

## **A Conversation About Israel**

Rosh Hashanah 5784 - Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe

The month my family spent in Israel this summer was LOUD. Beyond the Saturday night protests we have all been talking about, any time we walked down the city street, we were likely to hear a voice through a bullhorn shouting, “Democratia!”

One afternoon, my family was buying spicy pickles at the Jerusalem open-air market called Machaneh Yehudah when I heard some quieter words, this time in real Hebrew, “Excuse me, do you have a few minutes?” I turned and saw three Israeli young adults, two women and one man, looking at me. The question took me a second to process – not just because of the language, but who expects three young Israelis to approach an obviously American Jew *wanting* to have a conversation? I was pretty excited. I wanted to say, “I thought you’d never ask,” but all I managed was, “*Ken, Yes.*” One of the women continued, asking me what I knew about Yehudah v’Shomron, or Judea and Samaria, otherwise known as the West Bank. What, the man asked, did I think should be done with the land and its Palestinian residents? Suddenly, I was no longer so excited about this conversation. They can’t really want me to answer these questions for *them*! I looked briefly for an exit. Should I use my family as an excuse? But I chose to face it.

The exchange did turn out to be pretty uncomfortable. The three students were doing research. Two of them listened to me respectfully and wrote in their notebooks. But, when I said I hoped there would be a Palestinian state, the third, in very Israeli fashion, could not help arguing with me. And when they suggested annexing the area and offering limited rights to Palestinians, the debate continued for a minute or two. The two students then shushed up their friend, thanked me, and they left.

This encounter affected me. I couldn’t help feeling, perhaps naively, surprised that all three of these young Israelis seemed to see my vision of two states as unrealistic or even unfair. I also felt vulnerable, exposed, like I had offended them. But they had asked for my opinion. Although it didn’t feel good, I decided it felt right. I have a place in this conversation, even if they don’t like what I have to say and even if I don’t like their reaction.

One of the prophets of the High Holy Days sticks out for facing this dilemma of an unwelcome conversation. As we will read on Yom Kippur, God commands Jonah to speak to the people of Nineveh, and he does everything he can to get out of it. He boards a ship at Jaffa and tries to flee, only to be thrown into the sea, swallowed by a great fish, and then spit back out on dry land to fulfill his mission. Today, I have chosen to see that moment at *Machaneh Yehudah* as my Jonah moment, my impetus to take up with you the bewildering and painful conversation happening right now within the Jewish people: the one out about the State of Israel. The lessons Jonah learned during his difficult but transformative journey might help us as well. We learn that just as Jonah had to go to Nineveh, there is no substitute for going to Israel or finding other ways to engage deeply with it. We learn that we cannot hide from this difficult conversation. And we learn that even if we have challenging words to say – and I believe we should – we have to say them with love.

Jonah couldn't just stay at home and post a Facebook update. He had to travel to deliver his message. God commands him, go, *Lech*, the same word used to send Abraham on his journey to the land of Israel. Jonah has to walk a full day through the great city of Nineveh, and we wonder whom he encounters, who offers him a place to rest, who stops *him* to ask an awkward and challenging question? How does this experience bring him into a relationship with the Ninevites?

For me, too, that powerful experience of talking with Israelis didn't happen in America. To tell the truth, it's hard to have a relationship with Israel in America. The distance can transform that place into an idea, and the way it is talked about here can turn that multi-dimensional country into a barely-scratch-the-surface news segment. I hadn't been to Israel throughout the pandemic, and as the democracy protests continued through the spring, I worried I wouldn't connect in the same ways I always had. Israel felt to me like a sum of opposing parts, and I would now have to figure out where I stand. I was also bringing my kids to Israel for the first time and wanted to help them connect. I wanted them to see the Israel I love and also some of the complexities and even the not-so-flattering aspects of reality there. At the airport, I pulled up a map and started talking to them. "These were the borders in 1948, and then this is what changed." Then I looked up and saw my wife Jaimee smiling at me. Then I looked over and noticed that all three kids had completely zoned out. Three days later, after

watching footvolley on the Tel Aviv beach – that’s volleyball with no hands – after negotiating prices for bucket hats in the Carmel Market and reading the street signs in Hebrew, they said, Dad, we get it!

We did try to learn as a family about the deep challenges Israel and the Palestinians face. We met Arab Israelis, toured Jerusalem with a Palestinian guide, and discussed Israel’s democratic challenges on some of our many walks. We also swam in the Sea of Galilee and joined the Saturday night crowd of 300 for Israeli dancing in Nahariya’s main square. Being there changed everything, permeating the snapshot we can see from home and reminding us that the conflict we hear about all the time is one important and incomplete part of what happens every day in a living and breathing country. The Jewish community tries to bring Israel here through celebrations and programs, but going there is the only way to experience this place where being Jewish *isn’t* different, where the buses stop running on Shabbat whether you are observing it or not, where challah and rugelach are sold in every bakery. To feel the deep history of the land where our ancestors built the temple and, in modern times, reinvented a language and created a home for what is now half the Jewish people. To go there is to experience a modern country amid ancient ruins. It is to stand at the religious and cultural center of Jewish communities all over the world.

It is also to witness the thick and unresolved tension between two peoples with legitimate claims to the same land and to understand that we are one of those peoples. To sense the reality of the Jewish teaching, *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*, the entire Jewish people are responsible for one another. Israel has been a refuge for Jews throughout its history and has played a key role in the survival and flourishing of our people. American Jewry has always been there for Israel, and that comes with a shared responsibility for everything that happens there. We can best fulfill this role if we make an effort to *Lech*, to go, to take that full day’s journey, and even if we cannot travel there, we must go there in different ways. Reading poetry from Yehudah Amichai and watching “S’rugim,” the comedy series about modern orthodox young couples. Giving to causes that resonate with us, including ones that build relationships across divisions and work toward equity and healing. TRS has a Reform sister congregation in Israel, which we frequently meet virtually and visit when we go. Some of our members work with peace-building organizations there, and some with environmental ones. Our Israel committee works hard to support a robust conversation about

Israel in our congregation and also bring us closer to it. We are Jews, and we can't just talk about Israel from the outside. We need to take ownership of that relationship.

