

L'maan Tzion, for the sake of Zion – Yom Kippur – 2017 – Rabbi Andrea L. Merow

The famous comedian George Carlin is known for a bit called “7 words you can’t say on TV”. Carlin goes on a hilarious tirade naming the 7, and others. I can’t mention most of them, I might get bleeped off the bima. In the Jewish community, we potentially have an additional set of words that **we dare not utter** in public, or from a bima, for fear of setting off a powder keg of contention. Our 7 ineffable words might be: commandment, responsibility, compromise, moral imperative, dues, God and Israel. Add to this the known social dictum: we don’t talk God or politics in polite company.

On Rosh Hashana I spoke about God, today Israel. I’m batting 1000! Because **we** are not “polite company,” we are family. Strong families discuss difficult topics. We can love our parents, siblings, children, while at the same time, we may not like all their actions.

A troubling trend in the general and Jewish community, is the move to see problems and situations in a binary fashion, where we see things as black and white, yes or no. This leaves little room for the grey areas in between, where most of us live. Or, where we elevate one value, to the exclusion of every other, as opposed to seeing our lives as the balancing of competing values.

Sometimes we may hear arguments, but fail to listen deeply to understand the underlying values of positions not our own. This kind of thinking, and lack of dialogue, has in many cases, led to a near paralysis of thought and a sense that it is just too uncomfortable to have hard conversations on a wide range of issues from health care, school reform, guns and Israel. A colleague says that speaking about Israel is often a “3rd rail” conversation; it will likely burn you. Israel is too central to our core identity as Jews to make it a forbidden topic of discussion.

So how can we have important conversations? I want to propose a now popular American method, then several principles from our Tradition to employ when we speak about difficult topics, because shul, and our families, should be a safe space, in a somewhat toxic society.

One way for us to engage in speaking about Israel, or any difficult conversation is to use the model presented in the critically acclaimed 2002 book, *Crucial Conversations*: The authors teach that the “essence of their teachings are to find common purpose, make each other feel comfortable, to know facts and the path that you will present, learn the facts and path of your dialogue partner and seek common understanding.” Understanding the position of others does not mean agreeing.

I think we can also understand these principles in a Jewish context.

First, treat each other like we are created, *B'tzelem Elohim*. Every single human being is created in God’s Holy image. There is a piece of God that is hiding in the soul of the person we are in conversation with.

Second, *Sh'ma Yisrael*, Hear and listen. You know, we Jews sometimes don't listen...we wait. We wait to jump in and get our point across, giving us little space to ponder what we have heard. Our central tenant is to hear and listen, *Sh'ma*.

Third, and right after *Sh'ma, v'ahavta*, love. All our discussions with our family, our shul family, and our People, should be built on a foundation of love. Since God dwells within each of us, it is incumbent to recognize that piece of God in the "other". An elemental commandment is *V'ahavta* – love God; Love people, because that is where God dwells.

Fourth, *brit*, covenant. We as a people understand how important it is to agree on some central ideas. Before we find our areas of DIS-agreement, let's figure out where we can agree, and build on that.

And when we speak about Israel:

It is precisely *because* of our love of Israel that good people sometimes vehemently disagree with each other. It is *because* of our deep and abiding love for Israel that we want Israel to flourish in security, and to be a light unto nations.

What *can* we agree on about Israel?

We can agree that many of us have a deep connection to and love for Israel.

We can agree that we are fortunate to be part of The Jewish family.

We can agree that we are fortunate to celebrate Israel's 70th anniversary this coming year. For almost 2000 years **all** our ancestors could do was to yearn for a land well beyond their grasp.

We are fortunate to live in a time where the Jewish people can live in a sovereign Jewish nation State, if they wish.

We agree that we are proud of Israel's many accomplishments in technology, science, arts and humanities.

We are fortunate to be able to put into action the timeless words of the prophet Isaiah:

לְמַעַן צִיּוֹן לֹא אֶחְשָׁה וּלְמַעַן יְרוּשָׁלַם לֹא אֶשְׁקוּט עַד-יֵצֵא כְנָגְהָ צְדָקָה וְיִשׁוּעָתָה כָּל־יֵד יִבְעָר:

For the sake of Zion I will not be silent, For the sake of Jerusalem I will not be still,

Elisha Wiesel said this was his father's message: Stand up for what you believe in; speak out for the welfare of Israel.

I hope we might agree that many in our community speak out on Israel's behalf from vastly different understandings of what they believe might be best for the State; lovers of Israel can be Conservative, Reform, Orthodox, secular and find themselves on the left, center or right of political questions. It is crucial that Jews with differing views of how to support Israel still love and listen to those we disagree with. It is not acceptable for us to call other Jews derogatory names, we can save that vile behavior for the growing number of outed anti-Semites in our country.

Our historical connection to the land permeates every part of our liturgy. Throughout the high holiday period we joyfully sing, sing with me, “*simcha l’artzecha, v sasson lireacha*” Bring Joy to your land, and gladness to your City.”

