

***BDS, How about: “Best to Discover Support”***

During these many months of working from my home office, I had forgotten something very special about my Ohavi Zedek office. Now in my office, I am moved, all over again, by the image just outside my office window: the Holocaust memorial garden alongside our building. Just to lift the blind and see the sculpture of the person crying out to heaven, facing the stone which is etched with the place names from devastated Jewish communities across Europe where our people were brutally murdered by the Nazis.

I would be lying if I told you I had seen this out my window often before the pandemic sent us home. In fact, since the political upheavals that surfaced in 2016 unleashed public hate, we began to worry about resurgent anti-Semitism close to home.

Concerned for our safety in the synagogue, we consulted with security experts for advice on securing our sacred space, and we obtained security grant funds to help us with this. Among the advised security measures put into place were new blinds in my office that open from the top or the bottom. This way I could bring in light from the top while protecting myself and others from potential bad actors peeking into my office seeking to bring harm.

Just the thought of it makes me shudder even while I know it is necessary, as bad actors are increasingly organized and emboldened. These days, anti-Semitic tropes we thought were buried with the remains of WWII have come to life in bold and frightening ways.

The Anti-Defamation League reports, *“In recent years, American Jews have faced increased threats of violence and harassment both online and offline. According to ADL’s annual Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, 2019 and 2020 were, respectively, the highest and third-highest years on record for cases of harassment, vandalism, and*

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*assault against Jews in the United States since tracking began in 1979.*<sup>1</sup>“ Following the recent conflict in Gaza, 60% of American Jews report having witnessed “behavior or comments they deemed antisemitic.”

Now, standing in my office, as I lifted the window blinds from the bottom for the first time in many, many months, I could see the Holocaust memorial that has been hidden from my view for so long. And it all came together – how sad and challenging this time is with a resurgence of hate in the air.

The ADL reports that *“Digital spaces can be unwelcoming and unsafe for many Jewish people. ...antisemitic content is quickly and easily found on major technology platforms that have hundreds of millions, if not billions, of users. ... Most recently, following the conflict between Israel and Hamas in May 2021, ADL documented a disturbing rise in antisemitic content on multiple social media platforms during a seven-day period, including 17,000 tweets on Twitter that were variations of “Hitler was right.” ... ADL’s data on offline antisemitic incidents in May 2021 (shows) more than double the number reported in the U.S. during the same period a year before, in May 2020.”*

A lingering myth within modern antisemitism is that “Jews possess extraordinary power to harm or control people outside the Jewish community. Jewish people are depicted as megalomaniacs, as manipulating world governments, banking and financial institutions, and controlling the media and entertainment industries, bidding for world domination...Jewish people are often depicted as disloyal, accused of caring more about Jewish interests — or more recently, **about Israel.**”

There has been a long history of anti-Jewish hate, and ignorance is one factor amplifying this trend now. A 2020 study showed alarming levels of ignorance about the Holocaust: nearly two-thirds of American adults ages 18-39 do not know that six

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<sup>1</sup> ADL “2021 Online Antisemitism Report Card.

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million Jewish people were killed during the Holocaust, more than 10 percent believe Jews caused the Holocaust, and almost a quarter of respondents said they believed the Holocaust was a myth or an exaggeration.

The bridge between this ignorance and misunderstanding leads to negative perceptions of Israel and critiques of Zionism. Critiques of Israeli policies and actions, debated vigorously internally within the Jewish community, are one thing. But critiques that ignorantly vilify Israel have become the new “cause” among some progressive circles.

The situation in Israel and the region is complex and confusing. One aspect is clear: the conflict between Israel and her neighbors can only be resolved with good faith negotiations between the parties. Today, *Israel continues to occupy the West Bank because the Palestinian leadership have rejected numerous proposals, long negotiated, for a two-state solution. Regarding Gaza, Israel unilaterally disengaged from Gaza in 2005, removing settlers and the IDF, in order to create an opportunity for peace negotiations to take place. Instead, Hamas, an internationally recognized terrorist organization, took power in Gaza, destroyed Israeli infrastructure left behind, and murdered Palestinians involved in the ruling Fatah party. Hamas remains in power to this day.*

In this situation, where knowledge is essential, the vilification of Israel is difficult to explain even with facts and truth. Too much anti-Israel activism has become a cause without facts or context.

I say this even as I, with other rabbinic colleagues, share many concerns about Israeli government policies in recent years. But our feedback about this comes from a place of love, not hate; concern, not hostility.

Criticisms of Israel and Zionism are distinct from antisemitism, but the lines are blurring in public discourse and activism. Zionism is “the movement for Jewish self-

determination and statehood in our people's ancestral homeland in the land of Israel.

