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I think of giving a sermon on Israel the same way I think of going to the dentist. It's important to do it. It's important to do it regularly. It can be painful. But you avoid it at your own peril.

Today, though, I'm going to talk about Israel at my own peril. The war in Gaza has given most rabbis, I think, strong motivation to dodge the Israel sermon. We want to avoid it because of the deep divisions and strong feelings in our communities. But that's actually why we have to face the topic of Israel, especially on this Yom Kippur.

When I first came to Shaarei Shamayim as a student rabbi, I broke the one rule we learned in rabbinical school. (Actually we learned a lot of rules, but this was an important one.) The rule was to never talk about Israel in your first year. No matter what you say you'll get yourself into trouble. If the congregation doesn't know you or trust you, they are much less likely to forgive you.

So here I was in my first year. I really liked this congregation, and I wanted to know if I could be here in the long-term. I figured it would be better to talk openly about my thoughts on Israel and find out early on if we were a good match so we could avoid an unpleasant situation later.

I said that the truth was complex and the effects of the occupation were corrosive. I talked about my uncomfortable realization that funds being raised by Jewish federations in this country were being sent to Israel in part to support the settlements. I described how living in Israel had been so transformative. I shared that my friendship with a Palestinian woman led me to uproot my own deep assumption that Palestinians were my enemies.

In a state of terror I gave the sermon. And there was no backlash. Now it was clear that not all of you agreed with me, but you did ask me to come back. What drew me here and drew me to take this risky step was the sense of openness and respect for ideas at Shaarei Shamayim. You believe that the point of a community is not to all agree with each other, but to wrestle with difficult and controversial ideas together and to challenge each other's assumptions and conclusions.

I arrived here during the second intifada, and at that time talking about the occupation was the red line you weren't supposed to cross. Before that, during the first intifada, talking about a two-state solution was the red line. Now that doesn't seem very radical today, but advocating a Palestinian state was enough to get a rabbi fired in most places.

The new red line is BDS, or Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions. Many Hillel's, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish Federations, and other Jewish organizations have adopted formal

policies barring anyone from speaking at these organizations who has publicly supported the BDS movement.

I'm not interested in talking about BDS – at least not this year – but I am interested in talking about how to maintain an open dialogue in the face of the deteriorating discourse in the American Jewish community. BDS is a political and economic tactic, and you may support it or despise it, but shutting down conversation about it really bodes badly for the American Jewish community. The very last thing we need is silence. Silence is corrosive, it leads to indifference and apathy, and that corrosiveness drains the joy and vitality out of a community. What we desperately need is less silence. More dialogue. More debate. We need to grapple with multiple and contradictory viewpoints, even though it's going to invariably make us more uncomfortable.

Before the war in Gaza the discourse was pretty bad, but since then it's only gotten worse. Something seems to have changed with this war. It produced, or maybe just revealed, an increasing polarization of American Jews. With notable exceptions – our community being one of them – honest dialogue has become sparse, and the divide between us has grown deeper.

The most striking example of this, for me personally, is the resignation of my friend and colleague, Rabbi Brant Rosen, who has served the 500-family Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston, Illinois for the past 17 years. In 2008 he was named one of the top 25 pulpit rabbis in America by *Newsweek*, but more than that, he is a mensch and was completely devoted to his congregants. But Rabbi Rosen had become increasingly critical of Israel, and he had become a prominent supporter of the Presbyterian campaign to divest from multinational corporations that profit from the Israeli occupation. After the war in Gaza, though, the polarization in his congregation became too much and as a result he decided to step down.

Social media amplified the polarization, and it became a parallel battleground for the conflict. Sometimes it was useful as a source of information, but it also became a home for propaganda and misinformation. It revealed what our Facebook friends believe, but postings frequently lacked nuance and reflection. How many times did we ask: "How could she tweet such an ugly, inappropriate 140 character message?" Or: "How could he post such a stupid, racist, self-hating, spiteful article?"

While there's plenty of complexity in the real world, there were two warring sides on my Facebook page. One side expressed much grief over the kidnapping and killing of the three Israeli boys. There were calls to support and defend Israel against Hamas. There was outrage that Hamas fires rockets at the Israeli civilian population, uses civilians as human shields, and sends terrorists through the tunnels from Gaza into Israel.

The other side expressed grief at the deaths of so many Palestinian civilians. There was outrage at the Israeli government for creating such destruction, for leaving so many Palestinians homeless and without sufficient water. There was exasperation with Knesset leaders for

fomenting racism against Palestinians and maintaining an ongoing Israeli occupation and blockade of the Gaza Strip.

