

How Can We Talk to Each Other about Israel?

When Sol and Gussie Rothkerch, my maternal grandparents, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in the early 1970's, my parents, who were juggling financial challenges, splurged on a special anniversary gift. They donated funds to the Jewish National Fund for the planting of 50 trees in Israel in honor of my mother's parents. For them, it was an obvious choice – supporting the land of Israel was a joyous way to celebrate a special occasion.

My parents framed the tree certificate from JNF and proudly presented the gift to my overjoyed grandparents. Gussie and Sol had escaped pogroms, severe economic and livelihood restrictions and grinding poverty in Eastern Europe, and for them, the establishment of the State of Israel was an amazing miracle. Our people rose from the ashes of hate and built a thriving, modern country in the land of our ancestors—our long yearned-for ancestral homeland. The connection to Israel was core to their identity and worldview.

Our synagogue in suburban Philadelphia taught us to be proud of our Jewish identities and Israel was the most significant expression of that. We learned Israeli songs and dances and studied books on the glory of Israel as a modern nation in our Hebrew School and Hebrew High School. I still recall the gripping sermon from our rabbi on Yom Kippur 1973, telling us that Israel had just been attacked by the combined Arab armies, and this was a frightening existential threat.

We never learned about the Nakba, the Arab term referring to the establishment of the State of Israel – the “catastrophe!” Our mother’s milk was safety in our own land, a post-Holocaust victory. The suffering of Palestinians, we were taught, was a result of *their* refusal to accept the United Nation’s partition of the land of Palestine into two nations, one, a tiny Jewish state along the Mediterranean coast, and the other, a Palestinian home west of the Jordan River. There was no discussion of the complexity and of Arab suffering that was whitewashed by this narrative.

There’s a story told which I heard repeated last week on a rabbi’s New Year call with President Biden, who has told it many times over the years.

Recalling his first trip to Israel as a freshman senator in 1973, Biden was granted a meeting with prime minister Golda Meir. Together with Yitzhak Rabin, Golda briefed Biden on the many threats Israel faced, showing him a series of maps. “I guess she could see the sense of apprehension on my face,” Biden said, retelling of the story. “She said, ‘Senator, don’t look so worried... We Israelis have a secret weapon.’ And I thought she only had said this to me, no one else in the whole world... And I thought she was going to tell me about a new secret weapon.” So what is Israel’s secret weapon? Biden asked eagerly. “**We have nowhere else to go,**” replied Golda.

I came to appreciate why my parents and grandparents were passionate Zionists given their worldview and life experiences. I have also come to appreciate why it was singularly and exclusively tribal, even as it was the worldview that shaped my own Jewish identity. It was not just an idea; my father and I each had our own personal experiences of antisemitism, which

for us was aligned with the Jewish historical experience of centuries of displacement, second-class status, the Inquisition, the Crusades, Russian pogroms, and the Holocaust. Only in Israel could a Jew be truly free of this scourge, finally able to be masters of their own fate, finally returning home. This foundational value shaped my worldview, identity, and my passion for justice.

By this I mean justice for Jews and for Palestinian Arabs, all of whom have suffered deeply from the impositions of the actions and decisions of the Western and Middle Eastern nations. Yet, the actions and decisions that deeply hurt each of our peoples were different, and perceived very differently in Jewish and in Arab societies.

Today, differences of perception, belief, values, and attachments have been tearing us apart. Two wounded peoples, Jewish and Palestinian, have not been able to come together for mutual understanding and reconciliation.

Despite the multitude of coexistence and peace building organizations, Israel and Palestine remain at odds with each other, lacking understanding and shared goals. While most, but not all, Israelis and Palestinians have been unable to find a middle ground to advance understanding and ultimately, peaceful coexistence, these hostilities have gripped the American community as well. What was once a Jew vs Christians or Jew vs Muslims posture in my parents' generation has spawned a divisive Jew vs. Jew battleground. Muslim and Christian communities are not immune to this contentious environment either. In our divided political landscape,

where politics are explosive and toxic, our divisions regarding Israel and Palestine are tearing us apart.

Our people have been here before. In dark and difficult times, we have split ourselves apart, sometimes with hostility and judgement. The first and second centuries are an example of such a time. Here we find the statement in Pirke Avot, the Wisdom of the Fathers, a window into their divisive world:

(Pirkei Avot 1:7) Nittai the Arbelite said: Keep yourself far from a bad neighbor, do not associate with the wicked, and do not lose belief in retribution. (Avot de Rabbi Natan adds: “Not even for the purpose of gaining knowledge.”)

