

Israel: Enduring Connections and Conflicts

My daughter Sophie called me last week distraught over the violent eruptions in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank: “Help me make sense of what’s happening, Dad.” Her distress is compounded by the fact that many people her age – she is 25 – both in and outside of the Jewish community, feel alienated, if not hostile, toward Israel and their social media feeds reflect that. My son Levi, her twin, touched base a few days later with similar concerns. I had no good answers for them.

The *Matzav*, the *Situation* in Israel is heartbreaking and complex in ways that amplify the pain and defy any simple answer or solution. And yet we do have a need to make some sense of at least how we are feeling, as well as what we might do to help move the Israeli-Palestinian conflict away from violence and towards justice, equity, and peace for everyone living in the region.

Because at times like these it is easy to forget our connection to the land and people of Israel, I’ll start with the lines of connection and then move to the core conflicts that have been laid bare by this most recent Israeli-Palestinian conflagration.

Connections

Our connection to the land and people of Israel is both spiritual and practical. The Jewish spirit began in the land of Israel starting with God’s promise to Abraham in the book of Genesis that it was there (not New York City or Los Angeles) that we would become a great and blessed nation. History or sacred myth, the Jewish people have taken that promise seriously for the last 3,000 years. Genesis marks the beginning of our relationship with *Eretz* and *Am Yisrael* (the land and people of Israel) and through 2,000 years of exile we never lost touch, imbedding the connection in our prayers, holidays, and holy days. Even the traditional orientation of prayer, east towards

Jerusalem, reflects this deep current in the Jewish ethos. Not everyone feels this connection on a personal level, and yet it is part of the fabric of Jewish life and helps explain why we often care so deeply for what is happening there.

Practically speaking, there are other ways we are connected: Six million Jews live there, something any Jew connected to their heritage, to the Jewish People, can't ignore. And many of us have family and friends who live there, making those numbers personal. Israel is also a Jewish cultural center, a source of art and music and literature colored by Jewish history and thought. And it fulfills our need for a safe haven for Jews, in what is often a dangerous world. In other words, Jews in America and Jews in Israel have many lines of connection, whether we all directly feel them or not. These connections don't justify any troubles in Israel, but they do help us understand why what happens there touches us so deeply.

Conflicts

It was one thing to be on the sidelines of history – as we were for millennia before the founding of the state of Israel -- and another thing altogether to enter the field of conflict being implicitly considered a “nation among nations.” As Rabbi David Hartman (z”l) used to say, “It is one thing to be the spokespeople for the oppressed when you are powerless and another thing altogether when you are in power.” Israel as a “Jewish State,” “a nation among nations,” poses many dilemmas for a Judaism defined by almost 2,000 years of being stateless.

The first dilemma that comes to mind, even though it is not directly related to this most recent conflagration, is the lack of separation between *religion* and *state* in Israel. As Americans, we tend to believe that such a delineation is the only way a democracy can function, but it is worth noting that there are a number of countries we consider democratic that have state religions, such as England, Greece, Denmark,

Norway, and Italy, to name a few. And yet the lack of separation of religion and state is foreign and troubling to us for many reasons, including these:

- The notion of a “Jewish State” is problematic when we feel it does not reflect our Jewish values.
- Reform Judaism is discriminated against in Israel, where it is not even recognized by the “Jewish State.”
- “Jewish” and “Israeli” are often used interchangeably, putting Judaism at the center of Israeli identity and action, in the way that religion is not in England, Denmark, or Norway.
- It is hard for us to imagine that non-Jews living in the “Jewish State” are not implicitly, or even explicitly, discriminated against.

More germane to the current conflict is the question of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians in Israel and also the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinian lives differ significantly depending on where they live. Palestinian Israelis who are citizens, though discriminated against, fare much better than those living in the West Bank and Gaza. I want to focus here on Palestinian Israeli citizens as well as those who live in Gaza.

While enjoying the most freedoms and opportunities of the three populations, Palestinian Israelis are essentially second-class citizens. What do I mean by this? The discrimination they face is institutionalized – that is to say, officially sanctioned. Yes, they have many rights of citizenship -- they vote, they have representation in the highest forms of government -- and yet it is clear, and always has been, that they are separate and not equal before the law, in the way municipal dollars are spent, in the way they are treated by law enforcement and in everyday life.

