Students, faculty and a large contingent of alumni and community members packed Lewis Auditorium in Cornell's Goldwin Smith Hall on May 1, 2012 to hear Peter Beinart give a talk entitled "The Crisis of Zionism." Beinart spoke at Cornell as the final speaker in the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies' 2011-2012 Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series. In a presentation that ran the gamut from the role of water in Jewish theology to the politics of modern Israel, Beinart argued that the biggest single threat to Zionism in contemporary times is its lack of resonance with the younger generation.

After an introduction from Fredrik Logevall, director of the Einaudi Center, and Heike Michelsen, Director of Programming for the Einaudi Center, Beinart began his talk by telling the audience that his topic was a sensitive subject even amongst his family.

He went on to explain, "The people who lead American Zionism came to the movement when the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank was new." Beinart continued that their idealism mirrors back to the innocent, "Disnified" vision of Israel as a secular refuge for all Jews, and that they can ignore the ideological contradiction between being both a religious and democratic state. He continued, "Israel within the 1967 lines is a vibrant and remarkable democracy. In the West Bank, Israel cannot be called a democracy."

This tension between religious identity and democratic ideals is in part responsible for the failure of the Zionist movement to reproduce itself in younger generations. Although the movement is vibrant among orthodox Jews, explained Beinart, "The Zionism that is emerging in the younger orthodox community does not even pay lip service to the ideals of secular democracy." He also pointed to an inexcusable indulgence towards racist attitudes against Arabs that exists in the Zionist community.

Beinart identified the failure of the Jewish educational system as another reason for the decline in Zionism among younger Jews. Jewish schools are prohibitively expensive and academically
mediocre, and are struggling to exist from year to year because they don't receive adequate support from the community, according to Beinart. If a Jewish education is not a viable option, he continued, Jewish children aren't raised with an awareness of the joy of Judaism. Beinart laid blame for this directly at the feet of the older generation that has led the movement, claiming that they are more interested in building holocaust memorials to commemorate the past rather than schools to lay the foundations for the future.

According to Beinart, another fault line between Zionism and younger Jews is the high degree of alienation between newer Jewish organizations and Israeli policy. "Young American Jews are liberal," he explained. "Jewish college students are twice as likely to identify themselves as liberals as are non-Jews. These people are told to start with the assumption that everything in the state of Israel is right, and to reason backwards from there to find an explanation." This alienates free thinkers, who find this logic "un-authentic", said Beinart. In conclusion, Beinart said, "We need to tell young American Jews that there was a time when the best of their generation was fighting for democracy in Mississippi, and that their generation should be fighting for democracy in Israel." Paraphrasing renowned theologian Abraham Heschel, he said that only then would Israel be a homeland worth waiting 2000 years for.

After concluding his prepared remarks, Beinart responded to several questions from the floor. One audience member asked if the tensions between Israel's need to be both a Jewish state and a democratic state made national security and civil rights irreconcilable as ideals. Beinart replied that there is a need for a state devoted to Jewish refuge, but that Israel could reconcile Zionism with democracy by creating a Palestinian state. Beinart reasoned that with a Palestinian flag, a Palestinian national anthem, and most importantly, right of return for Palestinians identical to that granted to Jews by Israel, Arab citizens would have parity.

Another audience member pointed out that liberal American Jews are reluctant to engage in discussions about Zionism, and that Jewish students don't identify strongly with Israel. He asked Beinart how the Zionist movement should engage people with no interest in Israel. Beinart replied that students distancing themselves from Israel was a part of them distancing themselves from all things Jewish, and that providing them with an opportunity to travel to Israel and learn its history while simultaneously exposing them to the Palestinian context would provide a more genuine experience that would resonate with the more skeptical contemporary generation of young Jews.

Another question focused on whether the tradeoff between being Jewish and democratic could ever lead to a peaceful and stable Israel. Beinart concluded, "Israel will never be democratic in the same way that the United States is, and this tradeoff between being Jewish and being democratic will always be a difficult relationship, but long-term there is room for compromise."

Additionally, Beinart served as the editor of The New Republic from 1999 to 2006. He was a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations from 2007 to 2009. He has appeared on several television and radio programs including NBC's "Meet the Press," ABC's "This Week," and "The Colbert Report." Beinart graduated from Yale University in 1993, winning a Rhodes scholarship for graduate study at Oxford University, where he earned an M.Phil. in international relations.

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.