This advice was uttered at a time when several sects were in the making, all calculated to undermine the very foundation of Judaism, such as, the Sadducees, Boethusians, Hellenists, and the Essenes.¹

Many of you may recall the visit to our community in 2018 from the journalist, author, scholar and teacher, Yossi Klein Halevi. Yossi’s life work has been devoted to building bridges, following his upbringing in the hotbed environment of the Jewish Defense League in Brooklyn. Yossi is a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem who’s last two books were *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, preceded by *Like Dreamers*. He also writes for the op-ed pages of leading American newspapers. When I sat down to talk with Yossi in Jerusalem this summer, I shared my distress about the sharp and sometimes painful divides

¹ Ethics of the Fathers, Hebrew Publishing Company. New York, NY. 1962

concerning Israel/Palestine in our world, even our community, today. I wondered aloud how an American rabbi could talk about Israel now, given our sharp and emotionally charged divisions on the subject. In his wise way, Yossi said to me, “This is a bearing of the soul season for us as Jews, an opportunity for *Cheshbon Nefesh/ taking account of our soul*,” our season of truth. Sharing his worry for the future of Liberal Judaism in America, polarized and disconnected from our history, our people’s values and our story, Yossi insisted that there is no more important time for this conversation.

From that place, I offer another teaching from Pirkei Avot:

(Pirkei Avot 1:18) Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: By three things is the world sustained: By truth, by justice and by peace, as it is said (Zechariah 8: 16) “Render in your gates judgments that are true and make peace.”

The pursuit of peace requires an open heart, an open mind, an open ear for listening, and great courage. Fighting is easy; it requires only a passion for harming your enemy with the intent to win. Peacemaking is painfully difficult, where passion can only help us if it is intent on truth, often multiple truths, at the same time. The courage to let go of our passions, our dearly held opinions, and to shift our place in the world – that is sacred work. It means profound listening. This is our work, on this holy day of atonement.

When Yossi wrote *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, each letter was an invitation to the real Palestinians who live across the hill and down the road

from him, and to the whole Palestinian community around the region. He created a website where Palestinians could post letters to him in response to his. Some are published in the second printing of his book, and all reside on the website. In a time when dialogue and mutual understanding are elusive in many corners of liberal American Jewish communities, these letters offer an example of how to hear each other, openly.

Here are some examples:

One letter, from Mustapha Ezzarghani, the Co-Founder and President of the Moroccan-Israeli Friendship Association, strikes a warm and friendly tone:

Dear Mr. Halevi,

April 6, 2021

I recently had the honor of reading your book, *Letters to my Palestinian Neighbor*. The first thing that caught my attention was the title; the seemingly simple designation of the Palestinian people as your neighbors is a powerful declaration of love, appreciation, and familiarity. It also acknowledges a sense of belonging to the same land, area, and spatial entity.

The book, he wrote, “highlights the importance of working towards mutual understanding. Both sides have to accept at least some responsibility to learn about and understand the other, be it culturally, historically, or religiously. Your statement that peace cannot endure without such work really resonated with me. True peace is achieved when individuals change their mindsets and ideas, irrespective of government policies or treaties. It is through this

concept of a loving peace, something that is constantly worked towards, that I believe offers a common starting point.”

The author of this letter encourages deep self-reflection, adding,...”love of country should encourage us to discern the ‘better angels’ of our own identities, bringing about growth and change. Our complex, multifaceted, and often misunderstood lives are, indeed, ‘entwined.’”

While this stands out as a strongly positive reaction to Yossi’s plea for mutual understanding, the other view, angry at the tone and content of Yossi’s letters, is also prominent. For instance, there is January 2021 letter from Jahshan from Yemen. He wrote,

If...you were wondering what the author’s political stance may be, you need not look beyond the fact that he discusses the Palestinians – or, rather, addresses the Palestinians and indeed the wider Arab world – as though it is they who pose an obstacle to peace, whilst writing overtly sympathetically about the Jews. Perhaps this is the reason he addresses only Palestinians and Muslims rather than both involved parties in the conflict.

... When discussing the Jews, he goes to some lengths to portray them as the victims, the weaklings, and ultimately on the losing side; when it comes to the Palestinians, he only lectures.

