

YK KN 2019 Rabbi Amy Joy Small

The Future of American Judaism and its Relation to Zionism

“Israel lives in the most dangerous neighborhood in the world.” These words of my dear friend and teacher Yossi Klein Halevi, have been reverberating in my mind since I was last with Yossi in Jerusalem in July. When I shared this comment some weeks ago in a group discussion here, one participant, whom I love and respect, reacted with a quick, sharp rebuke. “No, it isn’t! *We* live in the most dangerous neighborhood!” It felt to me to be a knee-jerk reaction that didn’t hold up logically. It was a friendly exchange and fortunately not a damaging argument. But it doesn’t always go this way anymore when the subject of Israel is raised.

What is it that has wedged such a broad divide between American Jews and Israeli Jews? What has caused the emotional tenor of some of our Israel conversations to shift from pride and joy, to confusion and concern, to even sadness and revulsion for some? Personally, I am still filled with pride and joy and love for Israel, even while I am concerned, worried, fearful and sad too. Yossi’s comment was especially poignant because it was within a conversation about why American Jews and Israeli Jews don’t understand each other.

Our lives and our cultures and our concerns are ever widening apart. Our divergent worldviews and conclusions are a source of tension, and we wonder: what will happen if US Jews no longer provide political support for Israel? What will be if the only American Jews traveling to Israel are right-wing Orthodox? Not that there is anything wrong with being Orthodox, but

since the great majority of American Jews are more liberal, it means our viewpoints relating to Israel are different.

Our physical security and our psychological sense of security on each side of the ocean are vastly different. These geographical differences cause great misunderstandings. For the most part, American Jews live in a safe place; not so Israeli Jews. Iran's saber rattling is real. Hezbollah in the north and Hamas in the south continue to seek every possible opportunity to attack Israel. The majority of American Jews supported the Iran nuclear deal, while most Israelis, terrified of Iran's nuclear capacity, were horrified by it, and were angry at the American intervention in their very security, as they saw it.

The crisis of mutual misunderstanding isn't only an internal Jewish issue. In an age when partisanship has become America's religion, as aptly termed by Deborah Lipstadt, antisemitism is now instrumental in partisan conversation. From the right, there is White Nationalism, and from the left, BDS. Today intersectionality provides a home for contempt for Israel, using anti-Semitic tropes and memes. We should all be concerned about how damaging this is becoming within the Jewish community.

Yossi Klein Halevi's most recent book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, was a project within his years of work to try to find understanding, healing and peace between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians. He is one teacher who helps me to understand the complexities of the situation. Another is Tal Becker, who, like Yossi, teaches at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. Tal, originally from Australia, is a lawyer who has served as a

top-level Israeli negotiator with Palestinian leadership for years. Tal and Yossi shared thoughts about the future of American Judaism and its relation to Zionism during our summer rabbis' seminar.

Yossi reflected on how themes and groupings of early Zionism no longer exists; overly romanticized Zionism, glorifying strength, power and smarts, as it was taught to American Jews for decades, is gone. Today's Likud government has demonstrated a growing assault on respect for the individual. American Jews are shocked and reactive -- "*What, this is the Jewish State?*" many wonder. Why should I continue to support Israel-- what connection does that hold for me?

Many of us want to understand what has happened to Israel and why so many American Jews are struggling over support for Israel as a Jewish state. Yossi pointed out the significance of year 2000, when Israel tried to make peace with the Palestinians. Following prolonged negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leadership, the deal was nearly complete. After Israel offered most of the land and security arrangements that was demanded, with some compromises, Arafat walked away from the table. While we could analyze what went wrong, the key point is that this was immediately followed by the second Intifada. Buses being blown up with mind-numbing frequency, while cafes, shops, markets and malls -- all gathering places for innocent people, were targets of suicide bombers. No one felt certain that they or their loved ones would arrive home safely at the end of the day. I recall being there during the second intifada, walking up the street and avoiding going near bus stops, never riding a public bus, and standing in line for security checks of my pockets and bags for entrance to

shops and restaurants and all public gathering spaces. While at a breakfast meeting during that time with major American Jewish leaders and Israeli government officials in the lower level of the Inbal hotel in Jerusalem, all the security personnel started receiving phone calls at the same time. Intuitively, we knew. Another bus blown up --- but this time, it was around the corner from our hotel -- we had not heard the blast down in the hotel's lower level. We all ran outside to witness and say prayers at the gruesome site. Another memory: A friend called me from Jerusalem one night, shaken that he had gone out for ice cream and right after he left, the ice cream shop was blown up by a suicide bomber.

While my personal experiences of the intifada helped me to empathize more fully with Israelis, I realized that for Israelis, the scale of the terror and trauma were monumental. Parents feared for their children when they left for school in the morning. Everyone was traumatized by the time it wound down after four and half horrible years -- and remember, this was the *second* intifada-- the first intifada from 1987-1993 had also left its emotional scars. The terror of the second intifada destroyed the Israeli left; the peace camp has struggled for footing ever since. Israelis have tended to vote for a government that they believe will keep them safe. PM Netanyahu came to office to stop the violence, and effectively ended the campaign of suicide bombing terror. This is something that most American Jews don't understand. We have not lived this experience; we view it through an outsider's lens.

