

Ideals In Tension: Our Love for Israel in Trying Times

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During my first year in rabbinic school in Jerusalem, we had the opportunity to meet with many dignitaries and notables. One day we were sitting in a stuffy classroom under dull florescent lighting to hear from a special speaker: Simcha Dinitz. At the time he ran the Jewish Agency—the powerful non-profit that supports Israel and global Jewry. But he was best known as the Israeli Ambassador to the US during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, ensuring that military support flowed to the beleaguered nation at a critical moment.

After his presentation he opened up for questions. With the brashness and chutzpah of an idealistic but benignly naïve young adult, I posed a challenge that had troubled me: *Could Israel truly be both a Jewish State and a Democracy?* These things seemed to me somewhat mutually exclusive. How could Israel be both a nation that extended special regard and privileges for Jews, and a democracy offering broad rights to all as enshrined in the US Constitution?

There was a pregnant pause as I saw annoyance grow into anger and then into a kind of rage. He barked at me that the premise of my question was faulty, and that it was patently obvious that Israel always had and always would successfully integrate these two seemingly exclusive ideals. I was chastened by his tone but disappointed in his response and its neglect of the difficulty in reconciling two competing principles.

We all know that real life does not present us with the clean binaries of clear answers to perplexing questions. Most dilemmas that we confront are a spectrum of subtle grays and nuanced judgment calls. Struggling with this tension is a sign of emotional and intellectual maturity. Only children, and the childish amongst us, are satisfied with simple answers to complex questions.

Some of us simply ignore the struggle, hiding behind delusions of certainty or the extremes of absolutes. Others embrace juicy rationalizations which reveal more about us than the problems we face. Still others somehow live in the uncomfortable limbo of cognitive dissonance, knowing that our actions don't reflect our ideals, yet finding a way to fool even ourselves.

Often when our values stand in conflict, we strive to exert some self-control toward consistency-- overcoming the forces of habit, the temptations to excuse, and the surety of self-justification. But when the stakes are the highest—as with the life and death decisions that affect those we love in circles of care and community—we must draw upon a discipline that shapes not merely our behavior but reaffirms the morality that is at the core of our identity.

The American Jewish community is in an unprecedented time of pain and fear—division and disillusionment. In some ways we share this time of anxiety and uncertainty with all of our fellow citizens. Yet we seem to be at a unique point of tension between self-interest and sensitivity to the needs of others—between a

guarded retreat inward and a reaching out to those whose suffering compels us. This moment cleaves our community along ideological and generational lines. And most urgently, it ruptures our long-standing consensus on our bond with Israel—between what Israel is and what we think it should be—between who we are and who we aspire to be.

The course of the War with Hamas has pitted our devotion to Israel's security and survival against our growing horror at the costs in human lives and loss. Core values that our tradition holds sacred contend for our souls: Ahavat Yisrael/Love for Israel and B'tzelem Elohim—an awareness that all are created in God's image.

The current situation in Gaza is an outgrowth of Israel's defensive war against Hamas. It is a response to Hamas' vicious pogrom in Israel almost two years ago. In the first year of the conflict, Israel fought a just war in a just manner. Culpability for the inevitable loss of innocent life in Gaza fell squarely on Hamas. Hamas burrowed in tunnels beneath their own vulnerable people to ratchet up the body count as a weapon of war against Israel. And Hamas continues to torture and starve the Israeli hostages that remain alive.

But through this last year, the justifications for war and the reasons to extend it have changed. More than 600 former Israeli military and security leaders have penned a letter to President Trump pleading for his intervention to stop the war. They conclude that two of Israel's military objectives have been secured: Hamas has been dismantled as a military force and governing body. And it no longer poses a strategic threat to the Jewish State. But the third objective—bringing all the hostages home—can only be achieved through a deal for a cease-fire.

This army of experts has been joined by almost one million Israelis who have taken to the streets to protest the war, the government, and the dangerous descent of their country. And so, a just war fought justly has devolved into a grinding campaign of attrition—a forever war with no end in sight and no plan for the day after.

But the most painful and gaping hole in our hearts--the return of the hostages—has fallen by the wayside. *And for what?* It seems only to prop up the political survival of an extremist government and the personal freedom from prosecution of the Prime Minister.

