

A Call for Liberal Zionism

I love Israel. Having grown up in America, there is something amazing about being in a country with so many Jews. I love that the person waiting on me in the restaurant is Jewish. I love that the person cutting my hair is Jewish. I love that the person selling me tomatoes is Jewish. I even love that the cop who gave me a ticket for jaywalking is Jewish.

I also love ice cream. I love mint chocolate cookie, chocolate chip cookie dough, and half baked. Even the new non-dairy flavors are a great shabbat treat. Of all my loves that I imagined would one day come into conflict, never did I imagine my love for Israel and my love for ice cream would be at odds. Until now. Earlier this summer, Ben & Jerry's announced that it was, "inconsistent with its values to sell their ice cream in the Occupied Palestinian Territories." In a country with no shortage of opinions, when it comes to ice cream, Israel's notoriously fractious political sphere was virtually unanimous. Right-wing Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said that Ben & Jerry's decided to brand itself as an "anti-Israel ice cream." His centrist coalition partner, Yair Lapid, called the move a "shameful surrender to anti-Semitism." Israeli President Isaac Herzog of the center-left called the decision "a new kind of terrorism." One centrist cabinet minister dutifully posted a TikTok of herself chucking a pint of what looked like Dulce de Leche into the trash. Everyone is up in arms about ice cream, and the question is: Why?

Why does Israel, or for that matter Jews in America, care about what an American ice cream brand thinks of Israel's policies? There are a lot of other pints in the freezer. Some of them are even better. It is true that Ben & Jerry's will continue selling ice cream within Israel itself. It is also true that their decision will have little material impact on Israel. But even if it is largely symbolic, symbolism is huge. I could go on and on about ice cream but it's Yom Kippur and that's rude, and more importantly, my real concern is not Ben & Jerry's. What concerns me is the

environment that pushed a company that once sold charoset ice cream in Israel during Passover to make this decision in the first place.

Maimonides taught that on Yom Kippur we not only repent for our deeds like lewdness, robbery or theft; but also for attitudes, qualities that are sinful: hatred, envy, anger, and the like. With this *teshuvah* we can heal the hurts we've caused and the relationships we've damaged. This is the *teshuvah* which strengthens the covenantal bonds of our lives. My concern this Yom Kippur is the bond American Jews (and Americans writ large) have with Israel. Bipartisan support for Israel is declining. Younger generation support for Israel is declining. This worries me, and it should worry you too.

I want to speak this evening about something that sits heavy on my soul. After learning with the Hartman Institute this summer about Jewish power and the ethical dilemmas of sovereignty, I have come to realize that I am, within the spectrum of the Pro-Israel community, a troubled Zionist. By this I mean my commitment to Israel is strong. I am dedicated, unconditionally, to Israel's survival and well-being. I care about Israel's safety and security, Israel's standing on the world stage, and building stronger connections between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. One accomplishment I am most proud of in this community is creating our Shelichut program, now going four years strong. Israel is always on my mind. However, like many Jews around the world, I am deeply troubled by many of Israel's policies, and I believe that an inherent part of my Zionism and love for Israel is to give voice to that. While I believe that Israel very often reflects the very best Jewish and democratic values, sometimes it does not. I am troubled because I care and I believe Israel can do better.

Within Israel, the sentiment differs. The aftermath of Oslo, the Second Intifada, and the withdrawal from Gaza has influenced public opinion. The reality of the occupation is less

troubling, the behavior of settlers is tolerated, and even the state has sponsored further settlement. The rejection of every peace overture by the Palestinians places the moral responsibility squarely upon their shoulders. And what happened when we left Gaza? Gaza was turned over to Hamas so Hamas could build tunnels, launch rockets, and terrorize Israelis. Many Israelis have given up on the prospect for peace and are content with maintaining the status quo.

In America a different shift is taking place, from troubled Zionists to those who are agnostic about Israel, and very recently to the absolute mainstreaming of those who align with an anti-Zionist agenda. What has changed? Why have so many within the Jewish community stopped caring about Israel? For starters, the relationship between Israel and the last administration placed Israel as a partisan issue on the wrong side of many progressive American Jews. In addition, the movement to America to shine a light on systemic racism has generated a greater awareness of injustice, wherever it may be. And, the progressive attack against unjust status quos has created an environment that no longer sees Israel as the victim in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Israel discourse is guided by those who are both committed to Israel and simply not troubled by anything Israel does. They are not troubled, usually, because they think there is nothing Israel ever does that is morally problematic. They think Israel is simply a nation like all other nations, and all nations operate under the principle of self-interest.

