

Yom Kippur 5782

This past summer I went to therapy.

My mom, who was a therapist, taught me that when you are struggling with something that's important to you, when you feel pain or worry and can't fall asleep at night or concentrate on your work during the day – it's good to talk to someone. A non-judgmental listener who can help you understand your emotions, clarify your options and work on effective solutions.

So, with my mom's wisdom whispering in my ear, I went to therapy. **Israel Therapy!**

Yes, this is a real thing! – In the wake of Israel's war with Gaza this past May, a Reform Temple, and the Jewish publication The Forward, sponsored online group therapy sessions for people seeking help sorting through their complicated feelings about our beloved Jewish State; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and the commitment to social justice that sits at the center of the Judaism we practice.

This isn't the first time I've had these feelings but somehow the events this past spring that led to rockets and bombings and protests left me more anxious, more conflicted, more confused and in search of more people who shared my distress.

Over 500 people attended the opening session. The discussion swung all over the place - from love of Israel to criticism of Israel, from anti-Semitism and racism to apartheid and white supremacy, to debates about colonialization and boycotts – all in the first half hour! That so many issues arose during our initial conversation demonstrates that we are living in a uniquely convergent moment where Israel has become a symbol for everything with which we American, religiously progressive, justice-oriented Jews struggle.

It was tempting to spend time stating facts and clarifying definitions, it was tempting to recount terrorist attacks or list the Palestinian policies or decisions that have thwarted the peace process. But therapy is mostly about emotions and so our guides tried to steer us toward exploring our feelings – feeling about our relationship with our homeland. This too was difficult because, more than ever before, when it comes to discussions about Israel, people seem to be judged based on their feelings. Maybe you have experienced this as I have. In some circles,

sharing my angst over Israel throws me out of the group; in others my passion for Israel does the same. It seems that feelings have become a litmus test for who can and who cannot offer legitimate comments about the *situation* – or as they say in Israel – the *matzav*.

During our second session of therapy, our analysts shared the experience of a college student named Ariel. Her story resonated with me and may resonate with some of you too. In May during the war with Gaza, Ariel attended an impromptu gathering on her New York campus. Many of her Hillel friends stood together holding ‘support Israel’ signs and others that said, ‘ Hamas equals Terrorism.’ Not far away were groups, including other friends, who held signs that said, ‘Palestinians deserve full human rights’ and ‘Israel equals apartheid.’ And both sides chanted slogan, some for peace and some for justice.

Ariel shared how torn she felt - caught between two core parts of her identity. She is a Reform Jew raised with a deep commitment to social justice. And - the land and people of Israel are central to who she is. Ariel shared that she wanted to stand in the middle of it all – affirming the truths in each camp. Picking only one side seemed disingenuous. She, like I, sought a place to unload this burdensome, emotional struggle.

I searched for Ariel’s name in the chat so that I could write to her or invite her to connect after the session. But I couldn’t find it; so, let me tell you what I wanted to tell her.

Ariel, thank you for courageously sharing your struggle. Like you, I have an unwavering bond with Israel. My love of Israel does not contradict or override my commitment to human rights, including the Palestinians’ right to self-determination and statehood.

Everyone likes to say, “It’s complicated.” Ariel, It is complicated, but surely as you already know, Judaism is a complex tradition and our job as Jews is to deal with complexities. Signs, slogans, tee shirts and buttons are inadequately simplistic. Reject them. Don’t let anyone tell you it is either-or, with us-against us, Zionist-Anti-Zionist. These binaries are false and even impede moving forward toward an Israel we all dream about.

Ariel, stay right there where you can convene a conversation and, as uncomfortable as it is, embrace the mess of conflicting emotions, resist embedding yourself in only one side. This doesn’t mean letting go of your own strong and clear opinions. This doesn’t mean accepting the status quo either. From the middle you can reach out to others who may intentionally linger on

the edge of their group perhaps looking for people like you. From the middle you have a sightline on truths in many camps. Keep your eye on those truths because if we demonize one side, we miss the humanity of both. And if we assert the pure right of one side, we miss the responsibility of both.ⁱⁱ Speak from a place that rejects false binaries but listens to multiple narratives and histories. This is the best place to build relationships that will move the needle toward a shared vision of peace. Ariel, I'm rooting for you; for all of us who, from a place of great love for Israel and all humanity, feel torn and conflicted and sad and worried and eager to figure out how to do more.

Perhaps not everyone in my therapy group would have agreed with my advice to Ariel. I know not everyone in this congregation would agree with my advice to her either. As the Jewish community certainly does, we, the Rodef Shalom family, span the spectrum of beliefs about Israel and Zionism and our relationship to both.

That spectrum is complicated. To better understand it, I have looked to Donniel Hartman, an American born, Israeli rabbi and philosopher who captures this diversity of opinion through a helpful lens. I've learned a great deal from him and am excited that he will be participating in our upcoming 3-part program on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October. Hartman speaks about Jewish peoples' relationship to Israel through two continuums: one from uncommitted to committed, the other from untroubled to troubled.

You can imagine a variety of combinations of these views. Over here, we have the 'troubled-committed' – who are distressed by some of Israel's actions but remain supportive. Then there are the 'troubled-uncommitted' – who are similarly distressed and have withdrawn their support. Then there are the 'untroubled-uncommitted' - who have no appreciation for the need for a Jewish state at all, and certainly have no sympathy for Israel and its challenges. Finally, we have the 'untroubled-committed' – those who feel Israel's actions are essentially always justified by threats or security concerns and support Israel without question or anguish.

