



Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein
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When I was a little girl, I loved to visit my Uncles Harry and Nate. One of my most vivid memories of those visits is looking at their collection of Jewish books. My uncles and my grandmother came to the United States from Russia, where they suffered at the hands of local thugs who often harassed Jews. They were grateful to live in a country where it was safe to be Jewish. They were so proud to be Jews.

The book that made the strongest impression on me was a book of pictures from a place that I was only dimly aware of: Israel. What was so intriguing about this book that its pictures remain in my mind more than 60 years later? The black and white photos featured people who were blond, tanned, and muscled. They wore khaki shorts—rolled up. Their sleeves were rolled up, too, revealing muscular arms. Some of them were holding farming implements. Others were holding rifles. I had never seen Jews who looked like that!

My Uncle Nate longed to visit Israel, and he realized his dream in the early 1960s. Uncle Nate was—before I knew him—a tough guy. He enjoyed hanging out with the “Capone Brothers,” as he called them, at their summer home in Northern Wisconsin. Uncle Nate was not warm and fuzzy. But when he returned from Israel, he was in love. He gushed about everything; he marveled that even the dogs understood Hebrew! My uncles were among the millions of Jews across the world that looked with amazement, wonder, and gratitude at the founding of the State of Israel.

The writer Amos Oz describes what he saw when he was eight-year-old, on the night of November 29th, 1947—the day that the United Nations voted on the ‘Partition Plan for Palestine,’ which purposed to divide Palestine into independent Arab and Jewish states. He peered out of his bedroom window in Jerusalem as neighbors gathered outside around a radio:

Not a word was heard, not a cough or a footstep. Only the deep, rough voice of the American presenter blaring from the radio... One after another, he read out the names of the last countries on the list... United Kingdom: abstains. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: yes. United States: Yes. Uruguay: yes. Venezuela: yes. Yemen: no. Yugoslavia: abstains.

At that, the voice suddenly stopped, and an otherworldly silence descended and froze the scene, a terrified, panic-stricken silence, a silence of hundreds of people holding their breath, such as I have never heard in my life either before or after that night.

Then the thick, slightly hoarse voice came back, shaking the air as it summed up with a rough dryness brimming with excitement: Thirty-three for. Thirteen against. Ten abstentions and one country absent from the vote. The resolution is approved.

His voice was swallowed up in a roar that burst from the radio, over-flowing from the galleries in the hall at Lake Success, and after a couple more seconds of shock and disbelief, of lips parted as though in thirst and eyes wide open, our faraway street on the edge of Kerem Avraham in northern Jerusalem also roared all at once in a first terrifying shout that tore through the darkness and the building and trees...a cataclysmic shout, a shout that could shift rocks, that could freeze your blood...and the next moment the shout was replaced by roars of joy and a medley of hoarse cries and 'The Jewish People Lives'...

As Oz's father tucked him into bed after the celebration, he told young Amos:

Bullies may well bother you in the street or at school someday.... But from now on, from the moment we have our own state, you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew and because Jews are so-and-sos. No that. Never again. From tonight that's finished here.

Forever.¹

The miracle that is Israel shines: the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, high-tech advances, inventions of agricultural techniques that can make arid soil productive, and Nobel Prize winners—Israel is **the** start-up nation. Yet studies show that for many Jews in North America, Israel is not as important as it used to be.

Fifty years after 1967, an occupation that was supposed to be temporary seems permanent. In the West Bank, 2.7 million Palestinians live under Israeli military law, experiencing frequent violations of their human rights. As Jews living outside of Israel, we are discomfited by anti-Israel movements such as Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), yet unsure how to respond to its advocates.

This summer, I taught a class at Temple Rodef Shalom developed by Israel's Shalom Hartman Institute, a pluralistic center of research and education that works to enhance the quality of Jewish life in Israel and around the world.² At the first session, I asked participants to answer the questions: "What does Israel mean to me? What does Israel mean to the Jewish people? What does Israel mean to the world?" These are some of the responses:

- Homeland
- Complex
- Inspiration
- Lightning rod
- Conflict
- Pride
- Light to the world
- Work in progress
- Not welcoming to Reform Jews
- Scapegoat

¹ "A Tale of Love and Darkness," by Amos Oz, pp. 355-356; p. 359

² https://hartman.org.il/About_Us_View.asp?Cat_Id=187&Cat_Type=About&Title_Cat_Name=About%20Us

- We have a stake

This is an opportune time to ask these questions. June was the 50th anniversary of the 1967 war, in which Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria; and captured the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. November is the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, in which the British government endorsed the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In May, Israel will mark its 70th birthday. It is a time to celebrate the past and look to the future. It is a time to honor those who made Theodor Herzl's dream a reality and who fought and gave their lives to maintain it. It is a time to commend Israel's myriad accomplishments. It is a time to reflect on what we hope Israel can be.

