Creating New Narratives on Israel-Palestine

My friend, Haley, told me that when she was 12 years old, her counselors at Camp Moshava woke up all the campers in the middle of the night. They gave them aliases like Rifka and Beryl and told them that they were in Europe, preparing to escape to Palestine. The year was 1941. Haley and the other campers hiked through the woods trying to avoid Russian soldiers who could stop them at any moment. Once they arrived at the lake, resistance fighters disguised them as bags of potatoes and paddled them across in canoes. When they reached the other side, they entered Palestine and attempted to build settlements. Now they had to contend with British soldiers, who tried to tear their settlements down and arrest them. As the sun rose and the simulation ended, the campers sang Hatikvah, Israel’s national anthem, and ate donuts.

The history is a little shaky, and the practice of chasing campers through the woods in the middle of the night is a little questionable, but there’s no denying that these simulations were powerful. When I sent out a few queries about them on Facebook this summer, I received over fifty responses from Jews in their 30s to 70s who told me about their summer camp simulations. One woman described being woken up in the middle of the night and told she was a Middle Eastern Jew who was being chased by Arabs through the woods. Another was chased by Nazis. One camp allowed counselors—pretending to be in the Israeli Defense Forces—to chase kids in golf carts so they could get a sense of how the army worked.

Many of us who were raised in Jewish communities have been shaped by deep and emotional narratives about building Israel and remembering the Holocaust. Narratives are stories, neither right nor wrong. They help us make sense of our history, help us connect with Jews who lived before us, and help us to build Jewish identity. They instill within us a sense of purpose: there is meaning to being Jewish. We are part of something greater than ourselves. Being Jewish can be more than boring High Holiday services and boring Hebrew school classes.

With Israel, there are different narratives—or perhaps visions and hopes. Here are four of them.

First, Israel is a refuge from persecution. As Jewish life emerged from the ashes of Europe, the Jewish state signified a rejection of Jewish vulnerability, a safe haven in case antisemitism makes life unbearable in the diaspora. It marks the liberation of the Jewish people.

Second, Israel has been the hope for a cooperative, utopian society, an experiment in melding socialism and Judaism, the kibbutzim an example of what a radical farming society could look like. Israel is a light unto the nations, and the embodiment of social justice.
Third, Israel is the center of a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse Jewish people, its arms open to welcome Jews from around the world who make aliyyah, literally, who ascend to the Jewish homeland. Israel is the hub of Jewish music, dance, literature, and theater, a society that creates Jewish space and moves on Jewish time, a place where we can be fully Jewish.

Fourth, Israel is holy land with holy sites. It is the land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants. Settling the land, the biblical areas called Judea and Samaria, fulfills a biblical prophecy and hastens the coming of the Messiah. This land belongs to the Jews. The Torah commands us not to concede land to the Palestinians.

Narratives, and our hopes and visions of Israel, help us articulate deeply-held beliefs. With the exception of the last one, they have deeply shaped me.

Sometimes, though, our narratives fall apart. We encounter new ideas, we meet new people, and we have new experiences. The world around us changes. We realize that complicated history does not fit into tidy camp simulations.

What happens when a counselor asks, “How did Palestinians feel when Rifka and Beryl were settling Palestine, the land that Palestinian communities had lived on for hundreds of years?” Few of us asked those questions 30 or 40 years ago. But we are asking them now. And we are not quite sure how to respond.

Our communities have changed, and many young Jews no longer learn these same narratives. Or they do, but they conflict with their realities of living in a pluralistic society, so they don’t internalize them in the same way.

This summer I taught a session on Jewish identity to a group of ninth and tenth graders at a Jewish summer camp. Most were liberal or progressive, and many were members of synagogues. I asked them to make a circle, and I told them that I would read out thirty different statements about being Jewish ranging from keeping kosher to raising Jewish children to beliefs about Israel. They should step into the circle if they agreed with the statement.

Some campers were interested in Jewish practice, while others were not. All of them believed that remembering the Holocaust was an important part of being Jewish. When it came to intermarriage, they wanted to keep their options open.

Then I read a statement: “I am a Zionist.” The campers broke into discussion; many were unfamiliar with the term. I tried to explain that Zionism is the belief that there should be a Jewish state in the land of Israel. One camper wanted to know what a Jewish state meant. I explained that the government supports Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people. There is a Jewish star on Israel’s flag.

One camper asked about Palestinians. I explained that twenty percent of the state is made up of Palestinian citizens, about one and a half million. Another five million live under Israel’s military
occupation. In a Jewish state, Jew citizens are in charge of the government. Another camper asked why Jews and Palestinians couldn’t both be in charge.

I responded that if both peoples are in charge, that would be called a binational state. Increasing numbers of American Jews, Palestinians, and other people in this country think that’s a good idea. But very few Israeli Jews support this idea.

I moved on to another statement: “Step into the circle if you believe that Israeli Jews should have more rights than Palestinians.”

The campers looked at me like I had said something deeply offensive. One camper protested by taking a step out. Two other campers followed her. No one stepped into the circle.

