

## Hugging and Wrestling with Israel

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It is extremely tempting not to talk about Israel at the High Holy Days. I know there is a good possibility that something I say will offend someone, and giving offence is not something I like to do at the start of these Days of Awe. My childhood rabbi was notorious for infuriating large cross sections of his congregation and particularly at the High Holy Days. I recall a friend of my parents asking, “Is Gene Lipman still rabbi at Temple Sinai? Because I’m not setting foot in that building while he’s still there.” Hopefully, you know by now that this is not the kind of rabbi I’m striving to be!

Israel is hard to avoid because today’s Torah reading connects us so deeply to that land. Tradition tells us that Mt. Moriah where Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac is actually the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. A famous midrash connects the trauma of this event to the death of Sarah, which follows at the start of the very next chapter. Abraham immediately enters into elaborate and expensive negotiations to purchase a burial place for her. The parcel of land he buys is the cave of Machpelah, located in Hevron—in other words, right smack in the middle of one of today’s major Palestinian cities. A statement unique for its detail in Genesis lays out the precise borders of the block that Abraham purchases: “So Ephron’s land in Machpelah, near Mamre—the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of that field—passed to Abraham as his possession.” Religious Zionists, who look to the Torah as authoritative proof governing contemporary politics, cite this passage repeatedly to prove that Hevron is eternally a part of the Jewish state.

Even in the Torah, life in the promised land is not simple. When Abraham negotiates with Ephron the Hittite, he opens with the declaration, “I am a resident alien among you.” He lives in the land, but is not of the land. The land of Canaan in Abraham’s time is occupied by the Canaanites, but also by the Hittites and Perizzites. As Moses prepares the Israelites to enter Canaan, he advises

them repeatedly that they will need to deal with the seven nations that already live there. Many peoples must be displaced to make room for the Israelites.

These days, the situation in Israel is exponentially more complicated. Israel is surrounded by enemies, and I don't just mean those in Hamas who are sworn to its destruction. It's increasingly difficult to hear anything positive said about the country on the international stage. Things have heated up even more in recent times with the increased popularity of the Boycott-Divest-Sanctions or BDS movement. If you haven't heard, advocates of BDS stage protests at the Israeli-owned and run Seacret skin products stall on Rundle Mall each week. They make sure to have their rallies at 6:00 on Friday evenings, when it will be most difficult for friends of Israel to counter their demonstrations. The rhetoric directed against Israel around the world is increasingly poisonous and frightening; it has come to resemble classical anti-Semitism in its virulent portrayal of blood-sucking Israelis. It is a tough time in history to be a friend of Israel.

But, in all honesty, it is also a tough time to be a friend of Israel because Israel itself is an infuriating place. Last month, Anat Hoffman, direction of the Reform movement's Religious Action Centre in Jerusalem, swept through Australia and was interviewed by many major news agencies. Again and again, she shared the story of how she was arrested for the crime of being a woman wearing a tallit and holding a Torah scroll at the western wall. She spoke of the work that Israel Religious Action Center has done to counter bus segregation, so that women will no longer be forced to board buses and ride in the back so as not to offend male sensibilities. Women are now going out of their way to sit at the front of the bus, and court orders posted in every bus in the country testify to their right to do so. But the fact that a law suit was necessary for this to happen is sobering.

*The New York Times* ran an article several weeks ago by Tel Aviv University professor Carlo Strenger with the title "Netanyahu's Friends, Democracy's Enemies." The article pointed out that Netanyahu's foreign minister Avigdor

Lieberman in no way embraces democracy as an ideal governing system. Strenger writes, “Mr. Lieberman’s open disdain for European leaders and diplomats is not a failure of diplomacy; he is a shrewd man, who first and foremost seeks to cultivate an image of a strong leader for his right-wing constituency. He believes that the West’s hegemony has come to an end, and that the future lies with autocratic governments like those ruling Russia and China. Hence he believes that Israel has no reason to pander to the West’s values. To him, liberal democracy represents weakness and he contends that Israel should evolve into a stronger state with less individual freedom.”