Tal commented that among many Israelis, there was an assumption that if Israel made the right choices, the other side would respond accordingly.

After concessions offered in negotiations to end the occupation were rejected, the impact of the intifada was to kill the idea of compromise for peace. Couple that with the power of the state, and you have the situation we see now -- including West Bank check points, travel restrictions and the security barrier, 95% of which is a fence, but is most often called a wall for the 5% of it within population centers. Even the language is politicized.

Tal shared an old Jewish joke, where a Jewish mother says, "*I'm cold, so you need to put on a jacket.*" That is to say, as Jewish communities on either side of the ocean, we assume that we know what the other side wants or needs, and we keep missing. Here we are, a century after waves of our near ancestors fled pogroms and persecution and 70 years after the Holocaust, and we have established ourselves in two separate homes. What does that mean for us as a people?

Among American Jews, the loudest Jewish voices are fighting for an open, democratic, pluralistic Israeli society. In Israel, the loudest voices are fighting to secure the future through a resilient nationalism. Many no longer believe they will ever be accepted in the region, or safe from attacks. Israeli skepticism about peaceful co-existence collides with American liberal viewpoints. *We have two separate homes: what is right for one may not be right for the other.*

So then, *what happens when each community has different dreams? What does that do to our relationship?*

In the US, Jews can self-select where we live; we don't have to have contact with Jews we don't want to have contact with. In Israel, everyone is stuck with groups of Jews they may dislike and wish they could avoid. Tal told a story of a Soviet immigrant to Israel who, when asked what surprised her most about Israel: "*The existence of stupid Jews.*" I know, to us that sounds horrible. But for her, coming from Moscow where she was among a community of intellectuals, where the Jews who had to work twice as hard just to make it, Israel was different. Zionism has given them the freedom to be stupid.

But of course, many Israelis have used the skills learned in diaspora to innovate and create, and Israel has become a world leader in innovation in technology, farming, water resources, and emergency response. The book *Start Up Nation* was a feel-good, reinforcing our best hopes and dreams and our pride for what our people have created. But the dark side to the *Start Up Nation* story is that its creations haven't been used to solve the real problems of Israel -- safety, peace and security, religious freedom for all Jews, and a balanced and constructive relationship with Diaspora Jews.

Many of us can remember the high after the Entebbe rescue in 1976. It was one moment of strength in our relationship with Israel. But there have been many mood swings in these years. It is so complicated. While Israel now has more relations with more countries around the world than ever, Israel is the only country facing neighbors who want it to cease to exist. On the international stage, Israel is the "permanent other."

Israel refuses to be a victim; being a victim is not a virtue. But Israel's use of power makes some of us uncomfortable. While Jews having power is not a moral wrong; how that power is used should be with restraint, Tal commented.

Yossi reflected on the changing relationship between American and Israeli Jews. "We used to say that we had each other's backs." This mutuality has faded. Israelis have not paid attention to the angst and anxiety of US Jews regarding *our* country's political problems, causing consternation for some American Jews. On the other hand, most American Jews supported the Iran Nuclear deal, while most Israelis did not. They feel that Iran is their greatest security threat, and view Iran's aggression as life or death.

We need to tell the story of 20th century Israel that arose out of a Zionism of longing rather than a Zionism of need. Israel is the fulfillment of 2,000 years of longing, a place where Jews re-indigenized ourselves. "We need to develop a new and different story, a post 20th century narrative: *the story is no longer 'Israel is the answer,'*" Tal commented.

One Jewish leader telling a new story is Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Executive Director of *T'ruah, The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights*. A JTS ordained Conservative rabbi, Rabbi Jacobs framed her commitment to Israel through the halachic concept of *chiyuv* -- obligation. What is our obligation as Jews toward Israel?

I have recently engaged with T'ruah supporting migrant workers and asylum seekers. Rabbi Jacobs approaches Israel from that perspective. She

said, “I am here because I need to be here. This is a commitment to *halachah*, not only its ritual aspects, but its ethics and morality.” This is how to build a *just* society that protects the dignity of every human being. The ritual and moral *mitzvot* are imperatives that cannot be divorced from each other.

Sometimes liberal Jews don’t speak of their social justice work as being deeply connected to Torah. We claim our religious authority through engagement with tradition. This must also frame our relationship with Israel.

Rabbi Jacobs said, “We have to be here because we care about the people here.” To really engage with Israel means to engage with Israelis. American Jews need to care, even when we are confused or upset by the actions of the Israeli government.