“Anti-Zionism can cross the line into antisemitism when it:

- Denies Jews the right to the same national self-determination that is afforded to other peoples.
- Asserts Jews or Zionists are collectively responsible for the actions of Jewish or Israeli individuals, ...or the Israeli government.
- Incorporates classic antisemitic themes or conspiracy theories into criticism of Israel.”

This is where it starts to get personal, in our beloved home in Vermont. Here, in the progressive bubble of the Burlington area, anti-Israel, anti-Zionist progressive ideas have become prominent in public discourse. It reached a fever pitch this summer with the large protest in Battery Park over this summer's Israel-Gaza war. The protest, like others around the country and the world, targeted Israel for blame for the suffering and losses in Gaza. We are all devastated by the loss of life, as we are sickened by the Hamas practice of launching rockets from densely populated civilian neighborhoods – a cynical PR tool that brings the ire of world upon Israel when they respond to these rockets. The imbalance often noted in press reports and in protests, of the death toll in Gaza compared with the toll in Israel seems purposefully blind to the fact that Israel uses its resources to obtain and deploy the Iron Dome Defenses that save thousands of lives by intercepting the Hamas rockets, while Hamas uses its resources to make war.

Remarkably, the context for the war – the thousands of rockets launched into Israeli population centers, is lost in this conversation. The suffering of the Israeli population from terrorism and repeated wars, plays no role in these protests directed against Israel.

In statements like, “From the River to the Sea” – these protests are seeking to end the State of Israel, and erase the Jewish people's right to self-determination in our

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homeland, as was promised by the UN following the Holocaust. For those of us who live in the shadow of centuries of devastating antisemitism, pogroms that drove our grandparents to seek safety in the US or in Mandatory Palestine; who grew up with the Holocaust as recent history or even family experience, and a dark shadow in the present; who recall 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and two devastating intifadas, the need for Israel as a safe haven and Jewish home is non-negotiable. Frankly, anti-Zionism hurts my heart, following all of what our people have endured.

It hurts my heart that the one and only democracy in the middle east, Israel, is held to a much, much higher standard than any other country in the world. This, while dictatorships and authoritarian regimes in many corners of the world rule with brutality, suppression of dissent and dissenters are imprisoned, or worse. We don't have to look far outside Israel's borders to encounter these brutal dictatorships.

And it hurts my heart that Israel's many remarkable scientific and engineering achievements that have been spread around the world to better humanity are scorned or ignored. Even the many successful co-existence projects within Israel and between Israelis and Arabs in Israel and with communities in the West Bank are often overlooked or ignored. Israel's outreach to send help to countries where terrible natural disasters have caused great suffering is never acknowledged by her adversaries, around the world and right here at home.

Israel is a major incubator for the evolution of Judaism. For tens of centuries Jewish holiday rituals and observances have centered on Zion and Jerusalem. Jewish prayer language, in daily prayer and holiday observances center around the land of Israel. Zionism is in the heartbeat of Jewish religious practice and ideas.

I know and respect that we have differences of opinion within the Jewish community regarding Israel. In today's environment, many of us struggle to find our place in this

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narrative. Of course, Israel is not perfect. Neither is the USA. No country can sufficiently claim to be a moral beacon during this troubled time.

Many of us in the Jewish community, who have a stake in the success of Israel as a “light to the nations,” can and do share our concerns with Israeli leaders. This is what it means to be a member of the Jewish people – sharing a common destiny with the people Israel and the nation of Israel. Israel’s missteps and foibles *are not justification for vilification* – especially when this vilification is coming largely from activists who seek to put an end to the Jewish state. This is an assault on the Jewish people.

Now I admit that I had wanted to talk about something much more uplifting than this. But I came to feel compelled to share my views about this following recent events here in Burlington and an upcoming challenge in the Burlington City Council. Right now, a group of activists are preparing to present at the Council meeting next week what they call, “Resolution Calling for Justice and a Peaceful End to Palestine and Israel Conflict.” It escapes me why the City Council of our town should be taking up complex and highly controversial international issues, especially when this resolution will cause a great deal of pain and division between us in this community. But since this is brewing and the day is soon upon us, and some in our community have alerted me to their very pained concern about this, I felt I must speak to all of you about this. It just hurts my heart. I hope we can elevate this toxic conversation to one of mutual concern, such that one group’s interests are not denied because of the positions and activism of another.