Theodore Herzl and the Early Zionists knew that we would truly achieve normalcy as a State when we had to deal with issues like trash collection and criminals. Israel has both. And that in and of itself is an achievement. Real states have real problems.

I am so concerned about how we speak and teach about Israel, and how we create places of real dialogue, based on our love of Israel because not one of us wants to alienate Jews. We need to paint a real and complicated picture of the complex issues that face Israel.

We must face the reality that even young adults who were afforded a great Jewish education can get to their mid-twenties and feel alienated from Israel and angry at their shuls and schools for only teaching the Disney version of everything is wonderful. A couple weeks ago I saw many young adults posting on social media about Israel. One said that “the Jewish community must stop using the term “Green line.” It is a blue and white line, and it is ours. People who use that term are anti-Semites.”

Not my words, here is one from a Perelman graduate:

“I love my Conservative Jewish day school. It's where I learned to think, learned to love Judaism, and learned to question and commit to my values. My day school community taught me how to have brave conversations, so why did we never talk about the occupation?”

You do not have to agree with either of these statements. But, recognize that this is what many of our millennials are writing. We do not want to alienate them.

This young person loves Judaism and Israel and is telling us that she is sophisticated enough to understand and grapple with complex issues.

Several weeks ago, I was fortunate to be part of The Conversation. A conference sponsored by The Jewish Week newspaper, run by our congregant Rachel Goldman. Each year The Conversation brings together an invited group of Jews to dialogue about what it means to be Jewish in America. There were economists, philanthropists, authors, Charedim, orthodox, Reform, secular, me-all from a wide range of ages and viewpoints.

Gary Rosenblatt, publisher of the Jewish Week and founder of The Conversation wrote in the paper that “Several tense sessions dealt with concerns about the growing divide between the Israeli government and diaspora communities on issues connected to Palestinians, egalitarian prayer at the Kotel, conversion standards, and more....” Yes, Gary, it was tense, but meaningful.

The most important aspect of the conversations for me was listening to the very well-educated, earnest, Jewishly committed 20 somethings. They spoke about new ways to create and convene community; they were respectful, but asked hard questions of the current generation of

leaders. They are profoundly not bound to institutional allegiances, and thus question many of our assumptions. 3 millennials and a Hillel rabbi warned us that the largest problem is alienation. People on either side want a complex and meaningful relationship with Israel and with Judaism.

Some wanted to know why the majority of Israel donations may come from non-orthodox Jewry, and yet the State continues to not recognize non-orthodox Judaism. Some were pro-settlement of Judea and Samaria, while others would not step over the Green line.

The Conference was good at creating safe, confidential space. Most interesting was the sense that when those on the right and those on the left could talk about their underlying values and fears, as opposed to their dug in positions, they could find common ground, *brit*, covenant. And then they could even sing, dance and wish that the aspirations of the other came to fruition. We can do this here at Beth Shalom, we can create loving, safe space to discuss important issues if we see God in each other, listen and understand the underlying values of the other.

I think I was primed for *The Conversation* because this summer I read the top selling Israeli book *Milkud 67, Catch 67*. The bestselling book in Israel this year is a 166-page book about political philosophy. For that reason alone, you've got to love Israel, it is so "geeked" out. The author, Dr. Micha Goodman, teaches philosophy at the left leaning Shalom Hartman Institute and runs a school in the right leaning town of EinPrat. He is not seen as right or left, both sides find him vexing.

The book has sparked a new kind of thought revolution among Israelis about the Peace Process. He traces the underlying values on each side, and which of these arguments have taken hold of the society, and then suggests ways to build upon common values. He shows that the right and left have overlapping concerns.

He uses the model of crucial conversations and our model of listening with love of his fellow Jews.

Hava Rettig Gur, one of his reviewers, says it this way: "The pro-settlement right, failed to convince most Israeli Jews that acquiring the land was worth the risk of becoming an ethnic minority — or even only a small majority — in their country. But it succeeded in instilling its second argument: that withdrawal from the West Bank, especially after the bitter experience of Gaza and Lebanon, would endanger Israelis.

The peace-making left, meanwhile, failed to convince most Israelis — again, especially after bitter experiences such as the Second Intifada and the Gaza withdrawal — that its "religious" (in Goodman's words) yearning for reconciliation was reciprocated on the other side. But it succeeded in its second argument: that Israel could not afford to absorb millions of Palestinians.

Each side has lost the fight to impart its idealistic creed to the majority of the nation — but convinced the country of the urgency of its fears. He has deep empathy for both stories, ”and uses their common concerns to suggest ways forward, not to solve the problem of security or of demographics, but to make things better”. He employs the idea that “perfect is the enemy of good.”

Thousands of years ago in the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan taught that there are two cities of Jerusalem - - ירושלים של מעלה וירושלים של מטה - an upper, heavenly Jerusalem and a lower earthly one. This Talmudic story teaches that there is the reality of a place, and there are also the aspirational hopes for what that place could be. Heavenly Jerusalem is what we strive for, while still living here on earth. For the sake of Zion I will not be silent until the earthly Israel is more similar to the Jerusalem of our greatest aspirations.