And then, there’s the question of whether Israel will ever be able to make peace with the Palestinians and be integrated into the Middle East. I greatly respect the views of *New York Times* writer Thomas Friedman, who recently wrote an opinion piece called “Israel: Adrift at Sea Alone.” His article opens with blunt words: “I’ve never been more worried about Israel’s future. The crumbling of key pillars of Israel’s security — the peace with Egypt, the stability of Syria and the friendship of Turkey and Jordan — coupled with the most diplomatically inept and strategically incompetent government in Israel’s history have put Israel in a very dangerous situation.”

Friedman himself quotes an article by Aluf Benn, which appeared in Israel’s *Haaretz* newspaper: “The years-long diplomatic effort to integrate Israel as an accepted neighbor in the Middle East collapsed this week, with the expulsion of the Israeli ambassadors from Ankara and Cairo, and the rushed evacuation of the embassy staff from Amman. The region is spewing out the Jewish state, which is increasingly shutting itself off behind fortified walls, under a leadership that refuses any change, movement or reform ... Netanyahu demonstrated utter passivity in the face of the dramatic changes in the region, and allowed his rivals to seize the initiative and set the agenda.” Friedman suggests that it is Israel’s unwillingness to enter into serious talks with the Palestinian Authority that have prompted Mahmoud Abbas to sidestep the Israelis and ap-

proach the United Nations directly. Meanwhile, the facts on the ground mitigate against peace more and more each day. Jewish settlements are spread out through the whole of the west bank. 80% of settlers have indicated they would be prepared to accept a monetary settlement in exchange for moving back over the green line. But that still leaves tens of thousands of Jewish radicals, armed to the teeth, who in some cases have been instructed by their so-called rabbis that any action is justified to hold on to the land--even perhaps opening fire on Israeli soldiers.

So there is much to fret about. And there is much to discuss. But one enduring question is whether it is possible for us to discuss these crucial issues with intensity but also with openness and generosity towards each other. It's not always clear that this can happen. In June of 2010 writer Peter Beinart published an explosive article in the *New York Review of Books* entitled "The Failure of the Jewish American Establishment." He opens with the story of a pollster hired to investigate why American Jewish university students were not more vigorously defending Israel. He found that all the students he met with referred to the Israelis as "them" rather than "us." There was no sense of ownership, no sense of connection.

Beinart identified as a central contributing factor that within the American Jewish world, all topics are open for frank discussion—except for Israel. He notes that many young Jews can broadly be described as having liberal values, and they therefore may be disturbed at the way that Israel deals with the Palestinians. But if they dare question the policies of the Israeli government, they are denounced as questioning Israel's right to exist. Beinart writes, "For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead." There is nothing comforting, or even particularly hopeful about Beinart's article, but that doesn't mean that it isn't important. It is, I think, an even more important piece of writing as we see

the Netanyahu government lurch increasingly away from those values we hold dear, such as freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

Several months ago, I read out sections from Beinart's article at a Friday evening service in the hopes of prompting some soul searching and heartfelt discussion. What I got instead was a ferocious argument. I made efforts to calm the anger, then just cut off the discussion entirely and moved straight back into the service. It is true that we had on hand that night quite a range of opinions in the small congregation, but knowing the personalities present in no way prepared me for the virulence of the debate. That evening prompted me to begin to think about the question of how we can disagree about Israel but still listen to each other. The events of the next couple of weeks just reinforced my resolve to address this issue.

About a week later, U.S. President Barack Obama gave a speech in which he declared that the borders of the future Palestinian state should be based on the Green Line drawn between Israel and the West Bank following the Six Day War of 1967. To read many of the Jewish responses to President Obama's remarks, you would have thought he had openly declared war on the Jewish state. Instead, he was simply making official policy out of statements that had been articulated for years by many. This was the offer made by then Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak in the failed peace negotiations with Yasser Arafat in 2000. That same understanding was echoed by Bibi Netanyahu himself in a joint statement issued with Hilary Clinton less than a year ago. Times appear to have changed. PM Netanyahu reacted with anger to President Obama's speech, and the whole Jewish world--led by the America Israel Political Action Committee--was urged to rise up in opposition.

