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# THE FOUR CHILDREN & ISRAEL

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On May 14th 1948, David Ben-Gurion and his Zionist compatriots were poised to declare and establish the State of Israel, the first Jewish commonwealth in almost 2,000 years. However, Israel's founders were delayed, as they were bogged down in a matter of textual minutiae in its soon-to-be completed Declaration of Independence. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Fishman Maimon, who represented the Religious Zionist movement, was adamant that he would not sign any document that had no reference to God. Aharon Zisling, the head of the secular socialist party Mapam, asserted that he could not affirm the existence of a God he did not believe in.

To put this moment in its proper context, the British Mandate authorities were departing, six Arab armies were mustering at Israel's borders, the fate of the Zionist project, 50 years' worth of political effort and cultural revival, and 2000 years' worth of Jewish hopes and dreams hung in the balance. And a handful of Jews in a small building in Tel Aviv, who would determine the fate of the modern Jewish experience for decades and centuries to come, were arguing about the existence of God.

Ben-Gurion settled the disagreement with the phrase, "placing our trust in *Tzur Yisrael*," "the Rock of Israel," a phrase from Jewish liturgy. By referring to the Rock of Israel, but refraining from explicit mention of divine redemption, the declaration was ambiguous enough that both atheist and devout Zionists could affirm it. For believers, the phrase could refer to the Divine Defender of the Jewish People. For the secular socialists, the words hinted at the flintlike resolution of the Israeli army. The compromise was

accepted and the modern Jewish state of Israel was born, but this could only be done by ignoring the issue of the existence of God.

To birth a Jewish state, the Zionist founding fathers tiptoed around the existence of God in its founding document. Today, many American Jews, even those who actively practice Judaism, tiptoe around the existence of the State of Israel, ambivalent or ignorant of its importance to the modern Jewish experience. In some American synagogues, Israel is not talked about, due to the perception that it is a point of contention and divisiveness, or the rabbi's desire not to be the primary educator on the Jewish state. I have never been of the opinion that Israel should not be talked about. Although I certainly do agree that Israel can be a point of contention and divisiveness...just like kashrut, Shabbat practice, holiday observance, Torah interpretation, and a whole host of other things in our tradition. In Judaism, everything is divisive, and yet we still

talk about all of those things, unless we are ambivalent or ignorant about them.

In many conferences that I have attended over the past few years, I have heard a common refrain from Israeli leaders, thinkers, and journalists: American Rabbis need to be the ones who communicate the beauty and complexity of Israel to American Jews. That is a weighty task, a burden that I do not take lightly. I often ask myself: How does a rabbi do that? With such diversity of knowledge and opinion among American Jews, how can I possibly serve you best as that conduit? I found the answer in the observance of another Jewish holiday. So, in the spirit of Yom Kippur, please forgive me as I speak about the Passover Seder, specifically the Four Children.

As we all remember, the Haggadah speaks of Four Children, representing four different personality types, or ways in which questions are asked and parental responses are given: חֲכָמִים, the wise,

רשע, the wicked, תם, the simple, and שְׂאִינֵנוּ יוֹדֵעַ לְשׂאוֹל, the one who does not know how to ask. Each of these children asks a question based on their personality type and their need, and the parent responds in kind. Likewise, it could be said that there are Four American Jewish relationships to Israel. These also require us to listen and respond.

Deviating from the order of the Haggadah, I would like to start with the American Jew “who does not know how to ask” about Israel. This is the average American Jew, who is, for the most part, disconnected from regular Jewish practice. This person might observe a few holidays a year by going to synagogue on the High Holy Days or attending a Seder on Passover. They do not know how to ask because they have no frame of reference, no idea how important Israel is to the American Jewish experience.

My response to this American Jew would be as follows:

Israel is central to the American Jewish experience, and one's level of observance, or lack thereof, is directly correlated to one's love of Israel. Every major study over the last few years of the American Jewish community has shown that Jews of lesser observance have the least connection to Israel. This is because love of Israel and Jewish practice are directly related.

Judaism is inherently Zionist, and Israel has always been linked to communal Jewish identity. The celebrations of nearly every holiday, and many Jewish practices, are based in our connection to Israel. When Jews pray, we face Jerusalem. Our prayers for rain and dew are linked to the rainy and dry seasons of Israel. At the end of the Seder, we declare *L'Shanah HaBa'ah B'yerushalayim*, "Next year in Jerusalem!" You know from your attendance at Seders that it tells the story of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt. Where do you think they were going?