By now you know that I align with the 'troubled-committed' group, as I think many of us here do. Israel is integral to my Jewish identity. I'm committed to the cause. I care about the people who live there, their well-being. Yet I also dream of something more. I am troubled by

the functional inequities between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens. I'm troubled by the occupation that has lasted over 50 years and its resultant injustices and tragic suffering, for which Israel bears a share of responsibility. Committed and troubled - I can hold these two truths at once and I will, as I try to bring us closer to the Israel of our hopes and dreams.

As an Israeli, I imagine that Hartman is most concerned about the 'untroubled-committed.' It seems that more and more Israelis have landed in this camp. I know plenty of these people. Israelis who spent years engaged in the peace effort – who supported Oslo, who lived through intifadas, sent their children to the army, lived through terrorist attacks and wars. They are tired and no longer see a light at the end of the tunnel. They have accepted quiet where they once worked for real peace. Hartman is speaking most critically to this group, who must reengage if there is any hope for future peace.

For me the category of most concern is the 'troubled-uncommitted.' Many of these people are American Jews. Their connection to Israel is loosening. We see their commitment waning. They are no longer willing to invest emotional and spiritual energy defending not only the State of Israel but also the legitimacy of a Jewish homeland. I wonder if they have focused so much on Israel as a cause that they have lost touch with it as a place – a land that lives and breathes the Jewish story – and a nation of people who deserve to live safe, normal lives. We think we can bring them back by explaining to them Israel's side of the story, but they feel it's time to move on, not to rehash old pointing of fingers. They will only be satisfied with a solution that brings justice to the Palestinians. This is where we must meet them, and join them, and at the same time show them that they need not abandon their love for or dedication to our Jewish homeland.

During my sessions in Israel Therapy, I worked through my feelings about and relationship to all of these groups. As I mentioned earlier there are members of each within our Temple. While I strive to wrap my arms around our entire Jewish family, respecting and loving our diversity, I also strive to keep us all tethered to the inspirational and indispensable experiment called the Zionist project. I want to repair the fraying cord of the 'uncommitted.' Caring about Israel does not require us to accept everything it does. I want to help the

'untroubled' see that demanding social justice from our Jewish state, is not only within the bounds of our tradition but critical to our future.

My mother also taught me that therapy can only be effective if we bring our whole honest selves to the conversation. My Jewish self is not complete without Israel. The Jewish narrative, that lives within me, within us, began in that land – first as a tribe, and later as a kingdom. And then, for the past 2000 years, we were homeless and powerless – which didn't go very well for us – and I'm not keen to return to those times. While the fragile security of Jews worldwide is a dimension of my support of Israel, my Zionism is not a geo-political statement – it is so much more!

- **My Zionism is a commitment to a Judaism that is made more dynamic through its connection with and life in its homeland.** Even for those of us who don't live there, the stories of the family home are part of our story. We return to them to remember who we are. They ground us as we continue to grow.
- **My Zionism brings our moral obligations, rooted in our tradition, to that homeland.** In Exodus we are commanded – one law for citizen and stranger alike. In Genesis we learn – we are all created equally in God's image. Deuteronomy asserts tzedek, tzedek - we must double down on our efforts towards justice.
- **My Zionism believes that the State of Israel is legitimate, the occupation is not.** I believe that the Palestinian rejection of peace and the refusal to accept a Jewish State is a primary reason that Israel is still occupying the territories. And Israel cannot end the occupation on its own. The way forward, however, requires a change on both sides. We, as Jews, must work to move our own side. And while we struggle to end that occupation, we must bring equity to the Palestinians who live there.
- **My Zionism strives to build up my people, not knock them down.** While I have many misgivings about Israeli policy and politics, just as I do about those in America, I have none about Americans or about Israelis. All Israelis – from the untroubled to the troubled, deserve the respect of being recognized as citizens of the world and

not condemned for the state they live in or the conflict in which they find themselves endlessly embroiled.

- **My Zionism does not allow the complexity of Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians to be an excuse for moral ambiguity**, nor does it allow the absence of a peace-partner to be justification for unjust actions. Morality in the Torah is not selective. Danger does not excuse brutality, and ethical imperatives cannot be ignored just because they are hard. The whole conflict is not Israel’s fault, but making compromises and taking risks to end it will always be Israel’s responsibility, because our tradition teaches us to be Rodef Shalom – pursuers of peace! Moreover, our tradition teaches us that we are not obligated to finish the task, but we are also not free to desist from it.
- **My Zionism is aspirational. It is not an end in and of itself. Rather it is an opportunity to model justice, a distinctly Jewish justice, on the world’s stage.**ⁱⁱⁱ aiming for a place of peace and justice in which Jews and non-Jews can live together, that allows for Judaism to flourish alongside the traditions of others who live there. We are a long way from that place, but we cannot lose sight of the real vision of Zionism.

Israel is burdened and beautiful. It is scrappy and smart. It is messy and messianic. It is a place of possibility and pain. It contains our history and our hope. It will take determination by us all to move from the Israel-that-is to the Israel-about-which-we-dream. In the meantime, I and I hope all of us, will remain troubled yet always committed.

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ⁱ Sponsored by the Temple Emanu-El Streicker Center

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Jill Maderer, Opinion piece in the Philadelphia Inquirer “My Empathy for Palestinians does not diminish my devotion to Judaism.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Daniel Zemel, Response to ‘Rabbinical and Cantorial Students Appeal to the Heart of the Jewish Community’ from an elder colleague. Ejewishphilanthropy.com July 20, 2021