

Flexigidity
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I love made up words – particularly when they are conjunctions of others we already know. I think they are playful and helpful and they lighten the conversation. Let me offer a couple of examples: The word, “Ginormous” It is perfect for the moment you want to emphasize the size of something and neither the word “gigantic” nor “enormous” will suffice. A relatively recent one I came across is the word, “Hangry.” It’s pretty intuitive: you know it, the testy anger one might cop as he grows hungry? Here’s a good one: “Flexigidity” – Just the right mix of Flexibility and Rigidity. Not too rigid but not spineless, either. And, one of my favorites is the word, “Frienemy.” You know, a person with whom you struggle (an “enemy” at times) but can’t quite walk away from (because they are also a “friend”).

My Bubbie was a Freinemy. She was tough. It probably wasn’t really her fault - She was raised by a mean man and was one member of a large family. She came out fighting for her place in a world that she found threatening...as you might expect, that it made it tough for her to live at ease in relationships with family members who posed no real threat to her. Her daughters-in-law must have found it particularly tough. Neither seemed to be the woman that she would have chosen for her sons. She was hard on both of them – in different ways. My Mom struggled to play the role of the accepting and forgiving newest member of the family. As with most of us – the dysfunction of our family-of-origin was not immediately obvious to my dad and he couldn’t even see how hard it was for her to tolerate the abuse of her new mother-in-law. My uncle’s wife, on the other hand, is a very strong personality and she had no intention of accepting Bubbie’s behavior. My Uncle’s nature left him feeling no deep allegiance to his mother and he chose to support his wife walking away from his family-of-origin for many years.

The third child in the family, their sister...my aunt, was a loyal daughter. She took her share of Bubbie’s negative attention but always seemed willing to absorb it and

so managed to stay on Bubbie's good side. And, in between those two responses, was my father. He sought, for many years, to find that sweet spot between being a son respectful of his mother and being a partner loyal to his wife. Someday, perhaps, I'll tell you more about my Bubbie but for now, I want to reflect upon her children. One walked away - one stayed loyal and the third, well, he struggled. Who do you think had the most healthy relationship with her?

My Uncle died a few years ago so I can't talk with him about it but I've spoken with my dad many times. He believes that turning his back on Bubbie showed her that my uncle would not be bullied; that if she desired a relationship with him, it was going to have to be on mutually agreeable terms. She did eventually capitulate and he reentered the family and I have wondered if the years of distance from his mother was painful for my uncle? My father...wrestled. He wrestled with the inclination to forgive bad behavior. He wrestled with the principles of the Torah which insists we're supposed to honor our parents.¹ He was the one who sat at her side as Bubbie's body shut down - years after her mind had already diminished to a shell. Was there wrestling for him then? Who's relationship was harder? And who chose the right reaction to a complicated dynamic with a difficult person?

I share this with you today because I feel like the drama I just painted for you in a thumbnail sketch of my family is being played out elsewhere in my life. Except this time, my family members are metaphors for the current dynamic in my relationship to Israel. My Aunt represents the ultra-supportive American Jewish community – think AIPAC – loyal no matter what. My Uncle plays the role of the unattached and unidentified American Jews who are embarrassed because of Israel's failures and her imperfections – those who have easily walked away and do not seem to struggle with the loss. My dad is representing a growing number of Jews who are struggling with what Israel means juxtaposed with what we need her to be - we are feeling a lot of emotion and pull from all sides of the argument. And, Bubbie, well, she is Israel. Scrappy, playing by her

¹ Exo. 20:11.

own rules until forced to do otherwise. But, like an abused human, Israel's behavior makes some sense.

And all along – my family wondered, “what was Bubbie really feeling?” Hard for us in the family to imagine but if we were to just let Bubbie's behavior speak for itself - it often left the rest of the family with their mouths hanging open. I feel similarly about Israel – her behavior of late towards her closest loved ones is boggling. In order to talk about this, allow me to provide a brief historical context of a few salient points.