Every Jewish holiday is connected to its past observance in the land of Israel. One of the reasons we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is to remember Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, in Jerusalem. When we dip apples in honey, we use the most common, all-purpose sweetener used by our biblical ancestors in Israel. Our modern Yom Kippur is a reflection of the ancient priestly service to purify the collective sins of Israel in the Temple, in Jerusalem. This ancient practice also prepared the nation to be able to celebrate Sukkot, the fall harvest festival of the land of Israel. Even a holiday that might be more accessible to modern Jews, like Tu Bish'vat, is directly connected to Israel. It is not the "Jewish Arbor Day," but a celebration of natural fruits of the land of Israel.

Judaism without Israel is unfathomable. In our prayer books, poetry, and music, Jews have been spiritually and physically connected to the Land of Israel. Zionism and the State of Israel were

their natural outcome. As Aḥad Ha'am, an early Zionist thinker, said, "more than the Jewish People have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jewish People."

In 2012, at the National Convention for Conservative Judaism's Rabbinical Assembly, Yair Lapid, former Israeli journalist and co-leader of the new Blue and White party, articulated that the difference between being American Jews and Israeli Jews is just an historical accident. He said, "If we are to move the biographies of our fathers and grandfathers a half inch to the right or to the left, I could be you and you could be me. I could be you and you could be me, because somewhere down the line of the family history of each and every person who sits in this room, there is a man standing on a pier in a harbor, trying to figure out which direction he is going."

Lapid later revealed that, as he was delivering this message, he was thinking about Tom Lantos, a United States Representative who served in Congress for 27 years. Lantos lived in the same village in

Budapest as Lapid's own father, Tommy. After the Holocaust, they left their village, but went in opposite directions. One ended up in America and the other in Israel, where both served their respective countries in the political arena. But it easily could have been the other way around. We could be them and they could be us, if our grandparents and great-grandparents had gotten on one boat instead of the other. This is actually my wife Jena's story. After the Shoah, her grandmother came to the United States from Romania, while other members of her grandmother's family went to Israel, where she now has many cousins.

So, this is what you should do: Read some introductory books about Israel's history and culture. Learn about Israel's conflicts and its pursuit of peace with its neighbors. Follow current events on the news, from a wide array of perspectives. Introduce more Jewish practice into your life and see how entwined every bit of the Jewish experience is with the land of Israel. If you are a young person, go

on Birthright. If you are too old to qualify for Birthright, find another way to get there, like the Richmond Jewish Community mission to Israel. Or Atid is going, and it's practically a bargain. I hope you join us.

Next, we come to the American Jew who asks the simple questions, "What is Israel? What is Zionism?" This American Jew knows the basics about the holidays, Shabbat, and the dietary rules, and practices Judaism on a regular basis. He or she knows some Hebrew, especially prayer Hebrew, and also knows that Israel is important and meaningful, but can't exactly articulate why. In many cases, because he or she does not have enough information to pass on to his or her children, they might become the ones who don't know how to ask.

My response would be as follows:

Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish People, and Zionism is the liberation movement of the Jewish people, the idea that the

Jewish People have the right to self-determination in their biblical, ancestral homeland. As a Jew, you are part of Israel's story and you are connected to Israelis. Zionism has become a dirty word in some circles, but all Jews should be proud Zionists. Unfortunately, Jews in both America and Israel don't talk enough about Zionism. The concept is actually a big tent under which many different philosophies co-existed. Zionism was always a hyphen-Zionism, cross breeding the quest for Jewish statehood with other dreams regarding Judaism or the world. In the half-century before the state was founded, Zionism was a robust conversation between six schools of Zionist thought.

There was political Zionism, founded by Theodore Herzl, which had the goal of establishing a Jewish state for the purpose of defending Jews against Anti-Semitism. In response came Cultural Zionism, founded by Ah'ad Ha'am, who wanted to revive the Hebrew language, intellect, and cultural spirit of the Jewish people through

its connection with the land. There was also Labor Zionism, grounded in a secular, socialist ethos and represented by the Kibbutz, a farming-based commune, with the goal of replacing the image of the weak, city ghetto Jew by creating New Jews: strong, hardened men and women, connected to the land of Israel.

Later came Revisionist Zionism, led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, which married the ideas of liberal democracy, capitalism, and individualism, with a practical outlook on the coming military conflict with the Arabs of Palestine. Then there was Religious Zionism, whose main proponent was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a mystic who saw a state as the opportunity to fulfill all of God's mitzvot, the only place where the Torah could be lived to its fullest extent. Finally, there was Diaspora Zionism, led by Americans such as Louis Brandeis and Henrietta Szold, which was a philanthropic, support-oriented Zionism that reconciled American patriotism with Jewish nationalism. All of these Zionisms are still alive today.

