



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Israel: Holding Many Truths in Our Hearts at Once

I stood in front of a camera and a microphone. I was 17 years old. I don't recall how a local news crew had found its way into our family room. We weren't outspoken about Israel, just regular Jews, active in our Reform synagogue. I had traveled to Israel the summer before, with my confirmation class, and I had come back changed – not with a tattoo or an earring, like some of my friends, but feeling closer to my Jewish identity and making plans to spend my junior year of college in Jerusalem. But now, Israel had found itself dealing with the first intifada of the late 1980's, and I found myself on the 6:00 news. If you had watched, you would have seen me with straighter hair, longer and no gray, wearing the red t-shirt with Coca Cola written in Hebrew letters that I had bought on Ben Yehudah Street. You would have seen a family allowing ourselves to become vulnerable by talking about our feelings.

We shared how much we loved Israel and supported it, that we also cared about the well-being of the Palestinians, and that we were taking in the news like everyone else, not sure what to think about the unrest or the measures being taken to control it. We felt concerned for everyone there – Jewish soldiers and civilians, Palestinian protesters and bystanders. A few hours later, we watched the 60-second segment. My family and I looked at each other, wondering who of our friends had seen it. But when the phone rang a moment later, it was a stranger, with a cold, calm voice. He said to me, "You have just been identified as an enemy of the Jewish people," and he hung up.

Our goal in agreeing to this interview was to show our community that we, as Jews, had a nuanced view of Israel. To us, nuance was the defining feature of Jewish discourse. Our texts famously ramble on like the iconic Tevye, pulling on his beard and muttering, "On the other hand," over and over. The Talmud declares, "*Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim*, These *and these* are the words of the living God." And yet, I, a proud and idealistic young member of the Jewish people, had expressed a little doubt, and I was branded as the enemy by at least one person, and maybe more.

I had my own Tevye moment. I wondered, had I spoken out of line? All I had done was say what I was thinking. On the other hand, obviously, I didn't understand the complexities of handling political unrest, or what it's like to be an Israeli. On the other hand, we can never fully understand every issue on which we have to have an opinion, but speaking out is part of our civil obligation. On the other hand, when it comes to Israel, criticism can actually be dangerous. A critique I articulate from a place of love and concern can be misappropriated by someone whose motives are much different. Through my two years of subsequently living in Israel, during college and rabbinical school, my many visits, and countless conversations with Jews and non-Jews about my people's homeland, that experience has reverberated in me ever since.

This past spring, eighteen of us from Temple Rodef Shalom traveled to Israel on a first-ever trip from TRS: not to sight-see, but to explore the many complex conflicts and struggles faced by Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs and Palestinians. It was a serious itinerary, but it was a fantastic trip. We enjoyed some great moments, like praying on a balcony overlooking the Old City, and some surprising ones, like running into Benny Gantz, Netanyahu's main competition for prime minister, as he shook hands on the

campaign trail. We also confronted a lot of tough situations head on. We toured the West Bank and met with settlers and Palestinians. We walked through a refugee camp and saw monuments erected for Palestinian children killed during protests. And we saw things that gave us hope. We toured a school in which Jewish and Arab children study together in both of their languages. We met incredible people who are working in every community and in the intersections between them, to improve life and bring about understanding. When the trip ended, every person came back moved, inspired and uplifted. Needless to say, we didn't figure it all out. If anything, we came back more confused. We did take away some valuable lessons.

Perhaps our most salient lesson became a two-word slogan on our trip: It's complicated. Traveling during election season meant that Israel's crazy political landscape was in full gear. Election posters and billboards were everywhere. I'd never seen anything like it. Our guide held up a graphic showing every political party. It looked like a kaleidoscope, and the stories were even more baffling – one party was a breakaway from another, and this one was created just for one candidate, and these two tiny parties were joining into one, and this other one had changed its name. One party may or may not be allowed to run, and another block of parties was refusing to take part. And after the election, of course, enough of these parties would have to agree to join a governing coalition. Trying to take in the details made our heads spin. As our trip continued, the complexity went deeper. First, there were disturbing truths we witnessed about what life looks like in certain isolated areas for both sides.