Our *chiyuv*/obligation demands that we speak when we are concerned for Israel’s actions. Many American Jews are distressed over the occupation of the West Bank. Rabbi Jacobs called the occupation, “Israel’s greatest moral stain.” Yet an Israeli friend told me how terrified they are of the prospect of an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, providing the possibility it would become a terrorist base for an easy attack of the heart of Israel. Surely, we won’t all agree on this --- but it’s important to acknowledge the troubling reality of the occupation and the inhumane treatment of the Palestinians who yearn for a better life. How can the prospects for peace be cultivated when there is so much resentment resulting from Israeli actions on the West Bank? Some of us see the situation primarily through the lens

of Israel's dire security concerns. Others of us will argue that there is no partner for peace on the other side, and Israel is only doing its best in an unredeemable situation. And some of us will simply give up and walk away, rejecting the pull of Israel as a Jewish *chiyuv*/obligation.

But we must not give into defeatism; Zionism is about taking responsibility for ourselves. We mustn't give up and internalize powerlessness. We need to reconnect with our sense of obligation in order to create the Israel we want. If we are concerned about human rights, we should work with Israeli human rights leaders. We can work with Israelis to sustain Israel as a secure nation and strong democracy. This is embracing our *chiyuv*. This is deeply grounded in Torah that teaches us how to live with Jews and non-Jews. We must refuse to allow anyone else to hand us our history -- we must refuse defeatism.

One reason for our current conundrum is the duality within the roots of the Zionist idea. From Theodore Herzl to the present day, both *sameness* and *exceptionalism* underly our self-understanding in relation to the nations of the world. The 1896 book "The Jewish State" by Theodore Herzl, reflects this idea:

Theodore Herzl, "The Jewish State" (1896)

But we must first bring enlightenment to men's minds. The idea must make its way into the most distant, miserable holes where our people dwell. They will awaken from gloomy brooding, for into their lives will come a new significance. Every man need think only of himself, and the movement will assume vast proportions.

And what glory awaits those who fight unselfishly for the cause!

Therefore I believe that a wondrous generation of Jews will spring into existence. The Maccabeans will rise again.

Let me repeat once more my opening words: The Jews who wish for a State will have it. We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and die peacefully in our own homes. The world will be freed by our liberty, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there to accomplish for our own welfare, will react powerfully and beneficially for the good of humanity.

Zionism meant for Jews to be a member of the family of nations, but also pulled to be a people apart. This is our PARADOX.

Do we the Jewish people actually want to be a member of the family of nations? What compromises does this entail? What is the story we wish to tell about ourselves?

Yehuda Kurtzer spoke of how some believe that “the Jew and the family of nations will never be redeemed. The gap between us and them will never be reconciled. Antisemitism affirms ‘my sense of otherness.’ This is the Israeli view toward BDS.”¹

Herzl was inspired by the Jewish nationalism of his day in the late 19th century. He saw it as a dignified response to our oppression. The early Zionists understood that perhaps by building our own nation-state, we won't end antisemitism -- but at least it offers us some measure of dignity against being *other*. But it can also produce a political crudeness that says,

¹ Yehuda Kurtzer, talk at Shalom Hartman Institute Rabbinic Torah Seminar, July 2019

“I don’t trust the rules of engagement dictated by a world that does not accept me.”

So here we are, in its roots, Zionism incorporated the conflicting viewpoints that plague Israel today. The early Zionists had no choice. In its actions, the Israeli government, while protecting Israel from violence as best they see fit, reinforces liberal American revulsion for actions that may seem opposite to the ethical and moral calls of Torah. Yet at the same time, Torah commands commitment -- an obligation/*chiyuv* to the care and support of the Jewish people everywhere, and in our ancestral homeland, our only homeland, especially. And while there are many thousands of progressively-minded Israelis building coexistence with Arabs and working for peace, the majority of Israelis still vote for politicians whom they hope will keep them safe.

It’s complicated! But it’s **ours**. No other place on earth is a cultural, religious home for the Jewish people. American Jews and Israeli Jews need each other. Now is not the time to disconnect. Rather, it is time to meet our *chiyuv*, our Jewish obligation, to be in relationship with Israelis, to try to understand what is hard to understand -- for each of us. The glories and accomplishments and shining lights of Jewish values are all there -- let that not blind us to the challenges. And let us not let the challenges blind us to the good. Israel is, in the words of prayer, the first flowering of the seeds of redemption. Let us venture together to cultivate the flower.

I conclude with a ***Prayer for the State of Israel***.

Please God, bless the State of Israel. Protect it in the abundance of your love. Spread over it the shelter of your peace. Send forth your light and

truth to those who lead and judge it, and to those who hold elective office. Establish in them, through your presence, wise counsel, that they might walk in the way of justice, freedom and integrity.

Strengthen the hands of those who guard our holy land. Let them inherit salvation and life. And give peace to the land, and perpetual joy to all its inhabitants. Appoint for a blessing all our kindred of the house of Israel in all the lands of their dispersion. Plant in their hearts a love of Zion. And for all our people everywhere, may God be with them, and may they have the opportunity to go up to the land. Cause your spirit's influence to emanate upon the dwellers of our holy land.

Remove from their midst hatred and enmity, jealousy and wickedness. Plant in their hearts love and kinship, peace and friendship. And soon fulfill the vision of your prophet, "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Let them learn no longer the ways of war." And let us say, Amen.

Kol Haneshama Siddur, 1994