



## Islands of Sovereignty: Internalizing Zionism

**Amitai Fraiman**

Growing up in Israel, I was always “the American.” Yes, my parents made aliyah, but I was born in Israel, and that was what mattered. After moving to New York for rabbinical school, I was no longer “the American” but “the Israeli.” I joked that I had incredible English for an Israeli and remarkable Hebrew for an American, but small mistakes gave me away. Beneath the humor, I realized I was emitting a frequency that didn’t quite fit in either place.

In that liminality, I recognized which parts of my identity “belonged” to each context, and began to examine the deeper causes of the differences in my Jewishness.

What I realized is this: Israeli Judaism evolved in a majority setting, while in the Diaspora, and over a millennium, Judaism developed in a minority one. Raised in a religious Zionist environment, I was taught that the two Judaisms weren’t equal, but hierarchical. Zionism and Judaism were treated as interchangeable; therefore, Judaism in Israel was authentic, and in the diaspora, a pale imitation.

However, moving to the United States taught me to see both as equally real, necessary, and complementary. They complement each other precisely because neither side has fully internalized Jewish sovereignty.

One might think this is true only outside Israel, but it is also true in Israel. Some Israelis romanticize the past while ignoring sovereignty’s responsibilities to minorities and the realities of power, while others are so uncomfortable with sovereignty that they reject it outright. Both miss the mark.

In America, the challenge looks different. Here, Jews lack political sovereignty altogether, so it’s no surprise the mindset hasn’t taken hold. But is that true? Are there no Jewish settings with a form of self-rule that allows for the full expression of Jewishness?

Some might point to synagogues. Synagogues are vital, but they are organized around ritual and prayer. Camps and schools are essential educational and identity-forming institutions, but like greenhouses they cultivate and protect away from the day-to-day

interactions of the “real world.” They matter enormously, but can’t provide the whole canvas for Jewish civic life.

Israel offers that canvas. The power of sovereignty there is ambient, you feel it simply by walking down the street, where Jewish life is everywhere and everything is home. In the Diaspora, JCCs are the closest parallel. They emulate that sovereign ambiance by creating public squares where Jewish life meets daily life. Multigenerational, apolitical, nondenominational, and culturally rich, they serve Jews and non-Jews alike: a gym, a café, a preschool, a Hebrew class, a holiday concert. In JCCs, ordinary activity itself becomes Jewish life lived openly.

JCCs are mini-states, islands of sovereignty for the Jewish people.

Israel teaches the lessons of majority power and responsibility. The Diaspora teaches the creativity of resilience as a minority. Living without state-backed Judaism has forced Diaspora Jews to innovate, to fight for relevance in open societies where opting out is easy. It tempers the corruptions of power and has kept alive the memory of the stranger, building habits of integration, alliance, and openness. When Israelis internalize these lessons, extremism could be tempered, and sovereignty itself would evolve into something richer. Each side holds something the other lacks, and together they form a more complete picture of what Jewish life can be.

But how is this Zionism? Zionism is often defined, rightly, as the Jewish right to self-determination in our ancestral homeland. That definition is essential. But there were other visions too. Think of Ahad Ha’am, who imagined Israel not only as a political state but as a cultural center radiating vitality into the Diaspora. He misjudged the timing, but not the essence. When Israel thrives, it animates Jews everywhere, not just through exported ideas, but by reminding us of the power and responsibility that come with sovereignty.

This moment, in which we have both a strong homeland with its flaws and a thriving Diaspora with its challenges, is unique in Jewish history. It demands that we internalize Zionism, not as spectators, but as a mindset of sovereignty. Our task outside Israel is not just to wave flags, send money, or cheer from the sidelines. It is to embrace agency and to be co-creators of Jewish life, here and in Israel alike.

Zionism is more than the right to a state. It is the reclamation of our place in human history: not as scapegoats, not as symbols, and not as the “conscience” of the world, but

as a people with struggles, rights, and dreams- a people who step back into history as its authors and protagonists on our own terms.

Raised in Jerusalem, ordained in NY, and now living in Palo Alto, **Rabbi Amitai Fraiman** is the Founding Director of the [Z3 Project](#). R' Fraiman is also the founder of [שזזור/Interwoven](#), an organization specializing in telling the story of American Jewry to Israelis. Amitai is an [ELI speaker](#), a musmach of YCT, and a graduate of NYU's Wagner-Skirball dual MPA-MA program. Together with Michal, they are the proud parents of Maya, Yahli and Roei, who they love bigger than the sky