Israeli novelist A. B. Yehoshua once wrote, “a Zionist is a person who accepts the principle that the state of Israel doesn’t belong solely to its citizens, but to the entire Jewish people.” You are a Zionist, and this is what you should do: Use your current knowledge and love of Israel as the basis for further understanding. Listen to Israeli music. Read Israeli novelists. Learn about the intricacies of the political system. Learn Hebrew. Just like you can’t understand France without learning French, or Italy without learning Italian, or Japan without learning Japanese, you can’t understand Israel without learning Hebrew. The American Jewish community has put a very real stumbling block before itself in its lack of Hebrew learning.

If you have children, find a way to articulate to them why Israel is important. Go to Israel to immerse yourself in the culture, like, for example, Birthright, or the aforementioned Richmond Jewish

Community mission to Israel. As I said to the one who does not know how to ask, Or Atid is going, and it's a bargain.

When it comes to the wise and wicked children, I have always believed that there is a thin line between the two. Both the wicked and the wise are knowledgeable about Israel's history, culture, and the way its society functions. What separates the two is the question that they ask and the way in which they ask it. This past August, I had the privilege of joining a group of American Rabbis who formed a new group that decided upon the name "Zionist Rabbinic Alliance." We had the great fortune to have our opening dinner at the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC with Israel's Ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer. One of the rabbis asked the ambassador, "given the broad spectrum between love and hate for the State of Israel, how could one define what it means for an individual to be a lover of Israel currently?" The ambassador answered, "Do you want to believe the best about Israel, or do you

want to believe the worst about Israel?" The ambassador's response provided clarity for how one sees an imperfect country doing its best to live up to its ideals in a very challenging time and place. This is how I would distinguish between the wise and wicked American Jew on Israel.

The wicked child is almost always criticizing Israel, pointing out its flaws, while glossing over its successes, ultimately asking, "Why does Israel do so much bad?" He or she sees Israel only through the lens of its intractable conflict with the Palestinians, as opposed to its regional conflict with Iran and other terrorist groups. Israel's freedom, democracy, pluralism, and economic innovation are only distractions from the conflict. Much of their disdain is focused on the person of Prime Minister Netanyahu, ignoring his achievements in foreign policy, security, and economics, while selectively centering on his corruption, arrogance, and divisive rhetoric. The wicked child sees Israel as a source of discomfort,

embarrassment, or even revulsion. For this child, Israel fails in its attempts to be a democracy in the American mold, even though it never intended to be so.

The Haggadah would have us “set this child’s teeth on edge,” excluding them from the conversation and the story. And there certainly are American Jews who are beyond the pale of rational, informed conversation about Israel, namely people associated with the Anti-Zionist Jewish Voices for Peace, Students for Justice in Palestine, and other organizations with innocuously sounding names that outwardly deny Israel’s right to exist or work to its detriment.

But in my estimation, this American Jew is not that radical or hostile, and still believes in the existence of the state of Israel as Jewish homeland. My first response would be to listen, and I would treat this wicked child with respect. Anyone who cares about Israel must, at the very least, give the wicked child the common courtesy

to state their opinion and ask their questions. If we respect their questions even though they might trouble us, they might just listen when we speak, leading to meaningful and fruitful conversations. In most cases, the wicked child doesn't need to be bombarded with information. Moreover, any time you try to censor people's opinions, it demonstrates your own fear and weakness.

After listening, I would respond with a series of underlying realities and follow-up questions to continue the discussion. Israel faces real threats from Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS, Syria, and Iran. Even if peace were made with the Palestinians tomorrow, you must acknowledge that these groups would still work to destroy Israel and kill Jews. Regarding the Palestinians, what is your ideal outcome, based on the facts on the ground now? Palestinian leadership has not changed its position in decades. Their leaders are corrupt, and they revel in their corruption. They have no desire to change because it would threaten their own position. It's a tragic

situation for the Palestinian people. Based on all of this, what's your best alternative? If there were a Palestinian state, what might it really look like? Would it be democratic? Would there be freedom for the Palestinian people? Will Palestinian leadership treat their own citizens with more human rights than Israel? Would Jews be able to live in that Palestine?

If you believe in progressive values like human rights, rights for the LGBT community, rights for minorities, and want all to live in a free and democratic society, then you implicitly support Israel. It is contradictory to want Israel to be a democracy, and then criticize every policy of their democratically elected government. Support for Israel cannot be contingent on governmental policy positions, especially ones that happen to originate from the other side of the political spectrum.

