. In one case, Israel is seen sympathetically like a heroic David facing Goliath, which is represented by the gentile world, a world that remains ready to kick Little David down whenever he asks for a seat at the table. In the alternative view, Israel is seen as the albatross around our Jewish necks, turning a people and a faith once known for our commitment to justice into just another cautionary tale about how easily power is abused, especially when the abuser was once a victim.

I resist the paths charted by both these narratives. And I call on each of you to consider new narratives in which Israel is treated neither with kid gloves nor as expendable.

First, let’s not bury the lede. It is actually anti-bloodshed to fight for Israel’s existence, and to do so with far more passion than you’d typically find on the left these days. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that the more “progressive” you are, the more important it is to join this fight. Consider the fundamental truth that Israel currently exists, a fact on the ground that even its enemies must acknowledge. Those who wish to change that, meaning to replace the Jewish State with yet another primarily Arab country, are asking for a sovereign nation either to be destroyed with violence of Biblical proportions, or to voluntarily will itself out of existence. But Israel also has a *conatus*, and its people, who have no other majority Jewish state to turn to, cling hard to the Israeli narrative. So national suicide isn’t likely to happen.

Now consider the consequences if it did. That outcome would presumably require Israelis to determine that they didn’t behave justly enough to merit governing any part of the land. But what would that do to the Jewish Story? What would it say about a people who pined

for autonomy for countless centuries and finally obtained this autonomy in their ancestral homeland, only to find that they couldn't handle it without resembling the worst of humanity. Implicit in such a message is that other peoples who predominate on a land *can* treat their neighbors humanely, but not the Jews. Is that a narrative that would sustain a Jewish sense of identity, of self-respect, going forward?

One argument I frequently hear from non-Zionists is “why are the Jews so special that they deserve their own state? Should we support other stateless people kicking out indigenous populations and creating their own states too?” My response begins by considering history. Only 0.2 percent of the world's population is Jewish. This occurred artificially, due to killings and coerced conversions. It is hardly unreasonable for Jews, given their history, to demand a state where they can be in the majority for the first time in nearly 2000 years, a demand based not only on security needs but also on that word so often used by Zionism's opponents: justice. It is unjust for the world to cleanse itself of its Jews over the course of centuries, turning a once populous people into a tiny speck of humanity, and then deny even that speck the right to live somewhere in the majority. The U.N. decided that such a state should be in the Jews' ancestral homeland, where at least some Jews have resided continuously for millennia. So, once you take history into account and not simply one-sided polemics, Zionists have a justice-based claim to the land that cannot be ignored.

Today, notwithstanding these arguments, we see more and more Jews challenge Israel's right to exist. They are giving oxygen to those who would seek to destroy this state, whether violently or otherwise. On college campuses, they don't protest the regimes, let alone the existence, of Iran, Myanmar, Libya or Yemen – only Israel – and they do so in the name of “Jewish values” and “peace.” Well, I know of no Jewish value that requires Jews to jettison their people's claim to a homeland, while accepting the conduct of even the most abusive gentile state. And I can't fathom how the prospects for “peace” are advanced by fueling the passions of those who say that there shall be no peace as long as an existing state continues, pointing to Jews who oppose Israel's existence as evidence that the anti-Zionist cause is not only righteous but also non-partisan. This is why Jews who have quit on Israel are, in my view, unintentionally maintaining the bloodshed, not ending it.

But that is only part of the equation. After all, the Jewish Story – the Jewish *conatus* -- isn't a story of striving to survive at any cost. It's a tale of a people who seek to survive while at the same time honoring the principles of their faith. And our faith teaches us that “if I am only for me [or my tribe], what am I?” Every year on Yom Kippur we read from Isaiah: “Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies? ...[B]owing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? ... No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free.... It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him....” For the Jewish people, the Palestinians in our midst have become the hungry, the poor, the infirm,

and “Israel right or wrong” has taken the place of the ceremonial rituals to become the *sine qua non* of tribal loyalty.

I see no path for Israel to remain a *Jewish* state in the religious sense of that word unless it does everything it can to make room for an adjacent Palestinian state. And clearly, Israeli’s leaders have given up on that goal, so the job has fallen largely to American Jews to fight like hell for such an outcome. We have unique privileges among Jewish populations. But with those privileges come duties. We are uniquely positioned to demand that Israel not give up on its Palestinian neighbors -- to recognize that Jews have a responsibility to the Palestinians to honor the spirit of Isaiah and affirm their dignity. Let’s be crystal clear about this: I am not saying that Israel should tear down the wall, slap Hamas on the wrist, and sing folk songs. That would be suicide, an insult to our conatus. But if that position occupies one extreme, we must admit that the scorched earth and ethnic cleansing policies advocated by Bibi’s coalition partners occupy the other, and that Bibi resembles them far more than he resembles most of us.

October 7th clearly has turbocharged the narrative that American Jews and Israeli Jews are very different people. Americans with even a modicum of integrity or interest in history, however, must acknowledge that when our own nation faced a threat far less significant than what Israel faced on October 7th, we rained shock and awe on a Middle Eastern people and tracked only the impact of our wanton violence on *American* military lives; we as a nation could have cared less about Iraqi lives, civilian or otherwise. This, apparently, is what happens when a country with superior military power faces a successful surprise attack of shocking magnitude – the country hardens its heart, overreacts, and circles the wagons. It is deeply tragic, but I gather that it’s one of those laws of nature that applies to our species.

