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This past Rosh Hashanah my colleague gave a sermon on personal change. It was not a particularly political sermon, but at one point she did talk about the importance of working for social justice, and she made reference to the plight of African refugees facing a wave of xenophobic violence when they have attempted to immigrate to Israel.

Towards the end of the service a woman approached the bimah and asked to say a few words in front of the congregation. She then offered a rebuttal to the sermon, because she didn't like that my colleague criticized Israel and didn't talk about the existential threat of Iran.

My colleague graciously wished her a shanah tovah and said, "We now continue with Adon Olam."

This incident underscores for me an uncomfortable reality in the American Jewish community: We do not know how to talk about Israel.

Often we hear stories like these and conclude that we should be more respectful and less defensive, we should listen better, and we should provide more opportunities for constructive dialogue. Of course. But it's deeper than that.

Talking about Israel is hard. Disagreement runs deep in the Jewish community and conversations challenge our deeply-held beliefs about Jewishness and Jewish identity, Zionism, anti-Semitism, universalism and particularism, and our minority status as American Jews. It's hard when you've grown up with certain beliefs, or you've embraced a particular identity, and someone comes along and questions these. Even if it just starts off as a basic political discussion, it can feel as if someone is saying that you don't belong or your deepest concerns are unfounded or illegitimate.

For years I have struggled, not only with how to talk about Israel, but with what I believe about Israel – most notably the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I've undergone real change in what I think and how I feel. I think about Israel quite a lot. But I still don't like talking about it.

I travelled to Israel for the first time when I was twenty. I lived on a kibbutz for two months and studied at the University of Haifa for the rest of the year. I fell in love with Israel. It was a glorious, uncomplicated time, a period of my life when everything made so much sense. This certainty – that Israel could do no wrong and that opposition to Israel was akin to anti-Semitism – led me to rabbinical school just a few years later.

These orthodoxies I held didn't last long in rabbinical school. It wasn't that my teachers and mentors were so progressive on this topic – most of them weren't – but it was a place where

ideas could be debated, texts could be analyzed from multiple perspectives, and minority opinions could be heard.

I returned to Israel for a year of study as part of my rabbinical school program. While there I decided to intern at Rabbis for Human Rights, which led me to the West Bank. Never before had I met Palestinians, much less listened to their stories. I learned about the destruction of Palestinian olive groves, the demolition of Palestinian homes, and the confiscation of Palestinian land. I learned about beatings and killings and the fear and humiliation that they produce in the Palestinian population.

I thought I had seen what Palestinian life looked like. But then I went to Gaza.

Travelling to Gaza was one of the most important and one of the most flippant decisions I have ever made. A fellow rabbinical student and his wife had found a Palestinian tour company from East Jerusalem that was leading sight-seeing expeditions, and I decided to tag along. The tour company drove us to the border and another tour company picked us up on the other side. They took us to a few shops, an archeological site or two, a café, a beach, an amusement park, and a refugee camp.

I had never walked through a refugee camp before. The alleys were impossibly narrow, and the homes were concrete and barren. The living conditions were atrocious. We visited a family and sat in a little room where nine people lived. A teenage girl who sat beside me begged me to get her out. It was an open air prison years before the war in Gaza blasted the region to rubble.

The second Intifada broke out two months after I returned from Israel. I still had images of Gaza and the West Bank on my mind, but I also realized just how connected I felt to Israel. I had become close friends with many Israelis, and I worried about them. I had grown to love the complexity and richness of Israeli culture, and I especially loved that Hebrew was spoken in the streets. I loved that Judaism was so integral to everyday life, that everyone around you was celebrating Jewish holidays, that few people worked on Shabbat. I was drawn to the strikingly beautiful forests, deserts, mountains, and seas, to the incredible archeology and history of the land.

But I also had to come to terms with the Jewish community's response to the Intifada, which was that the underlying causes of the uprising were entirely the fault of the Palestinians. It just didn't reflect what I had experienced. I had seen how untenable life was for the Palestinians, how ordinary people were forced to endure such tremendous suffering, how the region was on the brink of despair. Never before had I felt such a tremendous disconnect, and it was deeply troubling.

I was tempted to just avoid the whole thing – after all, plenty of Jews choose to focus their energy primarily on spiritual or religious exploration. Why not construct a less messy and less

conflict-ridden Judaism rooted in study, meditation, and prayer or one focused on less divisive social justice issues?

I came to realize that we do a disservice to our community if we try to dodge such an important issue as Israel. As American Jews, we are part of a larger Jewish community that is intricately connected to Israel, whether we embrace that or not. Israel is so bound up with Jewish life and community, with our sacred texts and prayers, with our history and our future. American Jews are interconnected with Israel in ways unimaginable in the past, and as an American Jewish community, our voices matter.

I didn't feel that I could act with integrity if I muted my concerns, despair, or at times outrage. I didn't feel that I could live out Jewish teachings such as protecting the vulnerable, working for a more peaceful world, and pursuing justice if I had one standard for Jews and another standard for everyone else. I didn't feel that my religious and ethical principles meant anything if I couldn't apply them to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

So I made a commitment to talking about Israel as openly and as sincerely as I can, even if that meant exploring some difficult and ugly realities. It was painful to part ways with the Israel of my dreams, the Israel that I thought I knew when I was twenty, and to engage with the Israel that exists today, with all of its challenges and transgressions.