And let us not forget the hundreds of young IDF soldiers who have perished giving the last full measure of their devotion. Those who return home physically maimed or psychically damaged and driven to suicide. And the thousands now required to extend their service, risk their lives, and sacrifice their livelihoods for a conflict that should have been resolved long ago.

The looming specter of famine and disease in Gaza has deepened the affliction of our collective conscience. Much of the misery can, again, be laid squarely on Hamas' continuing victimization of their own people. Much stems

from the incompetence of international groups. But woefully, the Israeli government's siege of Gaza--withholding food as a military strategy--has also turned an untenable and nightmarish scenario into a humanitarian catastrophe.

And that humanitarian catastrophe has been exploited by those who have for decades sought to demonize Israel as founded in original sin. There has been much debate about how to designate what Israel is currently doing in Gaza. Is it a case of war crimes—the inevitable consequence of prolonged fighting by young and exhausted soldiers? Is it a case of crimes against humanity, an excessive and unnecessary inflicting of violence on a civilian population?

But by far the most insidious indictment against Israel is that of genocide. Most of those who wield it do so in the full knowledge that they are engaging in a kind of *genocide inversion*—using a term that emerged from our victimization during the Holocaust against us.

The need to bring Nazi perpetrators to justice was charted at Nuremberg and spawned a whole field of international law. Much of that code was crafted by Jewish attorneys Raphael Lemkin and Hersh Lauterpacht, whose families were slaughtered by the Nazi regime. Thus, to call Israelis Nazis and their response to October 7th genocide is often less about facts and merits and more about stigmatizing Israelis and Jews with the most heinous of charges imaginable. It is as much about inflicting psychic damage on Jews as it is about delegitimizing Israel and those who support it.

A few Israeli human rights groups, literary laureates, and historians have conceded that what is happening in Gaza *does* qualify as genocide. I think they are wrong, and I don't believe that there can be an honest assessment of this concept in the current charged environment.

Despite my contempt for the current Israeli government--and despite the bombastic statements of ultra-nationalists--I don't believe that Israel's leaders intend to commit genocide—intention being a key criterion for the label. But the wholesale destruction of Gaza and increasingly wanton loss of life has crossed a heart-breaking line. The devastation subverts the IDF's sacrosanct value of *tohar neshek*—a purity of arms—a criteria for conflict, rooted in our tradition, that has distinguished Israel in its prosecution of war since its inception.

In so many ways, the wrangling over definitions and designations is beside the point. Despite the ill intentions and ulterior motives of those who seek to defame Israel—and despite Israel's just and necessary response to the atrocities of October 7th—and despite the exploitation by Hamas and the hypocrisy of Western nations—*all of these do not relieve Israel of its moral responsibilities and legal obligations*. Israel can, should, and must always strive to rise above the provocations and pathology of its enemies. If we are truly to be an *or l'goyim*—a light unto the nations—we must not seek rationalizations in the sins of our enemies. Rather, we must continue to hold ourselves to the highest standards of our people and our God.

I am profoundly sensitive to those in Israel who remain traumatized by October 7th. Many have understandably given in to passions and fear. And there are many that see Israel as less an expression of Jewish values than a refuge for the survival of our people. But at a certain point, if the ultimate goal is to merely exist for its own sake devoid of the principles that invest purpose and significance into that existence, *then what are we? Who are we?*

I'm reminded of an Aesop-like tale from the Talmud about Rabbi Akiva. When the Roman empire decreed that Torah study would be punishable by death, a student approached the great sage and asked why he would risk his life to teach Torah. Akiva responded with a parable about a fox on a riverside speaking to some stressed out fish concerned about the fishing nets that awaited them around the river's bend. The fox asked the fish if they wanted to leave the water and ride his back to avoid the fishermen, obviously hoping to dupe them for an easy meal. The fish responded that the fox wasn't as clever as reputed. Though their situation was risky, staying in the water was their only sure way of life. So too with the study of Torah and embrace of values, Rabbi Akiva taught. If we abandon those values to the Roman threat, then in many ways, it's as if we are already dead.

It's a bit of a Catch 22. Israel—and all of us--must survive to sustain our values for the next generation. And yet without our values at the core of our beliefs and deeds, *what are we really sustaining?* Israel has secured its survival for the moment. In some ways, it is safer now than it was before October 7th after the trouncing of Hezbollah, the fall of Syria, and the defanging of Iran. But compromising those values by needlessly extending violence and trauma in Gaza in the pursuit of petty politics is a betrayal of all that the modern state was founded upon, and all that God's original promise was premised upon.

