

When PM Modi said 'Am Yisrael Chai': A civilisational moment in India-Israel ties

Hindol Sengupta • February 27, 2026

India and Israel find themselves in a geopolitical state where each could immensely benefit the other. But the relationship is becoming more than merely about geopolitics



PM Narendra Modi shakes hands with Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu after his address to the Knesset, Israel's parliament. PM Modi is now the first world leader to cross 100 million followers on Instagram. Image Courtesy: narendramodi/Instagram

It's a phrase that has echoed through Jewish history, unique in its historic saga of resistance in the face of persecution.

So when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Am Yisrael chai (the people of Israel live) in the Israeli parliament, he was tapping into one of the most potent insignias of the Jewish people, their sheer dogged will to resist annihilation.

Said to have been carved on the Arch of Titus in Rome after the fall of the Second Temple, these words echoed through Jewish history facing Nazi assault and destruction. In the 1960s, it became a song which was second in popularity only to the Hatikvah, the national anthem of Israel.

By all accounts, and assessment, an Indian prime minister saying this in Israel is historic. It is a shift both of mindset and policy. And both need to be understood carefully.

From the era of Gandhian and Nehruvian discomfort with Israel and affinity to the Palestinian cause, India under Modi is in a very different age. This is usually analysed as merely a 'right wing' attribute, but in fact it is much more core.

We are in the age of nations defining themselves through history and as civilisations. And no two countries and peoples perhaps better qualify than India and Israel. In Modi's worldview, the histories of Israelis and Indians, indeed more specifically the Jewish people and Hindus, echo each other. While their numbers vary, the trajectory of having faced relentless adversity to triumph and take charge of a homeland is similar. The tales of valour and a sense of destiny are common between the two peoples. As is the feeling that they are protectors of something ancient, something valuable and potent which must be protected and passed on from generation to generation. Mahler's idea that tradition is the preservation of fire and not the protection of ashes is particularly pertinent in this thought process.

While the geopolitical aspects of this relationship are critical, the civilisational aspect from the point of view of Modi and his interlocutors in Israel cannot and should not be ignored. To suggest that such a visit and such a speech are mere politics for Modi is to vastly underestimate, in fact, misunderstand his ideological moorings.

It is a geopolitical vision that sees the turbulent world that is coming, not least upended by AI, and seeks to dig deep into the roots of history to remain steadfast and resilient. It is a firm break away from the hesitance of the past when India feared that dealing openly with Israel would be ideologically and geopolitically damaging — both with its large Muslim population at home and the Arab world.

The world is far more complex today, which has, ironically, allowed for much more space for candour in India's ties with Israel — after all, India sees not only America but also China deal with all sides and all parties without reticence, and as the fourth largest economy in the world, it finally feels that it should have the ability to deal with everyone without ambiguity. The shifting tides in West Asia, including American

pressure led by President Donald Trump on the Abraham Accords, have opened more strategic space in this direction.

India has had a long history of bipartisan security ties with Israel, but to take it to the level of deeper integration — something that is useful for India in the light of Operation Sindoor and continuing crises with China — new modes of operation are required. With the war in Gaza still on in many ways and continuous criticism from all quarters, including in America, Israel needs strong international partners, in fact it needs friends. And the vocal backing of a country like India at a time of great geopolitical isolation is very welcome, and that echoed in the many rounds of standing applause that Modi received during his speech at the Israeli parliament.

This will become a historical reference point now, and what happens next will always be in the context of this visit.

There are concerns that such a visit and speech empower an embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is facing a difficult election. While this may in part be true, India's interests and Israel's commitments to this relationship go much beyond a single politician. There is a deeper understanding in both Israeli and Indian society that, in some ways, and in some key arenas, these two countries are each other's enduring bets, and the causes for their strategic alliance will not fade away any time soon. With each new conflict, this relationship is getting tested, and it is showing remarkable tenacity and depth.

Israel at this point has everything to gain and really nothing to lose with deeper ties with India. But does India have anything to lose? For instance, does this disturb its relationship with Iran? Not really. India has delivered all its promises, including the last tranche of the \$120 million for the Chabahar Port to Iran, and while an independent and strong Iran is helpful to India in the balance of power in West Asia, and especially in dealing with Pakistan, it sees clearly that the Iranian regime is in peril as it confronts the US on its nuclear programme and is increasingly unpopular among vast portions of its own population. How long this regime will remain intact in the same way is debatable.

Also, India's growing ties with Afghanistan and the Taliban's growing conflict with Pakistan are useful from an Indian context in keeping the Pakistani Army occupied.

It has been noted that such a visit to Israel helps India find firmer footing with the United States, and while that might be true at the moment, India is perfectly aware of the challenges faced by the Trump administration, which has a tough midterm coming up this year.

So Israel is a much wider play than immediate geopolitics. It keeps in mind that Turkey is looking to build significant capacity, including with Pakistan, to be 'the head of the Muslim world' once again. Erdogan's Turkey is increasingly hostile to India and its key sovereign interests, including in Kashmir.

Israel brings a wealth of inputs in everything from agriculture to AI — all of which India needs. India is naturally inclined to keep the peace with all sides — but it sees that the world is splintering — and in some ways it will have to make its position clear on some fronts. In this, consider that Israel has named India as a key ally in its 'hexagon of alliances', including Cyprus and Greece and other members who are yet unnamed. Such a formation is supposed to take on Islamist radicalism. Quite possibly the UAE will be part of this, in some shape or form, and it makes sense for India to see how this plays out, especially since questions are being raised about the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) after recent contention between the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia's recent defence agreement with Pakistan also casts a shadow, but India sees Saudi apprehensions after the attack on Qatar in the Gaza war. It is prepared to try and be a bridge in a world where things are more fragile than ever. Such a world needs moves and steps that have not been seen before.

This Modi visit will be remembered in Israel as a marker of India's resolute commitment to the relationship even amidst the toughest of times. This will become the standard through which the future of the India-Israel partnership is analysed in the future.

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