We went to the heart of extreme tension in the West Bank, the city of Hevron. We walked down what was once the crowded and busy main street, with the bus station, Palestinian municipal government and shops. Now, every shop is closed, and no one is there, except for a few Israeli soldiers silently keeping watch. The city center has been moved to another part of town, to protect the Jewish housing. Some Palestinians still live in their apartments over the deserted shops, but they have to enter and leave through a back door, because the street is closed to Palestinians for security reasons. A few of the Palestinian-owned apartments are now lived in by Jewish squatters, about whom the government has done nothing. Witnessing Hevron's 200,000 Palestinians, whose lives have been upended by the settlement of less than one thousand Jews, was eye-opening.

We then visited a Jewish town within Israel's borders, right next to the Gaza Strip. The town is protected from Palestinian snipers by three walls, decorated by these Jewish residents with peace murals. There were shelves piled high with spent rockets that had fallen in the town. Each shell was maybe as tall as this podium and a little too thick to wrap your hands around, and they had been made makeshift from other objects – a pipe, or a streetlamp post. Two people in the town have been killed by these rockets since Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, and one attempted terrorist attack there was thwarted by the IDF. One shudders to think of how many would have died if it had succeeded.

We were all deeply moved by the measures the community must take to live safely. All the playgrounds are specially designed. In the biggest one, the defining feature is a long, yellow and green concrete caterpillar, eight feet high, winding all throughout the play area. Inside the caterpillar is a tunnel big enough for a hundred kids to stand, or adults to crouch, and take refuge in the event of an attack. Here, children can't play outside unless they have a bomb shelter they can reach within 15 seconds. It was painful to see how these Jewish residents had to contort their lives, to protect themselves from attack, and it was moving to see a community live a vibrant life, under such dangerous conditions. They had a great falafel shop in that town. The complexity we witnessed included many competing narratives, which were hard to make sense of. In one example, we understood that Palestinian homes didn't have access to the same everyday supply of water that Israelis had. But depending on whom you asked, it was

either because of Israeli policy, or because of the Palestinian Administration's decision not to install the right equipment to access the full supply. Believe it or not, even with Israeli and Palestinian tour guides and analysts teaching us every day, we never figured that out. It's complicated. Although we couldn't go into Gaza, we learned a lot about it. We were even more confused when a Palestinian journalist attacked the current Israeli government for being *too lenient* on Gaza and its Hamas leadership. Of course, we knew about the divisions between Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, but we were still surprised to hear a Palestinian advocate a harder line from Israel.

I want to tell you there was a lot that heartened us as well. At the mixed Arab and Jewish school we toured, the students change from enemies to friends and, through their school experience they live out a direct contradiction of their lives outside. In history class, these students learn from a book with the Jewish narrative on the left, the Arab narrative of the same event on the right, and a blank space in the middle for each child to record his or her own thoughts and reactions. What a powerful mechanism to teach children about different perspectives and instill in them the ability to reconcile those perspectives.

We met with a rabbi from a settlement and a Palestinian from a neighboring village, who were part of a grassroots dialogue group. We felt the warmth in this rabbi's embrace of someone he used be afraid of, and we were awed by the courage of the young man who risked being shunned by his family to tell us how he met this rabbi, who to his community represented an enemy, invading his land, and he grew to see him as a neighbor and an ally.

We met Jews and Arabs all over the country who run organizations together, aimed at helping everyone from Bedouins to other Israeli Arabs to Ethiopian Jews. And, we were, as always, overwhelmed by the beauty of Jaffa Port, by the story of first the Jewish pioneers who established Tel Aviv and to see the new development all over Jerusalem, from riding the light rail to walking around the posh Mamilla shopping center. The more I learn about all this complexity, the more I feel like Tevye, speaking opposing truths aloud and holding them in my head and heart at once.