It may come as a surprise to you, but the most recent election did not change anything as far as substantive policy. The Benny

Gantz-led Blue and White party has virtually no differences in policy from Netanyahu's Likud. The election was a referendum on Netanyahu's ego and corruption, not his policies. The policies that you don't like are likely to continue for quite some time.

Is it possible to understand Israel on its own terms, rather than through a left-wing American Jewish lens? The price of Jewish sovereignty is imperfection. Israel is far from perfect, but it is still an amazing place. I challenge you to spend a day, week, or even month talking about Israel without mentioning the Conflict. Spend some time with Israelis and see the country from their perspective. Go to Israel, maybe even with, you guessed it, the Richmond Jewish Community mission.

The wise American Jew understands all of this about Israel. He or she is an unabashed Zionist, loves Israel for what it is, and sees its establishment, survival, and success as a miracle in modern times. Israel is an essential part of this person's Jewish identity. The wise

American Jew appreciates the beauty of the Jewish state, and also gets frustrated when it does not live up to its ideals. Whereas the things about Israel that bother the wicked child turn them off from Israel, the things that about Israel that bother the wise child happen to be the same things that bother Israelis about their own state. The wise American Jew can hold the same contradiction that a majority of Israelis hold regarding the conflict: ruling over the Palestinians is an existential threat, just as vacating the territories and leaving the Palestinians to their own devices is an existential threat.

This person knows that Israel is a complicated place. Israelis will cut you off in line, but will pay for your coffee if you don't have the cash. They will yell curses at you in traffic, but will help lift your baby carriage on a public bus and ask every detail about the baby. They litter in the park, but plant trees. They boisterously argue over politics, but passionately care for each other as brothers and sisters, because they are. You understand that Israel upholds the individual

rights of all of its citizens, whether they are Muslim, Christian, Druze, or others, even as the character of the state is Jewish.

My response to the wise child: Share that love of Israel with others. Speak with nuance. Praise what should be praised and critique what should be critiqued. Listen to and educate the other three types of American Jews. Deepen your own connection with Israel. Get involved in our local Richmond Israel Advocacy Group. Join me at next year's AIPAC policy conference in Washington DC in March, where 18,000 Pro-Israel Americans will come together to learn, love, advocate, and lobby their Representatives for Israel. Because it is an election year, it is sure to be filled with important speakers. In fact, AIPAC is giving a special High Holy Day season discount, \$200 off the registration fee if you sign up by the day after Simchat Torah. And of course, come to Israel with the Richmond Jewish Community mission.

The most important declaration in our tradition is the Shema. As I have taught before, the Shema stands out among our prayers because it is not really a prayer to God. It is a pronouncement to each other: *Shema Yisrael*. Listen up, People of Israel. On Yom Kippur, the Shema gains a special significance. When we regularly recite the Shema, we recite the next line, *Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed*, in an undertone. On Yom Kippur, we say that line aloud, with the same enthusiasm and volume of the Shema. There are many explanations for why we do this, but one of them can teach us about our collective responsibility to engage with and love Israel.

According to a midrash (Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:35), on his deathbed, our ancestor Jacob, also known as Israel, was surrounded by his twelve sons. He was stricken with anxiety, reflecting on the schisms that had previously divided his family. Jacob's own father Isaac affirmed his faith in God, while Isaac's brother Ishmael went

his own way. Jacob affirmed his faith in God, while his own brother Esau went his own way. Jacob wondered if twelve his sons, because of their feuds and differences, would split off from each other or collectively affirm faith in the God of their father. Jacob's sons alleviated his worries, and said in unison, "*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*," "Listen Israel (meaning their father in this case), Adonai is our God, Adonai is One." Jacob, assured of his sons' unity despite their differences, responded, *Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed*, "Blessed is God's glorious majesty forever and ever."

On this holiest day of the year, we Jews, in Israel and in the Diaspora, gather as one community, despite our differences in location and the disagreements we may have about the Jewish State. As the psalmist (Ps. 133:1) has so famously taught us, *Hineh mah tov u'mah na'im shevet aḥim gam yaḥad*. How good and pleasant it is when we diverse children of Israel can sit together, like the signers

of Israel's Declaration of Independence, like the leaders of the different schools of Zionist thought, like the different children of the Seder. As our ancestors did so long ago, let us open our hearts to one another in our unity and diversity, and affirm our love of Israel. From our own unique starting points, may we commit to deepening our understanding of, connection to, and love for the Jewish State.

*Ken Y'hi Ratzon.* May this be God's will. Amen.