Rather than focusing simply on how Israel has waged war, I suggest focusing on how it has *not* waged peace. For many years prior to October 7th, Israel had an opportunity to cultivate important allies among the Palestinians who want to see two states for two peoples. I know for a fact that such Palestinians exist, and liberal Israel commentators would add that some could potentially have attained leadership roles in Palestinian society. Like the Israelis, you see, Palestinians are not a monolith. Yet it speaks volumes that Israel’s government chose to support, of all Palestinians, the leaders of Hamas. This decision reflected a commitment to retaining as much as possible of the disputed land for the Israeli people, which entails marginalizing any Palestinians who would sincerely work for a two-state solution. Call it the Andrew Jackson model of statecraft – keep the “savages” contained and as powerless as possible, and when the chance presents itself, remove them from your neighborhood.

That has not been the preferred American-Jewish solution. The notion that the Palestinians neither deserve a state nor could ever be trusted to make peace with Israel has been unpopular on these shores among Jews, and for good reason. As Americans, we affirm certain self-evident truths, such as that all people are created equal and are endowed with inalienable rights. Either that applies to Palestinians, or it doesn’t apply at all. It offends our sensibilities

both as Americans and Jews to think of Israelis causing others to live in a permanently stateless condition. While most of us are willing to hold the Palestinians responsible for failing to make reasonable compromises, we demand that Israel not give up on finding reasonable compromises of its own. You see, the bulk of the American-Jewish population has never believed that Jews, who totaled under a third of Palestine in 1947, have a right to seize nearly all that land mass today. The Zionist project we were sold on was supposed to be an exercise in justice on behalf of a historically oppressed people, a claim to a small piece of the earthly pie -- not a land grab by a tribe embracing the Trumpian principle that might makes right. We see an increasing current of that latter mentality among the ruling coalition of Israel, and it doesn't jibe with the view of Judaism we have cultivated on these shores.

One place where the rubber meets the road for American Jews is whether we are willing to join the current majority of Israeli Jews and invoke the memory of October 7th to abandon our support for a two-state solution. I pray we do not. Another issue is the extent to which, if the Gaza War resumes, America should be arming Israel. Do we decide that no matter how savagely Israel's right-wing government behaves, no matter how much their leaders talk about kicking the Palestinians off the land, we should continually support massive shipments of American arms to Israel? In other words, can our community say "no" to Israel's requests for arms even though we recognize that it faces enemies determined to rid the world of a Jewish State?

For me, the answer, at times, must be yes. Israel's current leaders have demonstrated they have lost their taste for peaceful and dignified coexistence. They've given up on Palestinian aspirations to prosper, other than for the Palestinians who are Israeli citizens. So yes, let's push back on Netanyahu and his cronies -- let's advocate using American power to bring Israel back to the peaceful coexistence table. But I admit that it would be far easier to maintain a coalition with the anti-Zionists on any relevant topic, including this one, if more center-left politicians in this coalition, the Democratic statesmen who claim to support Israel, could find their vocal cords. More "pro-Israel" moderates need to become as clear and passionate as the folks on the far left and far right have been. They must have the courage to place the issue of whether Israel has a right to exist front and center, and to demonstrate why those who question its -- and only its -- existence, are fueling endless bloodshed. Personally, when I hear people talk about supporting Israel's right to exist in muted terms and rip into Israel's abuses in vivid terms, I view them as part of the problem, not the solution. *Emphasis is everything.*

I'd like to conclude the way we began -- by focusing on what it means to be subject to more than one *conatus* depending on what groups, causes, or institutions we identify with. There has never been a strong "American-Jewish" sense of identity. Maybe things will reach the point in Israel where that country is so hated in America that Jews here will stop referring to themselves simply as Jews, and instead primarily identify themselves with a hyphen (as "American-Jews"). But I doubt it. Historically, when children learn what it means to be a Jew,

they learn about our folk, our faith, and the story that connects them. It's a single story. Jews have been in separate places before. Some lived in the Kingdom of Judah while others inhabited the Kingdom of Israel. Some lived in Eastern Europe while others lived near the Mediterranean. They developed different cultures, and surely their values diverged in subtle ways. But throughout history, despite regional differences, Jews have always seen themselves as a singular people. One God. One faith. One people. We have survived branching into sects, but we always have recognized the ways in which we are united, and those have come to dominate our identities.

Whether post Gaza War American-Jews like it or not, we are stuck with Israel, just as Israel is stuck with us. The Jews there don't seem to be bashful when it comes to speaking on behalf of the Jewish people. Nor do they always appear to care about what we American Jews think about important issues. When they re-elect leaders who don't even pay lip service to supporting a two-state solution or when they discriminate against non-Orthodox forms of Judaism, they are not seeking our counsel, let alone asking our permission. But we in America don't have to be bashful either. Perhaps we haven't had our resolve forged by suicide bombings, antisemitic pogroms or pernicious double standards. Perhaps we've had it easy. But it's for that reason that we're able to step back, look more objectively at the situation, and identify where we need to provide support and where we need to apply the brakes. In the coming years, American Jews may be in a position to play a pivotal role in how the Jewish civilization evolves in the decades, and maybe the centuries ahead. We should not sit on the sidelines, and we should not let anyone think for us. Now is the time to tell America, Israel, and the world what we American Jews think it means to be Jewish.