

### Let's Talk About Israel

On an episode of "The Daily Show" this summer, Jon Stewart spoke about Israel. In this specific segment, Stewart informed his viewers how America was re-supplying Israel with ammunition to defend itself against Hamas. In response to this, he said, "We cannot be Israel's rehab sponsor and it's drug dealer. It's not going to work." Well, I am sure you can imagine the backlash Stewart received. To many, this was unjustified criticism of Israel. To others, it was spot on commentary. Regardless, it landed him in a cauldron of political hot water. Not one to back down from any controversy, Stewart responded to all of the clamor in his next episode.

On the show, Stewart poked fun at all the pundits and viewers who criticized his commentary. Whenever he mentioned Israel or any word connected to the Israel-Gaza confrontation, members of his own team popped up around him and drowned him out with shouts of "Self-hating Jew", "Hamas supporter", "Tradition...tradition", "Zionist pig" and much more. (Believe it or not it was comical.) The only full sentence he got in was, "There are many strong opinions on this issue and just merely mentioning Israel or questioning in any way the effectiveness or humanity of Israel's policies is not the same thing as being pro Hamas." He finally decided to simply give up since it appeared to him that no matter what he said, tempers would flare and people were bound to get upset.

I imagine some of us here have felt like Stewart at times: either discussing our views on the matter and getting attacked or deciding not to even go there because, well, what good could come from it? And to tell you the truth, this is exactly how I feel at times.

In fact, the issue of whether to talk about Israel or not during the High Holy Days is probably the single most discussed topic on the CCAR's<sup>1</sup> Facebook group page. To speak or not to speak, that is the question all of us pulpit rabbis have tried to answer.

And many people, not just rabbis, have weighed in on this dilemma. Peter Beinart, a popular political pundit and regular contributor to the *Atlantic* and columnist to Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper, wrote an op-ed piece about this issue in *Haaretz* a couple weeks ago.

He wrote, "Across America, rabbis are deciding what to say to their congregants during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I'd like to offer them a suggestion: Don't talk about Israel.

"The reason is simple: Rabbis have no comparative advantage. American Jews are inundated with commentary about Israel. They read about it in newspapers and websites. They hear about it on TV and radio. They attend lectures about it at their local

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<sup>1</sup> Central Conference of American Rabbis is the largest rabbinic organization in North America serving Reform rabbis.

universities and Jewish Community Centers. There's not much rabbis can say that the people attending High Holiday services won't have already heard. That's especially true because although American rabbis may feel deeply about the politics and foreign policy of the Jewish state, it's not their area of expertise. And by becoming B-grade pundits, they undermine their authority."<sup>2</sup>

For Beinart, rabbis should stick to talking about something they know really well--Torah, period. No good can really come from discussing Israel.

While I disagree with Beinart's point, I think he makes a rather persuasive argument. Last Kol Nidre, for instance, I spoke about the need to consider changing Israel's narrative for the sake of the younger generations who are just not connecting to Israel in the same way that the Baby Boomers have. When we talk about Israel, we can't just talk about the Palestinian situation and all of the country's international conflicts, but we must also talk about Israel's acceptance of the LGBTQ population, of it's incredible tech industry, and of it's emergency response teams that aid people of all religions and backgrounds all over the world whenever catastrophe hits.

After my sermon a few congregants came up to me with tears thanking me for saying exactly what they felt. A couple other individuals thought I had crossed the line and had given fodder to people who hold anti-Israel views and so they choose to not put themselves in a situation where I might say something about Israel that offends them. As Stewart suggested, you just can't win when it comes to Israel.

Israel is more than a "hot" topic. Whatever you say will surely upset someone.

Explaining why this is the case is a whole other discussion. But the short of it is that Israel is a vulnerable country surrounded by fanatics who want to annihilate it and after 2000 years of praying daily to return to the land of our roots, and achieving this miraculous dream, ensuring her well-being, akin to taking care of one's own child, engages the most intense emotions of Jews everywhere. Israel is not just a country to many Jews, but a piece of our DNA. It's deeply emotional and thus so are our convictions about it.

On the other hand, not everyone holds Beinart's opinion. Past president of the URJ, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, wrote an article for the Fall issue of *Reform Judaism* magazine, titled, "Muzzled by the Minority."

Yoffie, not one to back down from any issue, put it bluntly: "Truth is," he says, "North American Jews no longer know how to have a civil conversation about Israel."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Beinart, Peter. "American Rabbis, These High Holidays, Talk about Jewish Texts, Not the Jewish State - Opinion." Haaretz.com. *Haaretz*, 22 Sept. 2014. Web.

<sup>3</sup> Yoffie, Eric. "Muzzled by the Minority." *Reform Judaism* Sept. 2014: 64-71.

I think he is exactly right. I have seen this with my own eyes this summer when my Facebook feed was ablaze with comments and articles posted about the “*matzav*”, or situation in Israel. “Friends” de-friended each other if they felt offended by an article or if someone shared their views which were not in alignment with their own.

And because of this hostile environment, many rabbis have chosen silence. I suspect that many of you or your friends have determined silence to be the safest option. I mean, who here has ever heard someone say, “No political talk at the dinner table.”? Substitute “Israel” for “political” and many of us might feel the same way.

Yoffie explains how this is a new phenomenon. “Israel--the very subject that once brought Jews of divergent perspectives *together* as a community--has now become a catalyst for divisiveness.”<sup>4</sup>

What can we do, he asks, to unify us as a people once again?

I think it all comes down to healthy dialogue.

