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 Benignjamin 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 noceon movement. But I always thought that was 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 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

RT: Are there particular issues Jewish voters care about?
JC: It is 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 with the Jewish equals. Jews that 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?

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

Moving Kings, its there in recent works by Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer and Nathan Englander. Although it still feels as if Israel is fighting for its life, in my mind, that’s a psychological passion. Israel hasn’t fought a war for its existence in a long time and probably won’t again because of its enormous power and 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 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