What justice are you asking us to divide, Yossi? Did the Jews ask the Palestinians permission to come and live with them on their land in search of their historical roots? How did they enter Palestine? What

did they do in the process of entering the land and where is the justice in that?

The letter challenges Yossi for speaking about

“a legitimate destiny, meaning that the Jewish fate to settle on this land is legitimate. But this begs the question: who granted the Jews the legitimacy to proclaim such an alleged destiny on this land? ... one must ask: who determines that the Zionist project is indeed ‘legitimate?’”

The author of this letter criticizes Yossi, saying, “The deployment of emotional literary devices doesn’t, by any means, alter the fact that the conflict is, in reality, best understood as a series of atrocities.”

Only God knows what the author’s intentions were in writing such a book.... The author himself is Jewish and Jews are well-known for their battles with God and his judgement upon them.

To summarise, I don’t recommend reading this book to anyone. It is, in my opinion, an attempt at intellectually infiltrating minds. Those whose minds are fragile can be dangerously led astray by such letters and may even end up fervently defending them.

This is hard to hear, and yet, as Yossi is modeling, essential to hear. What if we could turn off the emotional switches that are ignited when we hear passionate words expressed from the other “side” of the conflict? Could we find a sacred meeting place in the middle? How do we get there?

Last year St. Michael's College brought Yossi's dear friend, and mine, a cofounder with Yossi of the Muslim Leadership Initiative at the Shalom Hartman Institute, Imam Abdullah Antepli to be the Rabbi Wall Memorial Lecture speaker. Abdullah spoke of the "reconciliation between Jews and Christians in the 20th Century given such a hard history, so now are Jews and Muslims called similarly to bring the "cosmic gift" of mutual understanding to "make God smile" in the 21st Century."

Abdullah noted an obvious but important truth, that Jewish-Muslim relations have not always been 'rosy'. Yet, he highlighted "the similar theological language and religious imaginations of the two religions and the way in which both love and obey God fervently." Our community's deep and meaningful friendship with the Islamic Society of Vermont and my friend Imam Islam Hassan are a testament to that sharing.

Imam Antepli commented that "If we can work as hard as the forces trying to divide us and be as intentional as the people trying to make us enemies," then Jews and Muslims can make real progress toward reconciliation."

"Moving toward reconciliation requires Muslims and Jews to "take words from Sinai and Mecca seriously" and for Muslims not be so ignorant as to be vulnerable to "unspeakably silly theories" such as those motivating the recent Texas kidnapping of a rabbi and congregation. Such morally alarming and on-the-rise incidents require Muslims to "do their homework," he said.

Imam Antepli said, "Part of this imperative for Muslims would be coming to realize how Zionism is understandable as "a homecoming

story for them, and there is nothing wrong with it ... When the Jews left they took Zion with them and had scriptural, ethical and moral connection to remain legitimately indigenous – local and native to this ancestral land. That needs to be honored and understood.”

But this is not a one-way street. Imam Antepi, who calls himself “a recovering antisemite,” has advice for the Jewish community:

“For their part”, he said, “Jews who seek greater reconciliation need to do their own moral homework to understand that **Palestinian suffering is not a fiction** and that “*this homecoming project has caused so much death, destruction and shattering of people who were living there before 1948.*” Israel has a role in creating a two-state solution, as impossible as it looks right now — “without losing any strength of your Zionism or joy and pride in the creation of Israel,” he said.

One further reflection from the letters of response to *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbors*, this from **Edward from Egypt** February 2nd, 2021

“I would contend that in order to make any progress in the conflict, we should:

Forget our past disputes; move past them so that we can stop blaming each other.

Make decisions based on realistic thinking and not waste any opportunity given to us.

Keep religious elements and extremists from both sides of the conflict away, as they are reliably the ones who incite and endanger the peace process.

Invite peace organizations and people of influence whose intentions and sense of humanity we trust to take part in peace negotiations.

I believe that when both sides profess good faith, express sincere intentions for peace and start educating their own people to forgive the other and forget the terrible era of destruction from which both suffered, regardless of who paid a higher price, progress will be made.”

This is the message for us as well. Here in our community many of us are seeking ways to support reconciliation and peace in the Holy Land. When our congregation trip to Israel in 2019 visited an organization called Root,s formed by neighbors in a West Bank community of Arabs and Jews. In their coming together, we saw their values in action. They live by the ideal that “peace will happen when neighbors talk to each other.” This year, may we find ways to live those values, with open hearts and minds, in the pursuit of understanding and peace, together.