The Resolution calls for BDS –Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. The ADL reports that “many of the founding goals of the BDS movement, including denying the Jewish people the universal right of self-determination – along with many of the strategies employed in BDS campaigns are anti-Semitic. The promotion of boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israel evidences a troubling double standard – singling out Israel for blame. Many individuals involved in BDS campaigns are driven by opposition to Israel’s very existence as a Jewish state.” Common to most BDS calls

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are distortions and outright fabrications of facts, misrepresentations of international law, and a false assertion that the proffered action somehow will improve the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Often, the very existence of a state for the Jewish people is perceived as the root of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Anti-Israel BDS campaigns divide and offend many in the Jewish community. They have shown to “result in harassment or intimidation of Jews and Israel supporters, including overt antisemitic expression and acts. This dynamic has created an environment in which antisemitism can be expressed more freely. And, all too often, BDS advocates employ antisemitic rhetoric and narratives to isolate and demonize Israel.”

Who among us would not wish for peace? The path to peace winds through efforts toward “reconciliation, including investment in the many meaningful coexistence programs that are necessary to foster a generation of Israelis and Palestinians, working and living side-by-side, moving past the teaching of hate and violence.”<sup>3</sup> On our OZ trip to Israel in late 2019 we met with scholars framing peace initiatives and folks on the ground who are working toward peaceful sharing and coexistence. Tal Becker, one of my teachers at the Hartman Institute is a lawyer who has mediated every peace negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians. He said, “What we don’t need is another smart person from the US State Department to come to negotiate terms and conditions. This must be solved by the parties on the ground.” I only wish I could have brought all of you with us!

We can, and many of us do, promote reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians through constructive measures. The Israeli public widely supports a two-state solution. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complex; holding Israel alone accountable for the

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<sup>2</sup> The Jewish Council for Public Affairs/JCPA

<sup>3</sup> JCPA

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conflict is inaccurate and unhelpful. Criticism of Israel, like criticism of any other sovereign country in the world, can be reasonable and legitimate. But BDS campaigns, which single out Israel for pariah status, are unfair and disproportionate.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, let's talk about the City Council and the activism of this moment. I had a long talk with my friend Imam Islam Hassan, who leads the Islamic Society of VT. BTW, if you didn't know, Imam Hassan and Pastor Ken White and I have a podcast called, "Kipah, Kufi and Collar." We speak with each other often. With the Imam and I working as partners, our two communities have built a connection of friendship in the past five years. Imam Hassan was quite upset to learn that someone involved in the July rally in Burlington against Israel represented that he was involved with it. He emphatically told me that he was not involved at all and would not have attended even if he had been in town that weekend, which he was not. He emphasized that he is a religious man, not political. He shared with me that he is devoted to the friendship of our communities.

In demonstration of this commitment of friendship, Imam Hassan wrote a statement, for us and for the entire Jewish community, to respond to this challenging time. I share this with you now:

***From Imam Hassan:***

*"At one point due to some changes in the political climate, Muslims in VT felt that their existence in the U.S. was being threatened, and they will be discriminated against only because they're Muslims."*

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<sup>4</sup> ADL



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*At that point, we have seen a lot of support and solidarity coming from the Jewish community, and also from other faith communities in the greater Burlington area.*

*Shortly after our mosque received an anonymous hate letter in late 2016, Rabbi Amy Small, along with her congregation of the Ohavi Zedek synagogue were the first to reach out to us offering support showing solidarity, and we have appreciated it immensely.*

*When we recently moved to our new location, Rabbi David Edleson along with his congregation of the Temple Sinai synagogue were the first to welcome us in the neighborhood, and they have been such wonderful neighbors since we have moved.*

*That being said, we certainly don't like to see anything that could in one way or another disturb the strong ties we have together with the Burlington Jewish community in particular, or with any other Faith community in the state of Vermont in general. Especially that Burlington isn't the place where any of the global conflicts around the world could be resolved. So, let's live here together in peace, like we have always been, and will always will."*

*Imam Islam Hassan*

*Islamic Society of Vermont.*

The BDS resolution will be formally discussed at the Burlington City Council meeting next Monday night, September 13. I hope a large number of concerned citizens will attend to voice concerns about the resolution, and/or to write to City Council. At this sacred time of year, we pray that our friends in the faith communities of our area will hear our plea and support a rejection of the divisive, hateful resolution. On these holy

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days we recite Unetaneh Tokef, a piyyut/poem from the darkest days of medieval Europe's persecution of Jews. It cries out, that "*teshuvah*, and *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* cause the evil of the decree to pass away." --*ma'avirin et ro'a hagezerah*. One commentator remarks, "We cannot will away either what happens to us or what happens around us, but we may have it in our power to turn it into something quite other than 'evil.'" May it be so.

Leshanah Tovah Tikateivu. May it be a sweet New Year and may you be inscribed in the Book of Life for good.