Much of the mob violence that has erupted in Israel in mixed cities like Haifa and Lod was initiated by Jewish residents, but even when it was not, any understanding of what's happening has to take into account the pent-up rage of Palestinian Israelis who just can't take it anymore. This is especially true in East Jerusalem, one of the major flashpoints of this conflict, where over 100,000 Palestinian Israelis live and where the Israeli government over consecutive administrations has worked to squeeze them out and bring Jewish inhabitants in.

Having said that, I would caution too harsh a judgment by us as Americans, with our own history of dishonor in the treatment of minority groups. If the Black Lives Matter movement has taught us anything, it has illustrated how people of color are often treated like second class citizens in our own country. And we can acknowledge that Israel's treatment of its minority citizens is significantly more just and equitable than that of any of its neighbors. I am not suggesting that we ignore or justify social inequality in Israel, or that we not work to eliminate it; only that we view it through a realistic lens.

Another contributing factor is poverty. I was recently on a call sponsored by J Street and a few other progressive Jewish organizations, and heard a young Palestinian Israeli woman named Neta speak. She was visibly shaking when she described the harrowing experience of being violently attacked by Israeli police at a peaceful protest in Yaffo. At the end of her remarks, she urged us that, if you do nothing else, work to end poverty wherever you live, because it is at the root of most suffering.

The pandemic has worsened economic inequality and poverty for everyone living in the region and it is another contributing factor to the violence on all sides.

Perhaps the most visible moral dilemma for us is the disproportionate use of deadly force by the Israelis and the civilian deaths that result. This is where the word “complex” really applies. On the one hand, the civilian death toll in Gaza and the abject suffering is heartbreaking. And yet, one has to consider, “what choices does Israel have?” Let me try to bring it home to you.

If you are in Israel, as Laura and I have been a number of times, in the most ordinary, everyday situations -- having dinner in a café, waiting at the airport -- when Palestinian missiles begin raining down, you grasp the direct and constant threat. You start to understand Israel’s ferocious and deadly actions to defend its inhabitants. To put it into a local context: The entire country of Israel would fit into the southern part of the state of California. Ask yourself what our government would do if thousands of rockets were being launched from Mexico.

Or reflect on what our government actually *has* done in our name all over the world, from El Salvador to Iraq. Attacks on one region of the American homeland on 9/11 triggered a decades-long war. The entire geographic area of Israel is often under bombardment. American wrongs don’t make an Israeli right, but at least we can recognize that the challenges are complicated and not specific to its government. And if the Iron Dome – Israel’s self-defense missile system -- did not exist, or if Palestinian rocket technology was better, the thousands of rockets that have been launched towards civilian populations would have killed many more people within Israel. Would we feel better then? Of course not. In many ways, the moral issues in this situation that seem clear-cut in the abstract are not as straightforward in person.

Finally, Jewish rationale for the protection of civilian life even during war goes back to Biblical times. But, while harm to non-combatants so deeply offends us, it’s also important to understand that Hamas purposely imbeds itself amongst civilian

populations, using them as human shields, using our moral commitments against us. Israel often sends warnings ahead of bombing raids to the civilians living there to try to limit civilian casualties, but this is not always successful. Again, this doesn't mean that we don't care about this horror; only that we can recognize the decisions on the ground are not as unambiguous as they may seem from a distance.

I'm not saying what is happening in Gaza is ok: It's not ok. What I am trying to convey is that the situation is anything but good guys vs. bad guys, like in an old Western, and certainly not as it is often portrayed by the media.

So, what can we do?

First, we can support causes that are bending the curve towards justice, reconciliation, and peace, such as the ones listed below: New Israel Fund, the Sulha Peace Project, J Street, or even the World Union for Progressive Judaism. No organization is perfect, but many are doing important work.

We can also support initiatives by our own government to broker an end to the conflict, including opposing the abuse of the "anti-Israel" or even "anti-Semitic" labels hurled against anyone who criticizes Israel or works towards a just and lasting peace.

We can resist the impulse to disengage and find ways to connect to the land of Israel and all the people living there.

And, finally, we can be the holders of hope. Our distance from the conflict gives us some breathing room to see past the existential threats towards what we pray will someday be a just and lasting peace.

Oseh shalom bimromav hu ya-aseh shalom, aleynu v'al kol yisrael, v'imru amen

May the Well Spring for Shalom be made manifest in Israel and all the world soon and in our day!

The New Israel Fund - <https://www.nif.org/>

The Sulha Peace Project - <https://www.sulhapeaceproject.com/>

JStreet - <https://jstreet.org/>

The World Union for Progressive Judaism - <https://wupj.org/>