

## Talking about Israel: Justice. Self-Preservation. Compromise.

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Two old Jews were sitting on a park bench, friends for many years. One looks at the other and says, “Oy”. The other looks back and says, “Oy”. The other replies, “Oy”, to which the response is “Oy”. They repeat this exchange a few more times, and then Max says to Irving, “I thought we weren’t going to talk about Israel.”

Friends, we do need to talk about Israel.

The last time Mount Zion had a year focused on Israel was in 2010, which was the last time I gave a High Holy Day sermon about it. A lot has changed in the past eight years. Israel has become both more beloved in some circles and countries and more reviled in many others.

If we talk about Israel honestly and fully, we may be able to remember why we love the land or people of Israel and what we fear most about what is happening in Israel or to Israel and how it impacts our lives.

If we talk about Israel honestly and fully, we might feel responsible, as part of the small Jewish people, to defend Israel and to support the Jewish values that are important to us, from justice on the one hand to self-preservation on the other and how compromise may even bring us to peace.

It has not always been so difficult to do this, to talk about Israel. Some of us can remember what it felt like twenty-five years ago when speaking about peace was not naïve, but a real possibility. In 1993, I was teaching 5<sup>th</sup> graders in Larchmont, New York. It was my first time teaching religious school. I remember a particular Monday. As usual, I left my rabbinic school class fifteen minutes early in lower Manhattan, so I could race to the subway to get to Grand Central, then a Metro North train to Larchmont, and a cab to the synagogue where I’d arrive to a class full of 10-year-olds waiting for me. But none of that chaotic schedule mattered. I was on cloud nine. I told these students with no hyperbole, you are going to remember this day for the rest of your lives. That morning, I told them, President Clinton stood on the lawn of the White House with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and ushered in a new era of peace. This was just four years after the Berlin wall came down, there were hints that Northern Ireland’s intractable religious war could be resolved, and now peace in the Middle East!

That September 13<sup>th</sup> morning, a reluctant Prime Minister Rabin said:

“Let me say to you, the Palestinians: We are destined to live together on the same soil, in the same land. We, the soldiers who have returned from battle stained with blood, we who have seen our relatives and friends killed before our eyes, we who have attended their funerals and cannot look into the eyes of their parents, we who have come from a land where parents bury their children, we who have fought against you, the Palestinians -

We say to you today in a loud and a clear voice: Enough of blood and tears. Enough. We have no desire for revenge. We harbor no hatred towards you. We, like you, are people, people who want to build a home, to plant a tree, to love, to live side by side with you in dignity, in empathy, as human beings, as free men. We are today giving peace a chance, and saying again to you: Enough. Let us pray that a day will come when we all will say: Farewell to the arms.”

That was a quarter century ago. I remember the feeling like yesterday. A real vision of peace in our lifetime. When people talked about Israel in the world, there was admiration. There was a sense that the old was becoming new, Judaism’s gifts to Western Civilization were honored, Biblical visions of peace were relevant and possible: “Let them beat their swords into plowshares.”

Since then, a generation has been born who never experienced this hope, seeing justice and peace honored in the *realpolitik* of the Middle East where the value of self-preservation usually reigns.

Those Larchmont fifth graders are now 35 years old. I wonder where they are, how they remember that fateful day, and how they talk about Israel today.

I love Israel, but I hate what is happening in Israel today. The government has made decisions that violate my values and make my blood boil and I have no qualms about criticizing them. At the same time, I hate what it happening to Israel. I will defend Israel as people unfairly demonize, delegitimize and hold Israel to a different standard.<sup>1</sup>

I worry that too many American Jews feel alienated from Israel. It might be because of injustices Palestinians endure every day and that focus is all that they see, because of the way liberal Judaism is not given equal status in funding or legitimacy in the government, or because Israel simply doesn’t play a role in their Jewish identity.

Being Jewish means having *some* relationship with Israel. It might be an estranged relationship. It might be currently unknown, like discovering a relative later in life. It may be a robust connection, a tenuous one, or it might be confusing. Whether we choose it or not, Israel is a part of us. Our namesake, Jacob, becomes *Yisrael*, after some wrestling. We too have the same fortune or misfortune.