I learned something else from the three Israelis who approached me for that conversation: I couldn't hide in the crowds of the market or anywhere else. Jonah, of course, learns this quickly when he runs away and ends up in the belly of the fish. As American Jews, the desire to hide when Israel comes up can be intense. Certain segments of the diaspora have always spoken out. But there is acute pressure within the American Jewish community that if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. Now, though, countless steadfast defenders of Israel are changing that paradigm. To cite just one example, former ADL chief Abe Foxman said recently, "I never thought I would reach the point that I would say my support for Israel is conditional."<sup>i</sup> These leaders are sending the message that there are Israeli government actions we will not accept. And there is a reason they are speaking out now.

Israel is at a tipping point. Violence by Jewish settlers against Palestinians is condoned by the highest authorities. The current far-right government's policies have threatened the rights of everyone from Palestinians to women, non-orthodox Jews, and the LGBTQ community in ways we have never seen before. But it is even bigger than that. Another stalwart Israel defender, Daniel Gordis, has called the current democracy crisis "not just one more Israeli debate over policy, but a struggle over the fundamental identity of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state."<sup>ii</sup>

Israel's democracy is a little crazy. The way the Knesset, or parliament, works, small parties are almost always the lynchpins of governing coalitions, giving them alarming leverage over the larger parties. These small parties can push the Knesset into decisions the country doesn't support. Small factions hijack the big parties in America, too, and we have witnessed threats to our own democracy. But we are comparatively lucky. Israel has none of the checks and balances we take for granted in America: no second legislative body to offset the first, no independent executive, no constitution. Israeli democracy hangs by a thread based on whoever controls a majority of seats in the Knesset. The only check on this power is the Supreme Court. That balance has held surprisingly well over the last 75 years. But it's very fragile. The Knesset has the power to

take away the court's authority with a simple majority vote, something no Knesset ever would have considered before. But now, the coalition is pursuing plans to weaken both the court's independence and authority. If this happens, Israel may essentially no longer be a democracy. The deep worry among many in the country is that at that point, this coalition or a future one could roll back minority and women's rights, annex the territories, and more, and no one would be able to stop them.<sup>iii</sup>

If you're like me, listening to this, you are overwhelmed. The good news is there is a lot of hope. The Israeli majority, who have been protesting over this since January, are incredibly strong, organized, and outraged. So far, there is just enough hesitation among the coalition to keep them from going through with their plan. If there is any population that can turn a situation like this one around, it's the Israeli public. But it won't be easy. That is why we need to come out of hiding and take our place in this conversation. I am also guessing that, at this point, some of you are not only overwhelmed but also uncomfortable. You may disagree with something I've said. If that's true for you, that is fine. I believe everyone in this room cares about Israel and everyone living there, and there is room for disagreement.

You might also be concerned that criticism of Israel invites antisemitism and boosts those who deny Israel's legitimacy. I'm sure many of you share that objection, and to that point, I will add that I agree. There is no doubt that antisemitism is still a danger. Words we express with every hope of helping Israel will be misused and twisted. But with the current government, not being counted as standing against their extreme actions and words would be worse. And saving Israel is worth the risk.

Let's return to the end of the Jonah story for an insight into how we might bring a criticism like this. Jonah has warned Nineveh and sits far off in the shade, waiting to see the great city overthrown. But the Ninevites repent! God forgives them. Now, Jonah, setting himself apart as the Bible's lousiest prophet, is angry with this outcome. He wanted to see his curse fulfilled! This is when God teaches us the most important lesson of the Book of Jonah: that criticism must be given as a blessing and not a curse. Especially when a harsh word of warning is needed to bring one back from the edge, it must be offered as a lifeline and not a threat. Even though Jonah meant his words to inflict pain, God meant

them for good. This text challenges us both to recognize when this is needed and to remember that the commandment in Leviticus to rebuke your neighbor comes just one verse before, paired inextricably with the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Criticism and disagreement must be conducted with love. By fostering and deepening our relationship with Israel, we take a place in the conversation that comes from caring. By acknowledging all sides and their humanity, we model the sensitivity that is needed to raise the level of the discussion. By being part of one of the countless efforts and organizations to help Palestinians, help Jews, build something, and be part of a positive vision, we earn the credibility to say our piece.

On our last Saturday night in Israel, my family attended a demonstration at the Prime Minister's residence. It was awesome – thousands of people, blue and white flags everywhere. As we bought T-shirts, someone asked where we were from and thanked us for showing up. The mood was somber but with a measure of joy. Organizers took turns at the microphone speaking their truths, putting hopes and dreams into words. When I contemplate what it means to stand with Israel, this is the image I see. That night, we felt what it really means to stand with Israel – not with a government or a one-dimensional idea, but with a vision of a just, open, and strong Israel with a promising and peaceful future. We were standing with others in Israel who share that vision. As Jews, as members of a people numbering 16 million with two vibrant centers, this is our responsibility: to go, to connect, reach out and strengthen our relationship, to love our neighbors, all of them, as ourselves; to be seen and heard in important conversations, and to stand for the Israel we want to see.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-723901>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/diaspora-jews-time-to-take-a-stand/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/israels-judges-to-hear-cases-on-their-own-fate-as-bitter-overhaul-of-judiciary-reaches-courts>