I’ve thought a lot about these teenagers. They were not unaffiliated or disaffected. They were eager to talk about their Jewish identity. They attended a Jewish camp. But supporting a Jewish state was not a core piece of their identity. They have grown up with the ideals of democracy and equality, human rights and civil rights—for all people. These are deeply ingrained values. They wanted to learn Palestinian history and learn about the Palestinian experience alongside Israeli Jewish history and experience.

Young Jews in the United States lean left politically; seventy percent, ages 18-29, are Democrats. If you remove the Orthodox from that group, the number is likely much higher. Young Jews in Israel, however, are the opposite; 64 percent of Israeli Jews ages 18-34 identify as right-wing. Even more startling, almost half of Jewish Israelis ages 18 to 49 agree “Arabs should be expelled or transferred from Israel.”

No wonder, then, that last November Israeli citizens elected the most right-wing government in its history. Itamar Ben-Gvir’s Otzma Yehudit party—the Jewish Power party—merged with Bezalel Smotrich’s National Union party, and became an influential force in the Israeli parliament.

The platform of the Jewish Power party declares, “War against the enemies of Israel will be total, without negotiations, without concessions and without compromises.” Smotrich has described himself as a “fascist homophile” and called for the Palestinian village of Huwara to be “wiped out.”

After Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came back into power, he began to weaken and undermine the judiciary, which has sparked enormous, continuous protests in Israel. They’ve continued for 38 consecutive weeks. As of last March in Israel, 21 percent of Israelis said they had attended a protest, the equivalent of 70 million Americans – an extraordinary number. The protesters engage in civil disobedience, often blocking highways, and call for democracy, women’s rights, and LGBTQ rights. At stake is whether Israel will become a dictatorial theocracy. But what’s striking is the protesters’ silence on Palestinian rights.
Last month, I signed a petition, along with almost 2,500 Israeli and American Jewish academics, rabbis, and other public figures, that argues there is a direct link between Israel’s attack on the judiciary and its occupation of millions of Palestinians. The text explains: “Without equal rights for all, whether in one state, two states, or in some other political framework, there is always a danger of dictatorship.” (“The Elephant in the Room”)

That so many signed on reveals that the ground is shifting and the discourse is changing. At a time when dictatorship and theocracy and civil war are now part of the conversation, it’s time that we engage on this issue. Netanyahu and leaders of establishment Jewish organizations claim to speak for Jews all over the world; if we disagree, we have a responsibility to speak out.

Once I spoke to a Jewish group about why Israel-Palestine was so important to me. I told them that in my early twenties I had fallen in love with the land and the state. Jews spoke Hebrew on the streets and created a society with Jewish history, religious practice, and peoplehood as its foundation. With a Jewish state, Jews controlled their destiny. As I got older, I frequently spoke out against the Israeli occupation, but I believed that once it ended, justice would prevail. Israel was far from perfect, but Israel was my Jewish homeland, and Zionism was the Jewish liberation movement that I loved so much.

In the last fifteen years, I have thought a great deal about what it means for a state to favor—or privilege—one people over another. It’s not just that Jewish symbols are emblazoned on flags, stamps, and military tanks, while Palestinian symbols are absent, or that Hatikva, the national anthem, does not make mention of Palestinians.

It’s that Israel privileges its Jewish citizens over its Palestinian citizens in every aspect of life including citizenship, political participation, land and housing, and education. Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel keeps a database of 65 laws that discriminate against Palestinian citizens. Israel has changed its basic law—its equivalent of our constitution—to grant Jewish citizens more rights than its Palestinian citizens. This was the case before 2018, but this law entrenched Jewish privilege deeper into its legal system.

One person approached me afterwards and said that he was uncomfortable that I had used the word “privilege.” I responded that I understood it made him uncomfortable, but I argued that it’s an important word. It gets to the heart of the contradiction of a Jewish state. It forces us to address difficult questions. Here are three:

Should our fears of persecution grant us unlimited power to persecute others?

Can democracy and equality co-exist with a Jewish state that discriminates against one-fifth of its population, sometimes in core legal principles of the state?

Is it right that I, an American Jew, could move to Israel and become a citizen, while a Palestinian in the West Bank whose family has lived on that land for generations, cannot?
On Yom Kippur we take time to consider our ideals, and visions, and the narratives that shaped us. We take stock of who we are, and of what we believe. We ask ourselves whether the stories of our past still speak to the actual world we live in. We ask ourselves whether our political beliefs are aligned with our values. We ask ourselves, in what way will we engage and speak out?

I believe that Israel is the most important moral issue of the Jewish people in this era. What happens in the next ten or twenty years will profoundly affect the future of Jews, Judaism, and Jewish life.

My core values are democracy, equality, human rights, and civil rights. I think it’s important to articulate them over and over again. I don’t want to practice a version of Judaism, or be part of a Jewish community, that sidelines or stifles them.

We do not know what the future holds, but on this Yom Kippur let’s take part in creating new visions.

Let’s learn, deliberate, debate, and struggle together.

Let’s raise our voices and stand up for the values we believe in.

_Gmar chatimah tovah_