I know that the discourse around Israel is very distressing at times. There are currents seeking to delegitimize Israel, those pursuing justice are really covering their anti-Semitic leanings, troubled Zionists are being marginalized from progressive communities, and some of the criticisms against Israel are incoherent and deeply problematic. All of the above make us want to seek out like minded individuals who understand our own point of view. While my

words may be construed by some as blaming the victim, that's not what I'm doing. We are not the cause of anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, nor every distortion within the Israel discourse. I'm not blaming us at all. But I want us to take responsibility for those things that we *are* doing.

When criticisms are raised, whether it is the sustained occupation, a bombing campaign in Gaza, Sheikh Jarrah, or whatever it may be, there are two core responses that are offered: "learn your facts," and "you are anti-Semitic." What are the facts one needs to learn? There are so many of them, but they all more or less go like this: It is true that the occupation entails deep moral challenges, but the occupation would have been over 20+ years ago if the Palestinians wanted peace. We offered the majority of Judea and Samaria and they said no. In fact, from the very beginning they said no. At the same time, Palestinians have terrorized Israel in every decade of the 20th and 21st centuries. This is who they are. And since this is who they are, Israel is forced into an occupation that it cannot end by an immoral Palestinian people and leadership who have consistently rejected peace and opted for war and terror.

Meanwhile, the prevailing argument is that anyone who is still troubled after learning the facts is troubled because of anti-Semitism. These anti-Semites simply do not want Israel to exist or Jews to have any social standing in our global society. These sentiments are only strengthened by the asymmetry of criticisms offered against Israel as distinct from other so-called injustices in the world, not to speak of those of the Palestinians themselves. When Israel is singled out, it is nothing other than a continuation of longstanding anti-Semitic tropes.

These arguments are very compelling and they have been part of my Zionist narrative for many years. I also believe that most of the facts are correct. If someone wants to know why the occupation didn't end 20 years ago, the answer is, the Palestinians said "no." The problem is these facts are no longer compelling, convincing, or even remotely moving to the *new* generation

of Jews and Americans. These arguments are like generals who are perfectly prepared for yesterday's war. Moreover, to call everyone who doesn't buy these facts an anti-Semite ignores the reality that many of the most significant critics are Jews and longstanding supporters of Israel. I will also add that calling someone an anti-Semite is not the best way to make friends and influence people. We are failing to understand that something has changed in the American Jewish community.

Many Jews today look at the Israel narrative, understand it is correct, but conclude that it is simply the wrong narrative for the questions being asked. Let me give you a few examples, examples that will intentionally make you uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable. The first is that we can no longer defend injustices which occur due to the occupation under the guise that the occupation is temporary. If it *is* temporary it isn't a systemic moral failure. After 54 years, more and more troubled Zionists are asking, "can we still call this temporary?" Not only has it been 54 years, the Israeli government has done little since 2005 to bring the occupation to an end. In fact, it has done everything to make sure it continues, including trying to pass a formal annexation of major sections of Judea and Samaria, only stopped as a condition to the Abrahamic Accords. How do *these* facts answer *these* questions?

Furthermore, while ending the occupation requires a trusted partner, there is still much Israel can do to demonstrate a commitment to peace. Rather than build new settlements and offer financial incentives for those who move into them, Israel can dismantle settlements outside of the settlement blocs and institute additional taxes for those who live within them. If you want to argue that the continued occupation is the Palestinian's fault alone, you have to give account to these criticisms, and the facts simply don't address them. We offered and they said no is very

compelling. But, *hello...offer again!* We are powerful enough to try. Try something. Try anything.

In the last war in Gaza, a new feature of this criticism began to emerge and that is the imbalance of power between Israel and Palestinians. The dominant narrative in Israel was: Hamas bombed and Israel engaged in its legitimate right to self-defense. The narrative came to an end when Israel ceased hostilities because its legitimate ends were reached. That's the story. Now, for the first time, troubled Zionists are no longer buying that narrative. To be clear, Israel is perfectly justified in defending itself from 4000 rockets aimed at its civilian population. Anyone who claims otherwise is a lunatic. To say that just because I have disproportionate power makes it illegitimate for me to fight is insane. But here too, we are not listening to the conversation. While bombing Hamas was legitimate, were there other options that were not explored? For many, especially younger generations of liberal Jews in America, the core story of the conflict does not begin with Hamas bombing, it begins with the occupation and a reliance on military power to solve all problems. I'm not claiming Hamas bombed Israel *because* of the occupation. Hamas bombs Israel because it wants Jews dead. But the fact that Israel consistently demonstrates exemplary expressions of morality *in war*, doesn't necessarily legitimize the war in the first place if you have not pursued other avenues of recourse.