The Declaration of Independence of Israel states its greatest aspirations for what Israel could become:

“THE STATE OF ISRAEL ...will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.”

That is clearly Heavenly Jerusalem, a model of what we can become.

The reality of Earthy Jerusalem includes:

-Difficult security issues including issues within Israel, in Judea/Samaria or The Territories – however you call it, and with Israel’s neighbors. Security is of course our first concern, but it must not be our only concern. L'maan Tzion, for the sake of Zion we will support Israel’s security concerns.

-Earthy Jerusalem includes a demographic reality of a sharp increase of the Haredi-ultra orthodox population, who are sometimes anti-Zionist, anti-western education. Your children, nieces and nephews put their lives on the line and serve in the Israeli army. This population seeks ways to get out of this service.

-The reality of Israel right now is that there is not freedom of religion or equality for non-Orthodox Jews. It is illegal, as in you can be jailed, if you are a Reform or Conservative rabbi and you do a wedding in Israel. 55 women of the wall have been arrested for either saying the Sh'ma out loud, reading Torah or wearing a tallit. To many Haredi Jews, neither rabbi from here, or any of you are Jewish enough for them. L'maan Zion, for the sake of Zion, we will support an open society where all Jews can practice Judaism in the way they wish.

Don’t think it is just us. Also very alarming is delegitimization of modern Orthodox rabbis by Israel’s Chief rabbinate and Office of Religion. Now **many** respected American orthodox rabbis

are not good enough for The State of Israel because the State has given over religious decisions to a small group of Haredi rabbis. This issue affects how kashrut is done in the country, how funding occurs for non-orthodox education the world over, and more. For the sake of Zion I stand with my orthodox colleagues and fight for their recognition, even while we are not yet recognized.

Early this summer we saw a symptom of this occur. In January a blue-ribbon committee appointed by the Prime Minister and led by the head of The Jewish Agency Natan Sharansky came to a signed agreement to create an improved area of The Kotel for non-orthodox Jews and Women of the Wall to pray. The agreement included many concessions by our side—a smaller space, but included the opportunity for some of our officials to be part of the body that world govern this prayer space. It was agreed to by the Prime Minister, the rabbi of the Kotel and all parties. Early this summer the government reneged on this deal. When you go against the Jewish hero Natan Sharansky, you are usually on the wrong side of the argument. L'maan Tzion, we will continue to sign letters to the Prime Minister, like the one that both of your rabbis, along with 700 Conservative rabbis signed urging the Prime Minister to not drive a wedge between Israel and the Diaspora, and to honor his commitments.

These are all part of the full picture of what the realities of earthly Jerusalem/Israel are like.

I know that we will work toward a more heavenly Jerusalem, where we fulfill the mandate of The Declaration of Independence, freedom of religion—even for Jews, and equality for all. The frank discussion of these issues, and more, are what thinking Jews demand of us. We can choose to not engage, but we do so at our peril, risking the disengagement of many.

Because you and I will not be silent for the sake of Israel.

We know, in the words of Theodore Parker that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” And it is bending. It is getting better, with our help.

-Two weeks ago the Supreme Court ruled that it is unconstitutional for the Haredi community to have mass exemptions from military service. They have one year to comply.

-In August the Supreme Court told the Government that they needed to thaw the frozen Kotel deal that they had agreed to. There will be more legal battles like this, but the arc of the universe is beginning to bend toward justice.

-Last year the Ruderman Foundation did a poll of Israelis and found “that 82% of Israelis believe that all Jews, including Reform and Conservative, should feel the Western Wall belongs to them and that every Jew, regardless of affiliation, should feel welcome in Israel.”

For the Sake of Zion, we will continue to do our part to make earthly Jerusalem more heavenly. For the sake of Israel we will donate to Magen David Adom and purchase ambulances from our community.

For the sake of Zion we will continue to support Masorti/Conservative Judaism in Israel. We will partner with our shuls there. We will applaud and support their growth, like the recent publication of this new High Holiday Masorti Israeli machzor. For the sake of Zion, we will go, and visit. And when we go, we will celebrate B'nai Mitzva at the small Egalitarian part of Kotel.

For the sake of Zion we will advocate for Israel's security needs in D.C., and we will advocate for her spiritual needs with the Government of Israel.

For the sake of Zion, L'maan Tzion, we will consider the underlying values that bring people to their positions and we will find common ground.

And for the sake of Zion we will not always agree, but we will always act like loving family. First, treat each other like we are created in God's Image.

Then, Sh'ma and v'ahavta – we will listen deeply and love others, and we will create *brit*, we will find common understandings upon which to build upon.

In the words of Naftali Hertz Imber, "*od lo avda tikvateynu*, we have not lost hope."

I trust that, L'maan Tzion, for the sake of Zion we will work to make the earthly Jerusalem just a bit more heavenly.

Please now join me in The Prayer for The State of Israel.