We can see how the war unleashed two opposing trends. Some Jews are moving further to the left, becoming more critical of Israel and even sympathetic to post-Zionist or anti-Zionist ideas. At the same time, right-wing Jews are getting more powerful, and far right-wing Zionist ideas are gaining significant ground.

All of this has left liberal Zionists in a tough place. With the peace process dead and little hope for its revival in the short-term, they were forced, in the words of political scientist Dov Waxman, to “abandon their liberalism or their Zionism, or just learn to live with the constant tension between them.”

Jews are so passionate about these politics and have such strong feelings about Zionism because in the twentieth-century Zionism became a kind of religion for American Jews, the last real expression of ethnic Judaism. The Yiddish-speaking, lox-eating, Klezmer-playing, anarchist socialist Jews of the Lower East Side are a thing of the past. Instead, supporting Israel became a primary way that many American Jews expressed their identity as Jews. Even Jews who were marginally involved in Jewish communities still largely supported Israel. And today, still, Jewish leaders are free to challenge essentially any part of Jewish religious practice – most Jews will barely raise an eyebrow – but Jewish leaders who challenge Zionism encounter stiff resistance, because a sacred line has been crossed.

This is what’s under the polarization. This is why it’s so difficult to discuss these issues in political terms. It’s not just whether we’re a liberal or a conservative, because those categories don’t mean much in this context. It’s about identity. It’s how we see ourselves as Jews. It’s how we express our Jewishness. This identity is largely shaped by our experiences – Zionist summer camp, Hebrew school, the Six Day War, the Holocaust, a year on kibbutz, a Birthright trip, a trip to the West Bank, an anti-Semitic encounter, a protest, a lecture, a meeting, a friendship.

Ethnic Judaism is still compelling for many of us. We have strong, uncomplicated, rich, and multifaceted Jewish identities. We have a deep commitment to the Jewish people. We gravitate towards everything Jewish – food, jokes, literature, religious practice, holiday traditions. We are concerned by assimilation and intermarriage because we worry that Judaism will not be perpetuated in any meaningful way in subsequent generations. Israel still remains at the center of what it means to be Jewish. And even if it’s not at the center, it remains an important component of our Jewish identity.

But our communities are changing, and some of us no longer have a real attachment to ethnic Judaism, or we never had it in the first place. We are “post-ethnic,” in the words of the historian, David Hollinger. Our Jewish identities are more fluid, our questions about belonging to the Jewish people more abundant. We cringe at the particularism and insularity we see in

Jewish communities and don't feel bound by its tribalism. We reject, in the words of Hollinger, that "descent is destiny."

With growing acculturation, assimilation, intermarriage, and globalization, more and more Jews – the Orthodox aside – are leaving behind an ethnic notion of Jewishness. The walls between Jews and non-Jews have fallen, and many Jews find themselves less committed to Israel because they don't have that same sense of commitment to the Jewish people as a people. They don't believe that the Jewish people's survival is at stake. For these assimilated Jews who are concerned with Israel, though, they are, in the words of political writer Peter Beinart, "more likely to see it as powerful than as victimized, in part because that's how they see themselves. Their universalism inclines them to a greater concern for Palestinian human rights, and thus, a more public opposition to Israeli policy."

The question is, do we celebrate this post-ethnic Judaism, or do we resist it and try to create a new sense of ethnic solidarity among Jews? There certainly are attempts in the American Jewish community to try to create a new sense of ethnic solidarity, the most well-known being Birthright, whose mission is to "strengthen Jewish identity, Jewish communities and solidarity with Israel by providing a 10-day trip to Israel for young Jewish people." There are also attempts at creating "peoplehood encounters" which would give Jews a chance to talk to other Jews from around the world. And attempts at developing a "pedagogy of peoplehood" which would teach Jews how important it is to be committed to other Jews.

When I applied to rabbinical school almost twenty years ago my application essays fully embraced, even celebrated, this ethnic solidarity. I had just returned from Israel and had been transformed by my friendships with Ethiopian Jews, whom I shared a dormitory with at the University of Haifa. It was peoplehood at its best – learning about each other's customs, laughing at our differences, connecting over certain similarities. We all spoke Hebrew. We all celebrated Shabbat.

But over the years, those connections – while important – have become insufficient as a basis for my Jewish identity. Now I'm not against peoplehood, per se, and I do have concerns about an entirely post-ethnic Judaism. But it seems to me that attempts at repackaging peoplehood into new kinds of programming, and even expensive trips to Israel, are outdated and ultimately doomed to failure.

