



“WHY SHOULD I, A WRITER, FEEL RESPONSIBLE, WHEN THE PRESIDENT DOES NOT?”

As November’s US presidential election looms, **Rebecca Taylor** speaks to the American author Joshua Cohen about the turmoil unfolding in his country and asks about the role of writers in addressing political issues

Joshua Cohen was hailed as one of the most “prodigious prose stylists at work in America today” (New Yorker) following his 2010 debut, *Witz*, and his dazzling 2015 satire of the tech industry, *Book of Numbers* – all written before he turned 35. He went on to address a swathe of issues including race, religion, class and the nature of ‘occupation’ in Israel and the US in his 2017 novel *Moving Kings*. His new book, expected to be published next year, imagines the life of Benjamin Netanyahu and his family during the time they lived in America.

REBECCA TAYLOR: American Jews have traditionally voted Democrat. Has that changed over the last few years?

JOSHUA COHEN: Since President Franklin D Roosevelt’s New Deal, Jews have overwhelmingly voted Democrat. A shift was reported around the time of George Bush senior and the neocon movement. But I always thought that was a more reported on than an actual phenomenon. I don’t see much wavering. We can’t talk about a schism in the Jewish vote. It’s not that Joe Biden is appealing; it’s just that the alternative is very unappealing.

RT: Are there particular issues Jewish voters care about?

JC: It’s impossible to talk of a “Jewish vote”, but campaigning for social justice is deeply ingrained in the Jewish American tradition. One of the ideals of the community is to win for others the equal rights that Jews have enjoyed for a few decades in America.

People know about the civil rights movement and of the ‘freedom riders’ [the activists, including some Jews, who rode on buses in mixed racial groups into the South to challenge racial discrimination]. That spirit has passed to a new generation of Jews who are both committed to racial equality and are sceptical about what they perceive as their parents’ uncritical support of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians – that said, much of this demographic supports Bernie Sanders, who’s old enough to be their grandfather. However, this position was arrived at not through Jewish thinking, but generational processes. If there is an inherently Jewish core, it is a questioning of race and identity. It asks: how white are Jews?

Clockwise from left: Joshua Cohen; members of the Washington Freedom Riders Committee hang signs on a bus at Times Square, New York, 1960s; Senator Bernie Sanders as he goes onstage in Austin, Texas

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RT: Do some black communities feel that Jews are out of touch with the issues affecting them?

JC: There’s an enormous difference in the dialogue between the chasidim in Crown Heights in Brooklyn and their black neighbours and the sort of dialogue that takes place between students [of different backgrounds] at university.

I believe all the tensions that emerge are inherently local and entirely parochial. They are often particular to living in a city and to certain neighbourhoods in cities.

There is a narrative that has it that black people are the real Jews, gathered and sent to the US as slaves, and white Jews are out there as imposters. That fuels a hateful narrative.

The idea of redemption is also strong in the US: going from slavery to a redemption that is being postponed. Not many Jews (apart from some on the more Orthodox side) are waiting for the actual moment of redemption but the black diaspora is. On their terms, redemption means economic and housing equality and educational opportunities.

The Jewish messianic tendency found a practical expression in the creation of Israel as a Jewish nation state. But such separatism is anathema to America, where everyone lives next to and rubs up against everyone else. That is the beauty of American life, but it’s sometimes difficult for Jews to remember that this beauty might not be as apparent to other minorities, who might resent our progress.

RT: Israel is still a major concern for American Jews and that seems to be reflected in contemporary American fiction. Apart from your own novel, *Moving Kings*, it’s there in recent works by Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer and Nathan Englander.

JC: Although it still feels as if Israel is fighting for its life, in my mind, that’s a psychological position. Israel hasn’t fought a war for its existence in a long time and probably won’t again because of its enormous power of deterrence.

But Israel is absolutely where most of the Jewish community is focused – because of the links between the US and Israel and because American Jews have recently felt slightly abandoned by



Israel and its prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

The increased connection between Israel and the US evangelical right has also made it a particularly rich subject, because suddenly the Americans that we Jews know so well as almost adversaries are being honoured.

There is a certain freedom for writers who are not from Israel to navigate the truth of it. But most contemporary American Jewish writers are grappling with the question: what does Israel mean to me? I am not interested in what Israel means to me. One marker of it as a country is that it can exist outside what it means to anyone who is not a citizen. I’m interested

in what it means to people who have lost meaning in other parts of their lives. In *Moving Kings*, when David King [one of the novel’s main protagonists] finds that his American family life is not able to provide him with stability, he turns in

a moment of panic to Israel.

My interest is also in depicting what Israel and Israelis look like to my eyes. I think that is the more interesting challenge as a writer.

RT: The Israeli writer Ayelet Gundar-Goshen recently wrote a piece for JR on the Israeli elections. She said there was an imperative for writers to speak out about politics. Is that the writer’s role?

JC: I got into writing in the first place because I didn’t want to be told what to do. I very much bristle against the terms “a writer should” or “a writer must”. It always surprises me that it is always the writer who is called to reflect on responsibility. Politicians just get away with being irresponsible. Why should I, a writer, have an imperative to do something and the president does not?

There is also a sense of aggrandisement in saying a writer “must”. I could understand it if someone had read my work and it provoked something in them but why should most people care about my opinions?

Critical theorists tell us everything is political and even the denial of politics in your writing is political. If that’s the case, then politics is a meaningless word. To

“Something wouldn’t let me bow. It was deeply inside me – a physical refusal”