North America is home to the largest Jewish community outside of Israel. We, therefore, have a responsibility to help shape this conversation. The State of Israel is not only the homeland of the Jewish People; it is a project of the Jewish People. When Rabbi David Hartman, the founder of the Hartman Institute, was asked why he made Aliyah in the 1970s, he replied: "Because Israel is too important to be left to the Israelis."³ Rabbi Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, believes that we need a new framework for our relationship with Israel,

The Jewish community is not in need of an Israel advocacy campaign of facts and figures alone but also of a new Jewish narrative based on Jewish ideas and values for engaging Israel in a way that will help integrate Israel into a modern Jewish identity.⁴

Our new framework must be based on Jewish values. The State of Israel is where Jewish values meet the road and where these values encounter the reality of governing. The most important of these Jewish values is our belief in the dignity of every human being. The dignity of human beings is grounded in the Torah. The human being who is created "in the image of God"⁵ does not belong to a particular ethnic or religious group. He is a member of the human race. This core belief in the inherent value of all human life winds its way through Jewish tradition, as we see in this example from the Mishnah:

Therefore, man was created singly to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul [of Israel] is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and whoever saves one soul [of Israel] is considered by Scripture to have sustained the entire world. The [the creation of but one man was] for the sake of peace among God's creations, so that no man may say to his fellow, 'my father was greater than your father' and to demonstrate the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed-be-He, for if a human being mints several coins from a single mold, they all resemble one another, yet the King, the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed-be-He, mints every human being on the mold of primal

³ "Israel's Responsibility for World Jewry: Reflections on Debate about the Conversion Law," in *A Heart of Many Rooms*, by David Hartman, 2002 Jewish Lights Publishing.

⁴ https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=463&Cat_Id=273&Cat_Type=

⁵ Genesis 1:27

Adam, yet none resembles his fellow. Accordingly, each person is obligated to say, 'on my account, the world was created.'⁶

This powerful teaching, which dates from the 2nd century of the Common Era, describes three basic principles that form the foundation of how we are to treat our fellow human beings:⁷ A single human being has absolute value, human beings are fundamentally equal, and human beings are as varied as they are numerous.

These values of human dignity are consistent with those expressed in Israel's Declaration of Independence:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL... will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture...⁸

Of course, to live these values in a 21st-century democracy situated in a dangerous neighborhood is complicated, messy, and often unruly. For over 2,000 years, we were a people without power, subject to the whims of others. Of these long years, Rabbi David Hartman wrote, "[We] did not have to deal with those agonizing moral questions that confront a nation that has military and political power."

The State of Israel, with the help of all of us, must address some challenging questions:

- "What are the requirements of the morality of war, and how can Israel use its power in a way that is consistent with the highest standards of Jewish morality and values?"
- How does Israel balance its legitimate right of self-defense with the rights of others?
- Can a Jewish state be reconciled with the values of Jewish pluralism and freedom?"⁹
- How can Israel ensure the rights of the 25% of her citizens that are minorities?
- How can Israel foster religious pluralism?

It's up to us to stay engaged so that we can help to answer these questions.

We can learn about and support the work of the Reform movement in Israel, and its social justice arm, the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), which works, through advocacy and through the Israeli court system, "to advance pluralism in Israeli society and to defend the freedoms of conscience, faith and religion." IRAC has been working since 1987

- To secure unequivocal state recognition, funding, and equal status for Reform and Conservative rabbis, synagogues, and institutions.
- Oppose gender segregation and the exclusion of women from the public sphere.

⁶ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

⁷ "Human Rights and Membership Rights in the Jewish Tradition," from *Judaism and the Challenges of Modern Life*, by Moshe Halbertal. Continuum Books, 2009.

⁸ <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/declaration%20of%20establishment%20of%20state%20of%20israel.aspx>

⁹ https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=463&Cat_Id=273&Cat_Type=

- Combat racist incitement, particularly by public and religious figures who use Jewish sources to incite racist actions and intolerance.¹⁰

We can participate in the variety of programs and study opportunities related to Israel, such as those offered through our innovative Beit Midrash, that will be offered at TRS this year. We can get to know our very own Israeli, Hadar Golon, who is TRS' Israeli emissary, or *shlichah*. Hadar, who was the first female Israeli soldier to serve in a tank brigade, will be teaching both adults and children in our Religious School. We can travel to Israel; Rabbi Schwartzman and Cantor Shochet will be leading our own TRS trip to Israel this spring. We can stay informed about Israel. Our TRS website has a wonderful collection of resources about Israel, compiled by our member Pam Konde.¹¹ Most of all, we can develop a mature and nuanced relationship with Israel. Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld writes:

What captured my imagination about Israel in my youth and has claimed my heart ever since — was not the promise of redemption but the drama of human connection and aspiration. I have always been drawn not to the perfection of heavenly Jerusalem but to the vitality of earthly Jerusalem — to the messy over the messianic.

Ahavat Yisrael (love of Israel) is not about a loyalty oath to the State of Israel. History has taught us the danger of such oaths. Our love cannot be built on a brittle ideological branch that will break the minute it encounters the reality of a complex country that is both beautiful and burdened by trauma and pain. Our relationship must be more supple and subtle than that.”¹²

Israel's national anthem, *Hativah*, means—literally—“the hope.” It speaks of the longing in the Jewish soul, over two millennia, to be a free people in our own land. What are our hopes for this beautiful and burdened place? It is our responsibility and our blessing to engage in the sacred work of answering this question.

Amein

¹⁰ <http://www.irac.org/mission.aspx>

¹¹ <https://www.templerodefshalom.org/israelresources/>

¹² <http://forward.com/shma-now/ahava/374587/messy-over-messianic/>