What would the world look like without Israel, without a Jewish state? What would happen to Herzl’s Zionist vision of a refuge for Jews no matter what happens whether in Russia, Yemen or England? What would happen to Ahad Ha’am’s Zionist vision of a cultural center for Jewish life, with Israel being the center of a wheel with spokes reaching outward throughout the world? Take Hebrew for instance. In Israel, as Anat Hoffman, the head of the Israel Religious Action Center, noted, “We resurrected Hebrew; it was the 2nd most famous resurrection in our region in history.”

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<sup>1</sup> Natan Sharansky talked about the three “D’s” of Israel bashing, three ways Israel is singled out among nations by demonizing, delegitimizing and holding Israel to a different standard.

What may be surprising is how positively Israel is viewed among Americans. Fully 74 percent of American adults have a favorable view of Israel, which is the best showing for Israel in 27 years. This was from a Gallup poll this past March. The only issue is that this support is becoming more partisan. Support for Israel is at 83% among Republicans and 64% among Democrats. There is also a generational divide. For adults 55 and older, support for Israel was at 80%, while support for the Palestinian Authority was at 18%. For millennials, support for Israel is at 65%, while support for the PA jumps to 31%.

This shift is connected to another fact. Young Jews are increasingly saying that they have no religion at all – despite identifying themselves as Jews - often proudly. This is all from the Pew Research Center's Portrait of Jewish Americans from five years ago. It reported that these "Jews of no religion" are rewriting the norms of Jewish behavior. They are far less likely to raise their children Jewish, to give to Jewish charities, to belong to Jewish organizations, to feel connected to the Jewish community and to care about Israel.

If many young Jews are feeling distanced from their religion and millennials in general are feeling more sympathy toward Palestinians and, to be clear, we should feel sympathy, then we have a tough road ahead when it comes to talking about Israel.

There is no shortcut. It takes time and effort.

Today, on this Rosh Hashanah, I ask you to invest the energy to learn, to listen, and to talk about Israel allowing for complex truths. As we talk, I hope that it is in part from our love for Israel first, from our legitimate fears for the enemies Israel faces, for how Israel is affecting anti-Semitism and for what Israel is becoming, and finally from our responsibility to our worldwide family, the Jewish people.

**We first talk about Israel from *ahavat Yisrael*, from our love.**

My relationship to Israel was born from weeks of physically connecting to the land and its past. When I was taking a college class on the Bible, the professor, an archaeologist, showed slides of the land from the desert to the Dead Sea and I fell in love. That summer, I was 18 years old, traveling with twenty other university students for six weeks in Jerusalem studying sacred space from the perspective of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Then we spent a month at Tzipori, an archaeological dig in the north. There, in the heat and dirt, in an iron age pit 20 feet down, I felt connected to land, to history, and to my Judaism in a way that made the next years of transitioning from pre-med to rabbinical school possible.

Amos Oz wrote:

The Land of Israel is not a museum of God.  
No place is a museum of God,  
no person and no inanimate object is a thing of worship....  
You come to a place - a hill, the desert, a spring, a house ...  
You change it and you make your mark upon it,

but it is also important to be open  
and give it the opportunity to leave its mark on you.

The land left its mark on me. My *ahavat Yisrael*, love for Israel, was born that summer and grew through many experiences, especially during my sabbatical in 2008 when I discovered my great-grandmother's grave on the Mount of Olives.

But my awe of Israel came from a high school class at my synagogue: "Imagine standing in Rome under the Arch of Titus," the teacher told us, "this 2000-year-old structure that celebrates the destruction of Jerusalem and the conquest of Judea, our ancestors.

Then, imagine standing on the rampart walls of Jerusalem gazing upon a vibrant, diverse society that our people have recreated with all its imperfections. How can you not feel the power of the improbability of that moment? In Psalm 126, which we sing before the blessing after the meal on Shabbat, we say in astonishment, 'we were like dreamers' as we returned from exile."