Lest you think otherwise, I firmly believe that Palestinians are responsible for the choices they have made and for their decades-long rejection of peace. But I don't make my expectations of Israel contingent on Palestinians doing their part. I'm not pollyannaish. I would not suggest Israel unilaterally leave Judea and Samaria, that would be a death sentence. We can't sign a peace treaty without a partner. But we *can* prepare the territories. We *can* move settlers that live beyond the settlement blocs. We *can* be obsessed with every single human rights abuse that

happens. We *can* embark upon a massive COVID inoculation campaign in Judea and Samaria. The Prime Minister *can* get up every month and reach out to the Palestinian Authority. There are so many things we can do. I have major demands and disappointments with Palestinians. But as a Jew, I never allow others to shape my responsibilities. If we want a pro-Israel community in America, we have to internalize some of this conversation, as uncomfortable as it may be.

In case you were wondering where the next generation of Jewish leaders stand, look no further than this summer's controversial letter criticizing Israel, signed by some 90 rabbinical students. Many in the established Jewish community felt very strongly that these students crossed a red line. The letter wasn't a red line. It was a cry to say, "Something is broken. I don't know how to be a troubled Zionist." Did they articulate it right? No. Do we need to answer these students with a counter letter in the newspaper? No. We need to sit down and *listen* to them. We need to show them that their criticisms are not strange or flawed. It's not that there is some fact that they don't understand. Do you know what it's like to have people say to you year after year, "you don't get it, it's complicated?" They are looking at us and saying, "excuse me, your full of !@#\$. I hope I haven't insulted anyone. But that's what they are saying. You want to blame them? Knock yourself out. You are writing off the next generation of Jewish leaders and I hope you live a very long time. Millennialism is not a skin disease. And we don't have a pill to make them 70-year-old Jews.

So, what are we going to do? Are we going to be insane – continuing to try something which has failed, believing that if we try it one more time we will get a different result? Or are we going to do something different? If we want the next generation of Jews to embrace Zionism we must cultivate a liberal Zionism. We need to work ten-fold to strengthen liberal Zionism both in America and in Israel.

Allow me to share briefly five characteristics of such a liberal Zionism. One. Moral criticisms of Israel's policies and decisions need to be *embraced* as distinct from *answered*. We don't need to accept every outlandish criticism, but the basic instinct of a liberal Zionist is to give voice to Israel's moral expectations. It is about asking and imagining what Israel ought to be rather than legitimizing what Israel is.

Two. We have to dramatically change the rules for a kosher Israel discourse – rules that effectively exclude liberal Zionists from the conversation. There is a difference between telling Israel what to do (a right reserved for her citizens) and telling Israel what I think - calling on Israelis to reconsider what to do.

Three. Ending the occupation is an important priority. This entails a resolution that enables Israel and Palestinians to live in their own independent states in mutual peace and security. Liberal Zionism is about recognizing that Israel's power demands that it initiates and implements any and all policies now that lay the foundation for this future state in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

Four. Israel's mission is and will always be to build a strong, safe, and vibrant national homeland for the Jewish people while fulfilling the principles of a democratic state, including a commitment to the freedom and equality of all its citizens regardless of national or religious identity. While a commitment to human rights cannot undermine Israel's right to exist, Israel's economic and military power demand that some risks be taken for the sake of our moral and democratic values.

Finally, we need to develop a liberal narrative of power itself. In the Torah, embodying the divine capacity for power is what makes us human. But we must recognize, as Abraham teaches us, that power is to be used in accordance with the principles of justice and

righteousness. If God has to answer to God's use of power, then certainly do we. Jews are called upon to be critics of power and the powerful. Power is not just expressed in our control of others, but as the rabbis teach us: *Eizehu gibor? Hacovesh et yitzro* – Who is mighty? The one who subdues their baser inclinations. We can use our power to restore peace and quiet, or we can use our moral and intellectual power to begin a new conversation.

Zionists, we who love Israel, need to do much better. There will always be a gap between Israel as it *is* and Israel as it *ought* to be. Israel doesn't have to be perfect. No country has to be perfect. But we need to feel that Israel is committed to these values. There is no doubt that liberal Zionism is going to demand an increased activism to influence and shape the decisions that Israelis independently make. This doesn't happen by legislating some law in Congress or placing stipulations on foreign aid, and it certainly won't happen by ending the sale of Ben & Jerry's ice cream in Judea and Samaria. Israel is not going to be coerced. It's about supporting liberal Zionist institutions and organizations in Israel that are building an Israel our grandchildren will have a relationship with. It's about fighting for Israel and reclaiming Israel. It's about joining with our partners in Israel for this fight. It's about all of us waking up.

If we want Israel to remain a part of Jewish life, if we want Israel to be supported by liberal Jews in America, we need an engaging liberal Zionist discourse – both in America *and* in Israel. We have to articulate the Israel we want and the Zionism we want. We have to defend it. Jews cannot walk away from each other. I know that there are some who will disagree with all I have said. But the truth is, we need each other, and we need to be in relationship with each other. Jewish history is changed by working together. Friends, this year let us resolve to change Jewish history. And in case you were wondering, I'm taking a break from Ben & Jerry's. Dairy Godmother in Delray is much better!