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Book Guide

If You Will It: Rebuilding Jewish Peoplehood for the Twenty-First Century

If You Will It analyzes the problems facing the American Jewish community today, and describes the steps needed to rebuild a sense of peoplehood—of Jewish identity and common purpose. The relationship between American Jews and Israel is at the heart of this book.

Summary

American Jewish identity is steadily weakening. National surveys show hundreds of thousands of Jewish children with one, or even two, Jewish parents not being raised as Jews by religion or to think of themselves as members of the Jewish community. Of the 2.4 million children living in a household with at least one Jewish parent, only half are being raised exclusively as Jews. Only 45 percent of Jews by religion say it's "very important" to them that their grandchildren be Jewish, and of Jews who say they no longer practice the Jewish religion, only 4 percent say that's important to them.

Surveys also show that young American Jews are far less engaged with and supportive of Israel than their parents' and grandparents' generations—even after the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023 and the Israel-Hamas war that has followed. Only about 45 percent of American Jews have ever visited Israel, even counting all those who've gone on Birthright trips in the last 20 years. This rate of visits is far lower than any other diaspora community.

Today security threats to Israel are growing and support among younger Americans is declining; meanwhile, Jewish identity among young American Jews is weakening. The American Jewish community and the Jewish state need each other as much as ever before.

If You Will It looks at the history of the American Jewish community and its relationship with Israel. In it, Elliott Abrams tells Jewish parents, grandparents, donors, and organizations where to focus in order to increase American Jews' engagement with the Jewish people and with Israel today: getting their children a serious Jewish education, sending them to Jewish summer camps, and bringing them to Israel for weeks, semesters, or academic years. Orthodox Jews continue to live in dense Jewish communities, but for the non-Orthodox (who comprise 90 percent of American Jews), such immersive Jewish experiences must be created. Otherwise, assimilation into American society—where Jews form only 2.4 percent of the population—will have the same erosive impact on Jewish identity as it has had on other ethnic identities.

This book is suitable for the following types of undergraduate and graduate course:

- Jewish Studies
- American History
- International Relations

Main Takeaways

- American Jewish identity is eroding, and the community is diminishing in size.
- While Orthodox Jews live in dense communities, the vast majority of American Jews are not Orthodox and must intentionally reinforce Jewish identity in order to preserve it, and with it a sense of Jewish peoplehood and engagement.
- The most effective ways of building Jewish identity in America are immersive experiences where Jews live or study among Jews: for example, Jewish education, Jewish summer camping, and time spent in Israel. In each case, more is better.
- Israel's security threats should lead it to try to maintain strong American Jewish support, but among younger Jews that support is eroding. And for American Jews, time in Israel living and studying is an effective means of strengthening Jewish identity and building close ties to the Jewish state. So, these two Jewish communities, the world's largest by far, can provide each other with great help.
- Facing campus antisemitism may not greatly strengthen Jewish identity, because studies show that students' reactions depend on the strength of the Jewish identity with which they arrived on campus.

Discussion Questions

Jewish Studies

- How is the size of an ethnic or religious community measured: what are the elements of membership or identity?
- Is ethnic identity in the United States a matter of choice or descent?
- What public policies have helped or hurt the ability of the American Jewish community to grow in size and strength?
- Trace the intermarriage rate of American Jews and explain why it has risen or fallen.
- How do American Jews compare to other diaspora Jewish communities and other U.S. religious and ethnic minorities, in their assimilation and intermarriage levels?

American History

- Trace the levels of religiosity of American Jews, from mass arrivals to the current day.
- Trace the interest of American Jews in the formation of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East.
- What was the impact of Israel's wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 on American Jews?
- Trace the levels of support for Zionism and explain the nature of American Zionism.

International Relations

- Explain the official U.S. government attitude toward formation of a Jewish state in the Middle East from the late 19th century to 1948.
- Why was the U.S. government supportive or not supportive at various times? Why did stronger support begin to emerge in the 1960s?
- What forms of support does the United States give Israel and why are they important to that country?
- How does support for Israel fit into broader U.S. policies in the Middle East?

Essay Questions

Jewish Studies

- Some analyses suggest that the American Jewish community is growing in size and vitality while others suggest erosion through assimilation. Discuss the evidence for each of these arguments. Which analysis do you find more convincing?
- Compare the attitude toward and relationship with the State of Israel on the part of American Jews with the relationships of Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans, Ukrainian Americans, Polish Americans, and Irish Americans with their homelands.

American History

- The United States has received millions of immigrants of various ethnic, national, and religious identities. In what ways have American Jews had experiences similar to other immigrant groups? In what ways have their experiences differed?
- Some parts of the American Jewish community supported Zionism while others opposed it. Explain their differences. How and why were those arguments resolved over the last century?
- How did antisemitism affect American Jews during the twentieth century? Compare antisemitism to prejudice and discrimination faced by groups such as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Catholics, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

International Relations

- The U.S. government initially favored the formation of a Jewish state, then became at best lukewarm in the 1940s. Discuss the bases of the support before and during the First World War, and attitudes during and immediately after the Second World War to 1948.
- Many religious and ethnic communities in the United States have ties to their homelands, from Mexico and Cuba, or Ireland and Italy, to Ukraine and Israel. Discuss how such ties help or hinder U.S. foreign policy.
- What role does Israel play in U.S. policy in the Middle East and Arab world?

Further Projects

- Hold a debate over whether intermarriage has a positive or negative impact on the American Jewish community.
- Write a policy brief to the government of Israel explaining why the country should try to play a larger role in American Jewish life.

Supplementary Materials

“[American Jewish Population Estimates, 2020: Summary & Highlights.](#)” Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 18 May 2021.

“[American Jewish Population Project.](#)” Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2024.

“[Camp Works: The Long-Term Impact of Jewish Overnight Camp.](#)” Foundation for Jewish Camp, Spring 2011.

Carlyle Murphy. “[Interfaith Marriage is common in U.S., particularly among the recently wed.](#)” Pew Research Center, June 2, 2015.

Dashefsky, Arnold and Ira M. Sheskin, eds. *American Jewish Yearbook 2023: The Annual Record of the North American Jewish Communities Since 1899*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2024.

“[Gallup Polls on American Sympathy Toward Israel and the Arabs/Palestinians, 1967-Present.](#)” Jewish Virtual Library.

Hersh, Eitan. [“A Year of Campus Conflict and Growth: An Over-Time Study of the Impact of the Israel-Hamas War on U.S. College Students.”](#) Jim Joseph Foundation, September 3, 2024.

[“Jewish Americans in 2020.”](#) Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021

Sarna, Jonathan. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

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