Yossi Klein Halevi writes about this return in his new book, *Letters to my Palestinian Neighbor*, which is our community book read this Fall. Focusing on the end of the 6 Day War, when Israel attains the Old City of Jerusalem, he says: "The iconic image of that moment is a photograph of several paratroopers, arms around each other's shoulders, standing at the [Western] Wall and gazing upward. Though they'd just won the greatest military victory in Jewish history, their young faces revealed not triumph but awe, like pilgrims at the end of a journey. At that moment they weren't representing the might of a sovereign state but the hopes of an ancient people." (p. 96)

Even though my sense of being Jewish does not feel in exile, for I am perfectly at home in my Judaism in the United States, I can still feel the joy of that return. For 2,000 years, through unspeakable horrors, we have kept the vision of the land of Israel in our daily prayers and rituals.

Does that make me a Zionist? Halevi suggests: "The answer depends on what one means by Zionism. If it refers to the political movement that emerged in the late 19th century, then certainly there are forms of Judaism that are independent of Zionism...But if by "Zionism" one means the Jewish attachment to the land of Israel and the dream of renewing Jewish sovereignty in our place of origin, then there is no Judaism without Zionism." (page 42).

Halevi's Zionism is my Zionism. Even as I worship at Mount Zion in St. Paul, Israel's existence is part of my Judaism.

### **We also talk about Israel from our fears.**

According to Ben Gurion, if you want to be a realist, you must believe in miracles. Sometimes, that can be pretty hard to do. There are two fears that seem quite legitimate. One is the fear of Israel's existential threat because of Iran's proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas stockpiling weapons and desiring to wipe out Israel in a heartbeat if given the chance.

The other fear is what the world thinks of Israel and how that impacts Jewish communities on college campuses and even in entire countries. In England, a recent poll said that 40% of Jews in England would seriously consider leaving the country if Jeremy Corbyn became Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup> Corbyn is head of England's Labour Party which leads the Opposition. His cozying up to leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah and stances on anti-Semitism that allow for opposition to Israel's existence, have caused existential angst among Britain's Jews. Can you imagine? This is 2018 not 1938. 40% of Jews are seriously considering that their ability to live worthwhile, full lives in Britain would be compromised if one of two major parties comes into power. On one website, an anti-Semitic comment summed up the fears: "You can't be Jewish and British at the same time. Choose one."

In the United States, antisemitic incidents rose 57% in US in 2017, the largest single year increase on record according to the Anti-Defamation League. And it is affecting our young people most of all. There was almost a 90% increase in antisemitic incidents on college campuses and a 94% increase in K-12 schools. Last year there were 4.2 million antisemitic tweets by 3 million different people.

These are facts about things we cannot control though we can influence them to a degree through education. Thankfully these statistics are not the full story. We still live in unprecedented times of acceptance, multi-faith dialogue and collaboration, and influence in society.

Yet we cannot pretend that we can be Jewish without addressing our relationship with Israel. With anti-Semitism on the left, as the situation in England illustrates, and on the right, as the statistics demonstrate, we need to figure out how talk about Israel with friends and neighbors in a way that can dispel myths and broaden the conversation.

There is yet another kind of fear. A fear not for Israel and its existence and not about how Israel impacts our life, but a fear for what Israel is becoming. When we see the current government continue settlement building in parts of the West Bank that erode possibilities for a two-state solution, there is cause to protest. When that same government allies with its ultra-orthodox coalition partners to delegitimize liberal Judaism, we should not be silent. This leads to the final reason we talk about Israel, out of responsibility to the Jewish people and from our values.

### **We talk about Israel from our responsibility and values.**

We are the people *Yisrael*, a minority in the world. We are smaller in number than the margin of error in a Chinese census.<sup>3</sup> We are not even 15 million souls<sup>4</sup>. The largest number of us lives in Israel, then in the US. As a small family, we are interconnected whether our ideologies

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/if-corbyn-became-pm-almost-40-of-uk-jews-would-seriously-consider-leaving/>

<sup>3</sup> I heard this analogy in a lecture by Rabbi Shai Held, President Dean, and Chair in Jewish Thought at Hadar in New York. [www.hadar.org](http://www.hadar.org)

<sup>4</sup> Recent statistics say that there are now 14.7 million Jews in the world. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/this-rosh-hashanah-there-are-14-7-million-jews-in-the-world/>

desire it or not. We are, in the words of Torah, *am kadosh*, a religious people, *Yisrael*, both a people and a religion.