I also wonder what Jewish peoplehood really means in our world today. Jews are a diverse bunch, and the chasms between us are getting deeper and deeper. Do we have a unique connection with *all* Jews? What does that connection look like when we include Haredi Jews who throw stones at Jewish women when they try to pray at the Western Wall with a Torah? Or settler Jews who attack Palestinian mosques, burn down Palestinian olive groves, and steal access to water resources? Some of us may have close familial ties to Haredi or settler Jews, but I suspect our connections are more about family relationships than any notion of solidarity with the Jewish people.

We probably all have family members and friends who are not Jewish, and many of the non-Jewish members of our community are sitting here today. That very reality, in my mind, calls ethnic solidarity into question. We probably have far more in common – including shared values and ideals – with liberal Christians and other non-Jews than we do with ultra-Orthodox Jews. As our notion of community expands, and the chasm between liberal and ultra-Orthodox Jews widens, a commitment to peoplehood as the glue keeping us together will no longer hold. Our communities and our families are changing. We need new ways of thinking about peoplehood and community.

If you look at photographs from the solidarity with Israel rallies this summer, you'll see that many supporters had gray hair. Not all, certainly, but I didn't see a whole lot of young Jews there. As Beinart writes, young liberal American Jews are exiting American Zionist organizations. These organizations are being filled with people largely unaffected by our post-ethnic world, namely the Orthodox, who are not liberal and who are quite committed to the settlement movement and to Israel as a halachic state, one that is ruled by Jewish law.

Liberal American Jews are being forced to choose between liberalism, with a focus on civil rights, human rights, and democracy, and Zionism, which is coming to represent a one-state solution that is not democratic, not concerned with Palestinian self-determination, and which affirms permanent Israeli control over the entire West Bank.

I turned forty this year, and I realized that I'm no longer part of the young generation that's developing its own political voice. I feel old and stodgy when I read that a new group of young Jews, called #If Not Now, uses direct action to challenge American Jewish organizations that speak in their name. They hold sit-ins in Jewish Federation buildings where they deliver letters and petitions, say Kaddish for Israelis and Palestinians, and get arrested for civil disobedience. I'm reminded how much our experiences shape our politics and tactics.

My most formative experiences were when I lived in Israel for a year during rabbinical school, just before the second intifada, and worked as an intern at Rabbis for Human Rights. This 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. I learned about Israeli bulldozers demolishing Palestinian homes. I learned about checkpoints. 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 random decisions I have ever made. A fellow rabbinical student and his wife were going for the day and I thought I'd tag along. It was sort of like a sight-seeing expedition. A Palestinian tour company took us to a few shops, an archeological site or two, a little warehouse of bee hives, a café, a beach, an amusement park, and a refugee camp.

I had never been to a refugee camp before. We were welcomed into a little room where nine people were living. A teenage girl sitting next to me stuffed a scrap of paper into my hand with

her phone number on it and begged me to get her out. It was already an open air prison years before successive wars blasted the area to rubble.

Talk about having an experience that raises complicated questions.

Now partly because of my age and probably more because of my choice of profession, I'm still "within the system," so to speak, and I'm not ready to give up yet on Jewish peoplehood. But I do question the idea that Jews have to be unified, that we have to fight intermarriage, that we should prioritize the well-being of Jews over the well-being of non-Jews, even in Israel.

This past spring, while I was on sabbatical, I lived in Jerusalem for two months. I had been writing a curriculum on teaching about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to kids, and I began reading young reader novels written by both Israelis and Palestinians. It occurred to me that I had never before read a book written by a Palestinian. How could I be so immersed in these politics for so long, and have never read a book written by a Palestinian?

In those books I saw the conflict through their eyes. I saw that what for Jews is Israel's War of Independence is for Palestinians the Nakba, or the catastrophe. I learned what this meant for their communities. I learned how the destruction of Palestinian villages traumatized their people for generations.

I felt haunted by the past. As I walked my kids to preschool every day through a hip Jewish neighborhood I would pass by what are now called "authentic Arab-style houses" and realize that before 1948 they were the homes of Palestinian Arabs.

I realized that Jews can't wish the Palestinians away.

I realized that as committed as I am to the Jewish people, my solidarity stretches beyond the Jewish people.

I realized that our Jewish future is inevitably intertwined with the Palestinian future.

I realized that we can't move forward if we don't understand Palestinian narratives of history.

I realized that I simply don't know what the solutions to this conflict are.

But I do know that we need to keep our hearts and minds open to the unseen possibilities for peace, justice, and reconciliation.

*Gmar chatimah tovah.* May it be a better year for all of us.