

Orthodox Jew in Israel: It's Time to Burn My American Passport

My wife and I, and five of our children, had a discussion over Shabbat dinner recently about giving up our U.S. citizenship. Five of my six children were born in the U.S.

On my father's side, I'm a second-generation American; on my mother's side, fourth or fifth. When we moved to Israel, my oldest was 11 and the youngest was three. A year later, our youngest son was born in Jerusalem. He's an American because we are. Some are surprised to know that we choose to keep our U.S. citizenship, or that we're even allowed to. Others ask why we'd want to.

Being American comes with many rights and responsibilities. Our situation as dual American-Israeli citizens is not unique. There are a growing number of Americans in Israel, but I suspect that there are many more in other countries where the same conversations are taking place.

I am proudly American: born, raised, educated and will always be American in my mind and culture. On many levels, the United States is the greatest country with the greatest potential for so many. It is the greatest democracy and is a world leader in so many things.

No country is perfect, and the U.S. is no exception. Keeping my citizenship is not a political issue nor a partisan issue. It is a great blessing to have been born there, have the opportunities I have had and made for myself.

America is also the country in which Jews have had greatest opportunities in our diaspora, despite overt discrimination in education, residentially, socially and more that have been

(and in many cases still are) part of the U.S. society. American Jews have established perhaps the strongest diaspora community ever. Time will tell if it withstands the trend of pretty much all other diaspora experiences. Nevertheless, until now, the U.S. has contributed to the Jews, as the Jews have contributed to the U.S.

Spending most of my life and career in the U.S., I've also worked hard and contributed my share of taxes. I hope that Social Security will still exist when I am eligible to retire and reap what I sowed.

Living overseas has broadened and deepened the understanding of the significance of U.S. policies, its role in the world and the value and strength of the U.S. economy and dollar.

I also consider it a privilege to vote in the U.S. Some ask why, if living overseas, I should be able, much less would care, to vote. When I explain that we never stopped being Americans, are required to file (and pay) taxes and that it's a right and privilege, most get it.

But every privilege also has its responsibility. Since living in Israel, I have been called for jury duty twice. I am exempt because I live overseas (though wouldn't complain if they wanted to send me a plane ticket), but I still have to respond. The U.S. also imposes complicated bureaucratic standards that all U.S. citizens living abroad, earning over a certain amount, still have to file taxes in the U.S., even if we pay more in taxes in Israel than we would in the U.S. on the same income.

We still have to let the IRS know. Some people with young children also get a tax credit, but you have to file to do so.

Opening a bank account here as an American requires extra scrutiny. Israeli banks ask, covering their assets literally and figuratively, if we are U.S. citizens. The last thing they want to do is cross the U.S. and its banking system. So, they

don't. And it costs U.S.

More frustrating is that, regardless of income, American citizens have to file an FBAR if their financial assets exceed \$10,000. That includes saving accounts, pensions, brokerage accounts, etc. Even if people have no current income, they have to report total assets. Unless you have time and know what you're doing, you have to pay someone to do this. For young people starting out in their careers (like my kids), it's a burden and expense that's hard to justify. It's almost something you have to pay someone to do because with the bureaucracy, while one can file their own taxes and the like, making a mistake would create even worse problems.

It's disappointing that my kids don't appreciate the blessings of being American the same as I do. Forget that they don't know about many American cultural and historical pillars (shockingly not even Woodstock), they just don't look that far west.

It's disappointing that they don't care that much, and it's disappointing that the U.S. makes being a citizen overseas that much of a financial burden. Nobody's given up their citizenship yet, but they have a hard time rationalizing paying what's for them a lot of money just to maintain their "membership" and risk something criminal for not doing so. My oldest daughter has two children and, even though they are eligible, they're not registered as Americans.

But there's always a catch. You can't just burn or give up your passport and say, "No thank you." Giving up U.S. citizenship is a costly bureaucratic process. It costs about \$2,500 per person (a month's salary for some, before taxes), as well as an "exit" tax, which basically is a percent of your assets. That's not only shocking, and out of reach for some on its own, but makes it cost prohibitive to renounce one's citizenship to the extent that it's a financial burden to do so, a unique American catch 22.

A few months ago, one of my daughters joked how once an Israeli man offered to pay her to get married as a means (illegally) to get U.S. citizenship. Of course, that's not happening. Now, my kids are talking about dumping their citizenship, especially if the U.S. allows Israelis the reciprocity of getting an automatic visa to visit the U.S., like Americans have coming to Israel.

Avoiding waiting for an appointment, and in line for hours just to apply for a visa, will be a turning point in how they consider keeping their American citizenship or not.

A college professor once said that a Jew can never have too many passports. If you ask my kids and others who are no longer diaspora Jews, one is enough: the one with the biblical emblem of the State of Israel. Who cares if we can't go to Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other enlightened countries? {eoa}

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He is president of the Genesis 123 Foundation, which builds bridges between Jews and Christians, and writes regularly for a variety of prominent Christian and conservative websites. Inspiration from Zion is the popular webinar series and podcast that he hosts. He can be reached at InspirationfromZion@.

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