In the earliest days of Israel's formation, David Ben Gurion needed support from as many corners of the Jewish world as he could get. Believing that Orthodoxy would lose its *raison d'être* in a decade or two and would disappear – he didn't anticipate a problem in delivering full control of all religious matters to the Haredim – the Ultra-Orthodox. Here we return to one of our made-up words – “Flexigidity”. He sought a demonstration - honoring Jewish rigidity expressed through ultra-Orthodoxy...balanced against the Flexibility of modern Zionism. Well, his prediction that Ultra-Orthodoxy would disappear has proven wrong and today, the parliamentary system of Israel considers them a powerful voting bloc.

Israel's government, the Knesset, has a total of 120 seats but the fractured party system all-but-guarantees that no party will have a majority of 60 seats to themselves. That means that much smaller, niche parties leverage huge power by joining the coalition of the largest party. In practice, this means that Netanyahu is forced to bring the Ultra-Orthodox political parties into his coalition and to make compromises – he gets his coalition and he gets the votes on matters important to him. Then, on matters that the Ultra-Orthodox really want, Netanyahu is more willing to give in. Put more bluntly, the *haredim* will vote with Netanyahu on settlements or trade if he agrees to limit the growth of the Reform and Conservative movements. I'll provide a couple of examples.

The separate sections at the Kotel and the strict administration of religious observance has meant that egalitarian Judaism has not had a place nor a method to express our deep spiritual and religious relationship to the holiest site in Judaism. Many

years ago, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that we **had** to be allowed to pray under the spirit of Israel's Declaration of Independence. That meant that the police were required to erect riot barriers and to stand in between the Progressive Jews who only wanted to read from a Torah and the angry mobs of ultra-orthodox young men and women screaming at them. Sometimes the mob threw rocks, eggs and even feces. The day I prayed with them a few years back, thankfully, they only hurled plastic bottles as they insulted us. Obviously, this is untenable so we went back to the Supreme Court to sue for our rights – and we won. The government was ordered to construct, at taxpayers' expense – just as they've done for 70 years for the orthodox - a section to accompany the existing men and women's section – an egalitarian area. Netanyahu's government agreed to implement the judgment of the Supreme Court and to allocate and build a new space for Jews to pray in mixed gender.

Now, let me turn your attention to the matter of conversion. That deal that Ben Gurion brokered with the Haredim back at the founding of the State returns to haunt again. The Zionists differentiated between a legal status of Jewishness – for purposes of aliyah – and religious Jewishness. Control of the latter, they gave to the Haredim to administer. The secular Zionists decided that, for the purposes of the Right of Return they would use the same criteria that the Nuremburg Laws of Nazi Germany used: if you have at least one Jewish grandparent, you are Jewish. The Zionists figured, if you were Jewish enough for Hitler's gas chambers, then you were Jewish enough to make an immediate change in citizenship and to become a naturalized Israeli. But, the separation between civil and religious definitions of Jewish-ness today creates a problem for the young man, born here in Stamford to a mother that I converted and who is raised as a committed, knowledgeable, serious Jew who decides to make *aliyah*. He begins his life there and finds someone he wishes to marry at which point the Orthodox rabbinate tells him that he is not Jewish. They will not consider the conversion of his mother to be kosher.

In March of last year, the Reform and Conservative movements petitioned that our conversions in Israel also should be recognized. This led to the submission of a bill by the Ultra-Orthodox that would close that door and preserve all authority over conversions to themselves.

That same week, Netanyahu reneged on his promise to build that egalitarian section for us at the Kotel – he simply pulled the legislation saying he wasn't going to do it – against the opinion of 2/3 of the Israeli public.² On Sunday, he affirmed, he has no intention of moving forward with the plan and that the Supreme Court has no authority over him.³ These two moves have dangerously diminished the *Flexigidity* of Israel and the Jewish people.

While I know that this word is made up by an Israeli scholar named Gidi Grinstein it sure helps. Using copious historical proofs, Grinstein demonstrates that: "Israel's *Flexigidity* would grow if communities would be allowed to choose their own rabbis, deciding who will teach them and learn with them, serve them, determine halachah for them and be accountable to them."⁴ In his published work, he goes on to share the importance of allowing for a democratic-looking process in which Israel's Chief Rabbi would be chosen by the populace and not handed over to the ultra-orthodox to appoint. Imagine what impact it would have on Israeli society if the 85% of the country who are not Orthodox were able to vote for the rabbi they desired to decide their Jewish matters!