Without this, conversations about Israel will simply turn into boxing matches that go nowhere.

So how do we do this? How can we foster an environment that promotes healthy dialogue? In my experience, there are two keys to this: Having an open mind and listening.

This past year I was invited by some congregants to a memorable Living Room Learning Session. Living Room Learning, as many of you know, is a program I created last year that allows people to invite friends and neighbors to their homes where they discuss and learn about any Jewish topic that interests them. It could be on Jewish comedians, God, or mysticism. Anything goes. The whole point is to get people to connect, socialize, and engage outside of the synagogue walls. I have found that the more comfortable one is, the more he or she is willing to share and open themselves up. And when people are surrounded by their friends, they are usually more relaxed and receptive.

Esther Faber came to me months back and explained how the women’s book group had read and discussed Ari Shavit’s captivating *My Promised Land*. (Put this on your reading list!) The group’s discussion was heated and when it was time for everyone to go home, there was a feeling that people had so much more to talk about. She and others wanted to continue the discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

For all of the other Living Room Learning sessions I attend, I present a topic and facilitate a discussion. But this time was different. Esther, Belle Shalom and Linda Hirsch came to my office one day after Esther had proposed the idea and explained that they had ground rules for this particular evening. Understanding that tempers flare when talking about Israel and the Palestinians, these women suggested the following rules:

1. A person may only speak when they are holding a specific object.
2. No one else may speak or interrupt at any time.
3. A person may only speak for 3 minutes and then when the timer goes off, they must pass the object to the person next to them.
4. No one may respond to any comment another participant said.
5. Listen to others. Really hear what they have to say.

At first, I thought this was way too structured for what was designed to be a relaxing evening talking about some Jewish topic. I thought the participants would feel stifled and that it would just seem awkward having to follow such strict guidelines. (And the facilitators were strict. They enforced the rules big time.) However, I couldn't have been more wrong about how I perceived the evening was going to flow.

The 15 of us sitting in Esther's living room all experienced something very moving. We all shared our thoughts and feelings and struggles about Israel several times and that in itself was therapeutic. But even more than that, each of us got to hear how others see their relationship to Israel and feel about the current situation. We realized that while we all differ in our thoughts, deep down we all love and care about Israel and her future.

Let me bring you into Esther's living room for a moment so you can hear the variety of what was said. One person stated, "The Palestinians want us dead. Hamas wants to hurl us into the sea. It is impossible to make peace with a people who hate us. We may as well just hurl them into the sea first. We all know Israel can. It's time they do it."

And someone else took a more dovish position. "The Jews have been expelled from Israel a few times. Did Judaism become extinct either time? No. Judaism simply adapted and became stronger. Judaism does not need Israel to survive. If Israel was taken over by neighboring Arab countries, Jews all over the world would still celebrate bar mitzvahs, shabbat, Pesach, *brisses* (sp), and they would still study Torah and talmud. Judaism is not going anywhere. So, if this is the case, then, Israel ought to do whatever is necessary to make peace. If they can create a country out of the ashes of the Shoah, they can make peace."

How do you think you would react to either of these extreme points of view if you were in a normal discussion with someone? Or how about if one of your Facebook "friends" posted something like this? What if you heard someone say these words from the bima? My guess is that some of us here would feel our blood boil. Perhaps some of us would de-friend a Facebook friend, argue, storm out of the room or drop synagogue

membership. Trust me, this happens all the time over Israel. Discussed in the right environment, however, and less judging and criticizing and more listening occurs.

All of us present that evening appreciated the experience of really hearing each other speak from our hearts. Because of the formality of the session, each of us walked away with a newfound understanding of just how widespread people's opinions are. It was enlightening. At the end of the sharing time, we reflected on the experience and everyone said how fortunate they were to participate. What we realized, what I realized, was that one's opinion on Israel and her policies, does not define an individual. We are way more complex than our take on how to handle border issues and the disputed territories.

At the same time, we should never apologize for our viewpoints especially because Israel is the state and the land of the Jewish people. It's our birthright. It might be governed by it's citizens but it is ours as well. We are all stakeholders.

If one can't face someone else who holds a diametrically opposed position on Israel, both of which might be based out of a deep love for Israel, then something needs to change. And that something is the way we engage with each other. As one of the most variegated groups on the planet, we need to accept our diverse range of thoughts and even learn from them.

And so because of this profound experience that the 15 of us had a few months ago, for those interested, we are going to replicate the structure and formality of that event tomorrow afternoon during the study session following the morning service at 1:30pm. Anyone is welcome to participate. Esther, Belle, Linda and I will each facilitate a group. Most of the same rules will apply. Afterwards, I think we will feel as though the first hurdle in talking about Israel will have been accomplished. We must first get over our fear of sharing how we feel about our homeland. We ought to speak as freely about Israel as we do when we argue and discuss the Torah portion on Saturday mornings.

My hope is that congregants and others in the Bellingham community will view Beth Israel as a place--a safe place--where one can speak to another about issues that have deep and profound affects on us.

Rabbi Yoffie writes, "When congregations are at their best, members hold respectful debates, truly listen to each other, and speak personal truths without reprimanding those with whom they disagree."<sup>5</sup>

Let us honor our diversity of thought by opening our minds and hearts to insightful and thoughtful points of view that may be very different than own own. May our mission of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment hold true for us.

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<sup>5</sup> ibid.

And finally, may we all echo the wise King Solomon in asking God to give each of us a listening heart.<sup>6</sup> Amen

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<sup>6</sup> I Kings 3:9 (*lev shomea*)