Not long after that came some disappointing news within the Australian Jewish community itself. I was gearing up to travel to Sydney for the annual conference of Jewish learning Limmud Oz. I learned that Limmud Oz, which advertises itself as a marketplace of Jewish ideas, had uninvited two speakers

from its upcoming weekend of learning because they supported the infamous Marrickville Council's proposal to boycott Israel-made products. Once the news hit the press, the chair of Limmud Oz wrote to participants to say "We are not obliged to give expression in our program to every view held in the community." I found myself inwardly quoting Voltaire, "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it." I really should not have been at all surprised that Limmud Oz uninvited these speakers; as I've said earlier, censoring criticism of Israel has become the norm within the Jewish community.

I believe that if we are to remain connected to Israel, we need to feel comfortable pointing out that it is not perfect. We should even be permitted to express deeply-felt concerns for its future as a Jewish democracy and for the possibility of its someday living in peace with its neighbours. If we love Israel, we will by extension want it to be better than it is now. After all, we expect that of Australia. Why not of Israel, where the heart and soul of our people lie?

Years ago, I was part of an initiative in Pittsburgh called the Jewish Unity Project. A group of a dozen rabbis and lay leaders met every month to discuss how we could get along despite our deeply-held differences in belief. Privately, we referred to the group as the Jewish Tolerance Project, which was probably a lot closer to the truth. We never reached points of agreement on any significant issues, least of all the ones that mattered like who is a Jew and what constitutes a valid conversion.

But we never stopped sitting down together either, and when the project ended because we were all just too busy, I was genuinely sad. I believe the model that I learned from this effort over several years has helped me to work cooperatively with several of my colleagues at the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation. Quite simply, I appreciate that there will always be significant points of agreement. But I'm not willing to let that stop the crucial work that we do together.

Just this last weekend, I was privileged to witness an even more powerful example of deep listening and tolerance. The Abraham Institute presented a combined lecture and debate with guest speakers Ittay Flescher and Samah Sabawi. Ittay will be known to many of you, since he has twice delivered the Yitzchak Rabin memorial lecture. In fact, he's even here with us today! Samah was born in the Gaza Strip, grew up in refugee camps in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and is currently the public advocate for Australians for Palestine. As the two of them pointed out early in their first presentation, they disagree about nearly everything. Both presentations were deeply personal and heartfelt. They readily expressed their discomfort with the other's views. At points, they disagreed about what the actual facts were. But remarkably, neither lost their temper, hurled accusations, or even responded angrily to some of the more challenging questions and comments from the audience. Just as significantly, both were clearly listening when the other spoke. It was not that kind of exercise we're all familiar with, in which we listen to someone just long enough to think of what we're going to say next and then stop listening. It's extraordinary to witness two people who are actually listening to each other, even when the other's words may be quite painful.

I believe their example made me a better listener on the night. Samah spoke about the right of return, in which those Palestinians and their descendants who were exiled from Israel in 1948 and 1967 would be permitted to return to their homeland. For once, my defenses did not immediately spring into action and scream out, No! The right of return means the end of the Jewish state! Instead, I absorbed her narrative of a people deeply connected for centuries to that particular piece of land and understood the depth of their loss and longing. If anything, understanding their pain makes it even harder to arrive at a solution. I still believe that it is not too much to ask that there be one country in the world which is a Jewish state. The part of me which is a harsh realist understands that Israel has a right to exist in its current form because it won the wars

waged against it. But I can no longer minimize or wish away the human cost of the Jewish state. .

These moments of deep listening are truly transformational. But they are few and far between, and especially when we discuss Israel. If I can offer one wish for this new year, it is that each of us experience at least one moment when we are able to listen fully and be open to the possibilities that listening offer. Being open to differences when it comes to Israel is also crucial if we are to enable the next generation to remain connected to Israel. As Peter Beinart noted, our young people now look at the face of Israel, and they do not often see themselves reflected back. If they see that there is no room for their views, which may be considerably to the left of their parents, they will decide not to engage with Israel at all, and this will be a huge loss for everyone.

There is a saying: Peace will come, and let it begin with me. We cannot hope that Israel will make peace with its neighbours if we cannot even make peace amongst ourselves. We hold many and contradictory views about the best path for Israel to follow. That does not mean that any one of us loves Israel more or less because of our views. None of us can be said to hate Israel because of our views. We must begin by listening, even when it is hard. Especially when it is hard. If we can find a way together, then perhaps there is hope for the peace process after all. May the One Who makes peace in the heights of heaven make peace for all Israel soon, and let us say Amen.