The upsetting irony is that today Israel is the only country in the world who has state-sponsored legislation against the right of Jews to practice their religion the way

² About two-thirds of the adult Jewish population in Israel opposes these government decisions! These are the unequivocal findings of the survey conducted by the Smith Polling Institute on June 27, 2017 among a sample of 500 respondents representing the adult Jewish population in Israel (sampling error 4.5%). This latest public opinion survey joins an ongoing, periodic series of surveys commissioned by Hiddush since its founding, which illustrate the Israeli public's opposition to the government's policies on matters of religion and state. Overwhelmingly, the public supports expanding freedom of religion and conscience in Israel, such as in the areas of right to family and marriage freedom. <http://hiddush.org/article-17123-0-Twothirds-Israelis-oppose-government-Kotel-and-Conversion-decisions.aspx>

³ Liebermann, Oren. Netanyahu bows to pressure over mixed prayer area at Western Wall. Cnn.com, 9/26/2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/06/26/middleeast/western-wall-israel-netanyahu/index.html>

⁴ P.316

they choose. Israel is the only western democracy that denies its citizens the right to marry. And who does this affect? Us: Non-Orthodox Jews who wish to work with a rabbi who understands our Jewish expressions and to have an officiant standing under the chuppah who reflects our values and our Judaism. Even AIPAC, whose charter directs its activities to be focused on domestic American policies took the almost-unprecedented step of addressing its concern with Prime Minister Netanyahu's choices.⁵ And, as a result of his proposed changes to the conversion bill, The Jewish Agency disinvited the Prime Minister from its world convention and cancelled a recent dinner for him. All the major non-Orthodox religious movements have registered their alarm and upset.^{6,7}

This past week, the Prime Minister effectively threw his hands up in the air and suggested there was going to be no solution to the conflict between the Orthodox rabbinate and the challenges of non-Orthodox Jewry – meaning “no deal”.⁸ He even went so far as to say that the Progressive Movements were using the Kotel issue as a way to “secretly gain recognition on the world stage through the back door on a technicality.”⁹

I feel betrayed by Israel, my family member. Everything I believed is being challenged. And I'm left disoriented. What do I do at this point? Walk away and tell myself “it's over and it never meant that much to me in the first place?” (Like my Uncle did to his mother) Stay in a relationship where I feel abused and under-valued because

⁵Schultz, Randy. What Israel needs from Netanyahu is a political conversation. SunSentinal.com, 7/4/2017. <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/opinion/fl-op-column-randy-schultz-netanyahu-western-wall-20170704-story.html>

⁶ Here is the Conservative Movement's statement on the Kotel: <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/conservative-jews-deplore-freeze-creating-mixed-area-prayer-space-western-wall>

⁷ And here is the Reform Movement's Condemnation of the Conversion Bill: <http://ccarnet.org/about-us/news-and-events/ccar-statement-israeli-conversion-bill/>

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⁹ Netanyahu says non-Orthodox Jews used Western Wall deal to gain recognition. Jewish Telegraphic Agency. September 19, 2017. <https://www.jta.org/2017/09/19/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/netanyahu-calls-out-non-orthodox-jews-for-using-western-wall-deal-to-gain-recognition>

of some principle about loyalty to the other? (Like my aunt did to her mother?) Or, do I dig really deep to my core to find the place in which my love for the other first budded and which remains intact? (Like my father did with his mother) The correct answer is D – “All of the Above” – To absorb and forgive some degree of abuse remaining Flexible, to set some boundaries expressing our self-respect demonstrating Rigidity and to underscore all of it with the consistency of love and commitment that we value in the important relationships in life – reaching Flexigidity.

Israel represents a lot to me. And, perhaps, in a naive way, is an idea which is poorly suited to this world. Through almost 2000 years of exile from the land itself, we never lost our relationship with the idea. We never stopped speaking of the realization of Zion on earth as a Light unto the Nations. We never ceased our relationship with *Yerushalayim shel ma'alah* – the Jerusalem that connects this world to the heavenly ideal.

