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May 23, 2010: What About Israel?

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Title: What About Israel?

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5/23/2010—Peter Beinart's heartfelt plea for a return to liberal Zionism in the New York Review of Books—The Failure of the Jewish Establishment—is causing a stir in American Jewish circles. There is evidence that young American Jews, especially non-Orthodox Jews, have little attachment to the State of Israel. Beinart believes that the reason for this is the growing anti-Palestinian fervor in Israel. The American Jewish establishment has defended Israeli policies and prevented any domestic American criticism of Israel by invoking the specter of anti-Semitism, even though actual Israeli policies belie the liberal commitments of these same American Jewish leaders. In Beinart's memorable phrasing, "For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead." What makes Beinart's plea so stirring is that he obviously cares a great deal about both Israel and the original universalism of Zionism. He is afraid of both likely possibilities: that his children will not care about Israel or that they will care about Israel and will carry ill-will toward the Palestinian people. He yearns for a model that respects both Israel and the legitimate rights of Palestinians. I have never criticized Israeli policies, basically because I thought it cowardly to do so from the safety of America. Now that I no longer consider myself Jewish, my reasons for not doing so are even stronger. Nevertheless, at a certain point, the pressure that American Jewish organizations bring to bear against critics of Israel prevents intelligent American policy from being made. Needless to say, that is an American rather than a specifically Jewish problem. But the calls in Israel for denying citizenship to Israeli Arabs and promoting loyalty oaths brings to the fore the fundamental question whether a religious state can ever be genuinely democratic. The problem in Israel is simple demographics. Non-Jews are multiplying faster than Jews. Eventually, something has to be done or the State will not be Jewish anymore. In that context, the apparent racism of some recent Israeli proposals is understandable, if not admirable. Far be it from me to say that Israel should not be a Jewish state. But if the tension between liberal values and official government religious commitment should turn out to be inherent, then the dilemma Beinart points to will not be solvable no matter how much good-will people have.