One of the most inspiring and compelling expressions of our values emerges from the Torah's account of Sodom and Gomorrah. God decides to destroy these two communities for their many sins, chief amongst them a criminal lack of hospitality. But Abraham's nephew Lot and his family—singularly good and righteous people--live in the town and are undeserving of this fate. God brings Abraham into his confidence in light of these connections and his newly elevated role.

Abraham responds to God's decree with bravery and integrity, exhibiting a faith founded upon reason rather than obedience. He challenges God with great determination and chutzpah: "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You!" And then the kicker: "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?*"

In many ways, Abraham is testing a God in whom he has invested more than his trust. He has bound his very life to God's vision. And God taught him that *Mishpat*/Justice is a foundational principle of this new faith. Abraham believes this so deeply that he insists that it's *even incumbent upon God* to follow these precepts. The rabbis go even further, teaching that Abraham is

concerned with more than just acts of injustice. He warns God about reflecting even the appearance of injustice in the eyes of the other nations. One commentator even drew from the grammar of the verse Abraham's concern that God would be accused of inflicting collective punishment.

If in our tradition, even God must abide by the foundational principles of our people, how much more so are we mere humans obligated to so. And how *much, much* more so should the Jewish State live by these precepts as the global embodiment of Torah and the God who revealed it.

I have dedicated my life to Israel and the Zionist cause. I carried pushkas and collected quarters as a child for the Jewish National Fund. I've led multiple trips for hundreds of congregants and cherished the year I lived in Jerusalem. And over these trying last 2 years, I've advocated, and educated, and fought in the larger civic space for Israel's right to exist and to defend itself. I am proud to have joined with so many of you in enduring the slings and arrows of outrageous attacks on our beloved homeland while standing up to the rise of antisemitism, masking hatred for Jews in the guise of contempt for the Jewish State.

But I've reached a breaking point and an agonizing realization. It is perhaps one of the most difficult I've ever navigated. It pits my enduring support for Israel's well-being against the values and principles—the ideals and the tenets of our faith and tradition. And while this moment will never diminish my love for Israel and its people, I can no longer stand by as the object of my pride devolves into a pariah state.

I am loath to offer any public criticism of Israel at a time in which legitimate concerns can be twisted to give aid and comfort to those who exploit this moment to achieve their ultimate goal of a world without Israel—and for many—for far too many—a world without Jews.

But I can no longer allow my sensitivity to public perception of Israel to undermine my commitment to the principles of justice and peace---my commitment to the need for a vigorous defense of our people AND a respect for the sanctity of the lives of innocent Palestinians—and my commitment to vigilance against enemies AND an openness to reconciliation that offers hope for the future. These are the values that have defined our faith as Jews. These are the values that have forged the Western morality that has defined our world. And it is incumbent upon all of us to live in that gray and uncomfortable, yet critical space of holding multiple beliefs together in our hearts.

An image I shared with you years ago, but one that powerfully resonates in the current moment. In 2005, I traveled with the leadership of Temple and St. Mark's Cathedral on an interfaith trip to Israel. We had access to an amazing array of current and future leaders, both in Israel and in the Palestinian territories. As we returned on the bus from Ramallah in the West Bank to Jerusalem, we were stopped at a checkpoint. A young Israeli woman no older than

18 and no taller than 5 feet entered the bus to check us through. The M-16 slung over her shoulder was as long as she was tall, its muzzle nearly dragging on the floor. But on her helmet, a bandana read the verse from the prophet Zechariah: “Lo v’chayil, v’lo v’choach ki im b’ruchi amar Adonai...Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit says Adonai.”

Was this a paradox--merely a performative gesture of a soldier to ease her guilt? Or was it a pursuit of a more perfect union—a response to hard realities AND a striving for higher values—an acceptance of the world as it is AND a longing for the world as it could be.

I imagine she is like so many of our young adults, wrestling with a love for our people and the lessons of our tradition—the cornerstones of our faith and identity that often seem in conflict. It is a perplexing challenge and a daunting task to find some resolution. But it is in the wilderness of such sacred tension that we eventually reach the promised land of reflection, reconciliation, and return. We must never cease from pursuing this path. We must never shrink from the calls of soul and conscience. We must never surrender the struggle that makes us more than human and a little less than divine. Amen.