Here is what I fear: We are seeing the beginning of the end of the modern state. I know that is awfully dramatic but the time for concern is certainly upon us. Israel is in danger of losing its way under leadership that is too concerned with staying in power and has forgotten what made Israel special in the first place. We all know that the security situation is dire – there is plenty to focus on there. One state or two, we're going to have more than enough to focus on without tearing ourselves apart internally. The idea that Israel is the home to the Jewish people cannot work if they alienate me with the rest of the non-orthodox world both in Israel and the diaspora. And I don't know if Israel can survive the next chapter without us.

In fact, with all this being said, I am actually optimistic – I believe in the democracy of this great nation. Recall: I wondered aloud about Bubbie's behavior? We only had her actions with which to judge her. And, with Israel, too, it is tempting to judge negatively the country's character based on these examples. But, there are other demonstrations of her principles about which we must remind ourselves. In 1997, Congregation Kamatz in Mevaseret Tzion was granted land from the government upon

which to build a Reform Synagogue for the first time¹⁰. Rabbi Meir Azari became the first non-Orthodox rabbi to receive a salary from the government, just as every Orthodox rabbi is eligible to receive - but only after 7 years of deliberation by the Supreme Court. It feels so hard right now but, as our patriarch Jacob says, working for Laban to gain Rachel's hand in marriage was a goal so meaningful, that seven years of labor "felt to him like but a few days"¹¹. This, too, is that important and we've got a lot of the story ahead of us. Anat Hoffman, one of the most important crusaders for this positive change at the Wall says, "The biggest enemy is apathy," she goes on to say, "Israel is too important to be left to just Israelis." I don't relate one bit to the argument that, "just because I don't live there, I do not get a say in how the Jewish State treats the Jews."

Israel makes me proud the world over. They are on the ground in Houston helping with recovery efforts and they were on the ground in Florida even before Hurricane Irma made landfall. They were in Mexico City within hours of the recent earthquake to help with cutting edge technology to map and search collapsed buildings. Being so far from home for these very holidays, Netanyahu recently told first responders that they were the Shining Light of Israel to the World calling them, "Kol Shofar Lamerhak" ("The Sound of the Shofar to those who are Far Off") Even the UN, who has been no friend of the small Jewish State said that "Israel's medical response team is the #1 in the world."¹² She shows beautifully, in the external world.

Our command, our *mitzvah*, is to help Israel to preserve its admirable pluralistic character *internally* – this will lead to a greater demonstration of all the values that are close to our heart. Yom Kippur is a time to renew our covenant with Israel – even with the elements we don't prefer. It is a time to forgive past transgressions committed against us and a time to redirect ourselves, even more squarely, **towards** Israel rather

¹⁰ <http://womensenews.org/2003/08/rabbi-stakes-her-claim-orthodox-stronghold/>

¹¹ Gen 29:20.

¹² Ahronheim, Anna. [Israel sends 70 Home Front Command Soldiers to MEXico in Quake aftermath](http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israel-sends-70-Home-Front-Command-Soldiers-to-Mexico-in-quake-aftermath-505727). JPost.com, 9/23/2017. <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israel-sends-70-Home-Front-Command-Soldiers-to-Mexico-in-quake-aftermath-505727>

than turning away. A few years ago, I begged you to register for and to vote with ARZA the Association of Reform Zionist of America in the elections of the World Zionist Congress. Because of you and tens of thousands of others, we have a stronger voice than ever in Israeli society. This year, and from now on, I will share with you similar efforts and I will ask you to join me in taking the time to write a letter or sign a petition or even call a congressperson from time to time. I want you to help me communicate how important Israel is to the world-wide, Non-Orthodox community. We will continue to have legitimate differences of opinions on Israel's security policies and their humanitarian matters but, we absolutely MUST remain engaged – particularly now.

As for me, I resonate with the words of the prophet Zechariah who spoke to the Asirei HaTikvah¹³ - the Prisoners of Hope – I know that there is so much more possible for Israel's future – I am a prisoner to my own hope. That is why I'm still going! - I want you to come with me next summer – on a family re-union to Israel - so I can show you what I love about her.

¹³ Zechariah 9:12.