Our responsibility is to our people and to our values. As we talk about Israel, we will engage most of the diverse voices in our small Jewish family if we honor three values: justice, self-preservation, and compromise.<sup>5</sup>

From Abraham to Isaiah to Abraham Joshua Heschel to Anat Hoffman, our demand for justice through the millennia is as central to our understanding of Judaism as any value. As Isaiah says, (1:17) “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.”

Yossi Klein Halevi applies this value when he says to his Palestinian neighbor: “...I could no longer ignore your counter-story of invasion, occupation, and expulsion....For many years we in Israel ignored you, treated you as invisible, transparent. Just as the Arab world denied the right of the Jews to define themselves as a people deserving national sovereignty, so we denied the Palestinians the right to define themselves as a distinct people within the Arab nation, and likewise deserving of national sovereignty.” (p. 9)

“History is the reservoir of resentment,” writes scholar Robert Rotberg in “Building Legitimacy through Narrative.” There are many narratives in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Honoring each person’s story and then moving past history will enable justice to roll down like waters.

The value of self-preservation should be self-evident. It is rooted in the creation story. We are created in the image of God and thus must protect ourselves. When Israelis speak of security and concerns about its enemies, they are speaking the language of self-preservation.

Too often justice is the Jewish value emphasized only by people on the left, and self-preservation by those on the right. This puts liberal Zionists in the peculiar position of holding both values which leads to both supporting Israel and fighting Israel. We must defend and criticize Israel with the same emphasis, with the same breath. Defend Israel’s need to defend itself, but criticize the building of settlements that divide the West Bank.

I am reminded of the story of the married couple who came to the rabbi to resolve their differences. The rabbi listened to the husband and said, “My son, you are right.” He then listened to the wife, and said, “My daughter, you are right.” Overhearing the conversation, the rabbi’s wife questioned, “How can they both be right?” To which the rabbi replied, “My dear, you are also right!”

And that is the paradox of holding equally the value of justice, forged in our history of powerlessness over two millennia, and the value of self-preservation which comes naturally in a time of power of the Israeli state. You’re right and you’re right. This is the value of compromise.

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<sup>5</sup> These values were highlighted for me in a series I taught at Mount Zion in 2016 called iEngage by the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. [https://hartman.org.il/Programs\\_Landing\\_Page.asp?Cat\\_Id=295](https://hartman.org.il/Programs_Landing_Page.asp?Cat_Id=295)

Halevi writes to his neighbor: “My people will fulfill its right of return to the state of Israel, not to the whole land of Israel. Your people will fulfill the right of return to Palestine, not to the whole land of Palestine.” (p. 129). Justice and self-preservation require compromise. The answer is clear; our narratives and history just get in the way.

We do need to talk about Israel.

As we do so, first listen to many people with different views, affirm what is right in what you are hearing and then offer something that the other person might not have considered. They may just say: “Ah, you might be right too.”

Sometimes we need to stop talking and just experience something powerful. On Israel’s 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary this past year, President of Israel Reuven Rivlin assembled 12,000 singers from all streams of Israel’s society to sing Naomi Shemer’s *Al kol eleh*. It is the perfect song for Rosh Hashanah, for the honey we dip our apples into is not created without a bee which has a stinger. There is the bitter and the sweet.

As Shemer writes:

Over all these things, over all these things  
Please stand guard for me my good God  
Over the honey and the stinger  
Over the bitter and the sweet  
Don't uproot a sapling  
Don't forget the hope  
May you return me, and may I return  
To the good land.

“Let’s sing together,” the president declared. “Religious, secular, Arabs, Jews, soldiers, women, men, children... let’s put aside everything that divides us, and do together what connects us and brings us together – it’ll be fun!”<sup>6</sup>

Now that’s an image of hope. I wonder what my 5<sup>th</sup> graders from Larchmont would think, whether the love for a diverse and complex Israel in that sing-a-long would move them? Would it inspire them to talk more about their relationship with Israel? Would it help them embrace multiple truths and values? My heartfelt prayer is yes.

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<sup>6</sup> You can see the sing-a-long here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxzR9Z-kG6Q>