On one hand, it's clear to me that this conflict was not brought on by Israel alone, and it is not in Israel's ability to end it alone. We often hear the expectation that "Israel should end the occupation." While so many of us on both sides share that wish, none of the many parties to the conflict are close to doing what's necessary. For its part, the US is not helping Israel by abandoning its position as an ally to both Jews and Palestinians. With all of this, the prospects for peace are almost invisible. A lot of Israeli Jews feel it's time to move on with their lives. Many American Jews are exhausted from confronting criticism of Israel, particularly among progressives, that seems one-sided and misinformed. We wish we could move on, too.

On the other hand, there are Jews and Palestinians who believe moving on is not an option if it means giving up on peace. As I heard recently from an Israeli member of Knesset, achieving the impossible is what Zionists do, and with the right leadership, things can change more quickly than we think. To me, giving up on a negotiated solution is unacceptable. Nor is it OK to take unnecessary steps that make peace harder to achieve. While I met settlers this spring who desire peace, the geographical expansion of the settlements into new territory outside the existing settlement blocks is an increasing threat that hope. It limits the options for future borders. And how must it feel for young Palestinians to watch as Jews build homes on land that is supposed to be set aside for their future state?

Perhaps most importantly, no matter how or when peace will be possible, Israel needs leadership now, committed to making sure it is a country for all its citizens, and not just its Jewish ones, and committed

to maintaining Israel's vibrant democracy; defending free speech; and resisting calls to annex territory without giving everyone living there a vote. For us, I believe it's essential to support causes in Israel that are working to preserve the values of inclusiveness and democracy.

The Reform Movement has taken similar positions to the ones I have just articulated. You may feel differently about them. At TRS we talk about all these issues. Like Tevye, we hold many truths together at once in our community. All this complexity also means we need to be nuanced in talking about how we *feel* about Israel. On the one hand, I am distressed by some of what I see right now. On the other hand, I bristle every time I hear Jews who disagree with some Israeli policies described as "alienated" or "disconnected" from Israel. I am nothing like that. As a Jew, I want to be critically engaged in the issues *because of how much* Israel matters to me. It's a nation that has been crucial for our people's survival and has given so much to us and to the world; a state of which any people should be deeply proud; a country that on some level is ours, our gift and our responsibility; and, a country with more than one people living in it, with competing narratives that create tragic distance between good communities, and with policy challenges that make America's challenges seem easy. But as I reach into Israel's complexity, every layer brings it to a deeper place in my heart.

To offer an analogy, I don't idealize America, but I do love it. I disagree with some of its policies, but I wouldn't let anyone demonize the country. It should be the same for Israel. We and the State of Israel are not newlyweds. It's been too long for us to romanticize this nation we love; we must take a broader view, and our love must be more mature. Each problem we encounter, each injustice we witness, every heroic project of help and renewal, every ancient site and breathtaking valley or mosque or synagogue, every story of Zionist dreams fulfilled and every one about a Jewish or Arab life destroyed is part of the full, beautiful tapestry of Israel. This is why I and all of us who went there to study Israel's challenges came back uplifted and filled with a renewed, even deeper feeling of being connected to it. It's why no matter what kind of travel you are doing in Israel – sightseeing, studying or anything else, taking some time to see what's really happening in people's lives, and delving deeper into Israeli society, will always enhance your experience.

All these thoughts and feelings join in my heart and my mind. And each of you has opinions, concerns, and aspirations of your own for our people's homeland. *Eilu v'eilu, divrei elohim chayim*. These and these are the words of the living God. The Talmudic sages, who famously disagreed in their passion for Jewish law and the Jewish people, were commanded to hear one another with respect and empathy, no matter how emotional their debates became. Before any one of them gave his own opinion, he was required to generously repeat back his rival's opinion first.

Today, this careful respect is what we need. Everyone who has something constructive to say about Israel must be heard, from the teenager who just went there for the first time, to progressive Jews in America as well as conservative ones, to American non-Jews, including Palestinians. Even more important, the people in Jewish Hebron and Palestinian Hebron, in the Jewish border towns and Gaza City, in Tel Aviv and East Jerusalem, in the Bedouin villages and the kibbutzim. They all have stories to tell. We are called on to listen.

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<sup>i</sup> Talmud Er. 13b