Since the 1967 War, the American Jewish community has transformed Israel and Zionism into a secular religion, a substitute version of Judaism itself. Israel has taken Judaism’s place for many Jews.

A recent [Pew poll](http://www.richardsilverstein.com/www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/) on Jewish identity, showed younger American Jews increasingly refusing to affiliate with the mainstream community. American Jews are increasingly secular and do not see Israel as the defining issue for the Jewish people.

But the older generation has not given up. Pro-Israel corporate titans like Sheldon Adelson have joined other donors in pouring $1-billion into Birthright Israel. It has sent 300,000 American Jewish youth to Israel for trips designed to inoculate against assimilation and guarantee “continuity” into the next generation. Adelson no longer feels Judaism can survive. Instead, the only viable future for world Jewry is pro-Israelism.

In past decades, respected American Jewish leaders held dissenting views on these issues: Rabbis Judah Magnes, Arthur Hertzberg and Leonard Beerman, and secular leaders like Henry Siegman. But increasingly dissent from a narrow communal consensus is not tolerated.

International Hillel announced a new policy which eliminated programming critical of Israel, including BDS. An insurgent response to this has arisen called Open Hillel. It reject constraints on Israel-related speech. But Hillel CEO Eric Fingerhut has put them on notice that if they sponsor forbidden programs they will lose their affiliation with Hillel.

Major Jewish museums cancelled talks by UC Berkeley Professor Judith Butler and New Republic senior editor, John Judis, because pro-Israel groups and donors threatened to withhold funding if they hosted such controversial speakers.

After the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival screened the documentary, *Rachel*, about the life and death of Palestine activist, Rachel Corrie, the local Jewish federation introduced rules precluding its beneficiaries from hosting “anti-Israel” events. These guidelines resulted from pressure exerted by major local pro-Israel Jewish foundations like the Taube and Koret Foundations.

This retreat from intellectual and political diversity has resulted in the impoverishment of communal leadership. Until a decade ago, there were respected non-partisan liberal Jewish groups like the American Jewish Congress, which espoused a generally liberal Zionist perspective. Now, the only national Jewish group with a liberal approach to Israel is J Street. Though it is essentially a Jewish lobbying group on behalf of the Obama administration.

The only group that espouses a truly progressive non-partisan agenda on Israel is Jewish Voice for Peace. It is largely demonized in the mainstream community. JVP cannot host events at most Jewish federation-funded community venues, again due to pressure from pro-Israel donors and foundations.

What American Jewry needs is more of the spirit of Walt Whitman:

“Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Instead of embracing contradiction and debate; instead of welcoming diverse ideas about Israel, American Jews have closed their minds. In the past American Jewry entertained wider debate on these issues. If we didn’t exactly “contain multitudes,” we hosted Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein, I.F. Stone, Grace Paley, Adrienne Rich, Hertzberg, Abraham Joshua Heshel, and gave birth to Magnes, all of whom competed vigorously in the political-intellectual arena. That richness of debate has been lost.

The American Jewish mind is closing because the issue of Israel is so difficult, so fraught with anxiety. So we relegate it to zealots like StandWithUs, CAMERA and The Israel Project. By delegating the Israel issue to the extremists of groups like SWU, it pushes those with divergent views to the margins. We close our minds because, to have them open, would mean putting the bullies in their place and having to hear uncomfortable ideas about the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Modern Language Association president, Marianne Hirsch, a child of Holocaust survivors, [described](http://chronicle.com/article/The-Sound-of-Silencing-in/144339/) the avalanche of abuse that targeted her during the MLA’s debate over academic freedom in the Occupied Territories:

I was more disheartened by how American Jewish organizations and their members insisted on violating the painful history of Jews, including that of my parents, to foreclose discussion of the policies of the state of Israel and their impact on Israeli and Palestinian education.

History has shown that societies intolerant of dissenters lose the intellectual and innovative edge. They cannot see shifts in the winds of social change. They refuse to adapt. As a result, eventually they are swept away.

Though America’s pro-Israel leaders view their behavior as defending Israel, they are eliminating precisely the sorts of political ideas which could save it.