Talking about Israel is hard as a rabbi because I know that there is real diversity in our community – more than we might think – and I take that seriously. I think it's a sign of a healthy community for people to respectfully disagree with each other – and with me – but I don't want anyone to feel that they don't belong or that their voice doesn't matter.

It's a tricky thing to publicly confront the official positions of the mainstream American Jewish community regarding Israel. These positions dictate a narrow allegiance to Israel, and while they may differ to a point and change over time, they insist that you have to support Israel no matter what its government is doing.

Personally, I find it really painful to challenge these official positions. It makes you feel like an outsider. It's uncomfortable. It puts you at odds with the people you care about. One of the things that I love about my rabbinical association is that there is a huge range of opinion among us and we are able to have these difficult conversations with each other. But this is a rare in American Jewish life. Usually it's a pretty lonely road.

Challenging these official positions can also be pretty ugly. I have been accused of being a self-hating Jew more times than I can count – which is a strange accusation, given my line of work. There is real extremism in the Jewish community, and as a community we have not addressed it. The sometimes vicious attacks on those who deviate from the official positions make it difficult for people to speak up, and as a result, all too often people don't.

This past April, *New York Times* columnist, Paul Krugman, wrote a short piece in reaction to the scathing reviews that Peter Beinart's new book, *The Crisis of Zionism*, elicited. The book is a critique of the American Jewish establishment's refusal to confront Israel's continued occupation of the Palestinian territories and its eroding democratic principles. Krugman calls Beinart a brave man and writes:

The truth is that like many liberal American Jews — and most American Jews are still liberal — I basically avoid thinking about where Israel is going. It seems obvious from here that the narrow-minded policies of the current government are basically a gradual, long-run form of national suicide — and that's bad for Jews everywhere, not to mention the world. But I have other battles to fight, and to say anything to that effect is to bring yourself under intense attack from organized groups that try to make any criticism of Israeli policies tantamount to anti-Semitism.

I'm sure he has other battles to fight, but what a lost opportunity. It's not right that we have created a climate where the winner of a Nobel Prize in Economics does not feel that he can express his opinions without being intensely attacked. This intolerance for dissenting opinions doesn't make us stronger, and is not, as the saying goes, "good for the Jews."

It's also not right to equate any criticism of Israeli policies with anti-Semitism. While some criticism of Israel can certainly be anti-Semitic, the charge is too often thrown at people as a way of shutting down an uncomfortable discussion.

Anti-Semitism certainly exists, and it's important to see it for what it is and to challenge it whenever it appears. This is our communal responsibility, and just as we should not exaggerate anti-Semitism, we should not minimize it either.

Many of us have had direct experiences of anti-Semitism or we have been affected by others' experiences. Our community has been traumatized by discrimination, oppression, and of course the Holocaust. Our collective history of persecution looms heavy in our memory and identity, and when people criticize Israel we feel unsafe.

We need to deal with this collective fear and trauma so that we can better understand and speak about Israel. We also need to understand that as a community we are not powerless. We are certainly not as powerful as anti-Semites might imagine us to be, but we have far more power than we usually acknowledge. New waves of anti-Semitism and even persecution might be part of our future, and we should be vigilant to protect our community, but to argue that Jews have always been victims is a misunderstanding of Jewish history. And to argue that anti-Semitism is lurking behind every criticism of Israel is just not true.

We also need to better understand what it means to be loyal to the Jewish community. The mainstream Jewish community often argues that we should pledge allegiance first to other Jews; Jewish interests supersede all others, and Jewish survival trumps everything else. It's not

that the needs of other people aren't important – they are – but they don't come first, especially when Israel is concerned.

I guess I would question what loyalty really means. I think we can all agree that we want Jews to be safe and that we want our community to thrive. And I don't dislike the idea of being loyal to the Jewish community, but I would ask what kind of community we're talking about. Is it one that pits "us" against "them" or one that is committed to building bridges with people of all ethnicities and religions? I don't think it's in our collective interest, at least at this point in time in Jewish history, to hold on to an overly particularistic model that prioritizes Jewish needs at the expense of all others. I believe that we need to create a Judaism that is authentic and serious and that can help us to respond to the profound issues of our day, and this would include how Israel treats its non-Jewish inhabitants. I believe that we need to create Jewish communities that are creative and vibrant, and that can help us better learn how to work together, how to truly be allies, and how to stand in solidarity with one another. This is where my loyalties lie.

Too often we understand Jewish survival to be pitted against our responsibility to other people and we are asked to choose. If we are sympathetic to Palestinian suffering, then we are overly universalistic and we don't care about the Jews. But maybe our sincere concern for and passionate commitment to the other is a prerequisite for our own survival. In the precarious world that we live in, we need to build more bridges. We isolate ourselves at our own peril.

There were two times in ancient history when Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel failed –in the sixth century BCE and in the year 70 CE. The Rabbis of the Talmud teach that in both instances destruction by the enemy was preceded by the ethical deterioration of the Jewish community. It's a radical message, but it's one that we should not forget.

At this Yom Kippur, let us do our own soul-searching in order to articulate our own beliefs and talk constructively about Israel. Let us open our doors wide enough to welcome in dissent and to tolerate minority opinions. Let us work to create a Judaism and Jewish community that can help us respond to the suffering of others. And let us not lose sight of our ethical tradition that calls on us to treat all people with respect, dignity, compassion, and justice.

Gmar chatimah tovah – may we be sealed for a good year.