

If You Will It, It Is No Dream

Rosh Hashanah 2017

Shana Tova.

Leonard Fein was an American activist and teacher who founded both Moment Magazine and Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger. As if that wasn't enough, he was also a great story-teller.

Mr. Fein readily admitted to making up [this very true story](#) about, as he tells it, a group of Jews from Minsk, or possibly Pinsk, in 1860...or 1861. The gist of the story is that a group of old Jewish men would get together every week to shoot the breeze. They enjoyed daydreaming about what it would be like to move to Eretz Yisrael: how they would create a society; what they would do to earn a living; and what Jerusalem might look like.

These relatively sophisticated men once invited a non-Jewish acquaintance to join them for their evening shmooze. Before he left, they hesitatingly asked him if he would tell them what his kind thought of their kind. Their guest was quick to answer: "You people are alright, but you think you're morally superior to the rest of us."

To their credit, the group of Jews didn't try to deny it, only to explain where their feeling came from. One man spoke up in response, "It's very late, so we can't give you the whole history of our sense of moral superiority. We'll explain it instead by way of a metaphor: We do indeed think we are your moral betters," he said, "and the reason we do, is that we don't hunt. You people hunt, and we don't hunt, and that makes us better than you."

Their guest laughed at them, and then stormed: "You silly, trivial people; of course you don't hunt! We don't permit you to own guns!"

It's easy to feel morally superior when it's your *only* means of dominance. It is one thing to sit in Minsk (or Pinsk) and complain about the way things are run - when you're not permitted to run things. It's a can't-lose proposition - either things go well for you, or they don't and you get to feel justified in your grievances.

Abraham Lincoln said, "nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." From the moment of our first exile, the Jewish people have been haunted - not by our own successes or

failures, but by the specter of what could have been. For nearly 2,000 years, our default action has been to *kvetch*, always saying, “We would have done better if we had been in charge.” But what happens when we’ve lost that perceived moral high ground - because we’re now running the show? Once we have it all - land, money, weapons, and influence - can we still claim to live by the values that we held so dear *before* we came into power?

Some say that American democracy is the greatest social experiment - and that might be true in the secular world. But from the Jewish perspective, **nothing** has been more experimental than the modern State of Israel. For two thousand years we were persecuted, forced to live under often-hostile governments, and barely tolerated - but at least we knew who we were. Now that we are self-governing - owners, such as it is, of a sovereign state - we face challenges that we could not have even imagined 70 years ago. The State of Israel is, by far, the most extraordinary Jewish accomplishment of the past 2,000 years, and its mere fact has changed the existential condition of being Jewish everywhere¹. And we don’t always know what to do with our newfound identity as masters of our own destiny.

¹ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israelis-dont-care-that-youre-insulted-an-open-letter-to-american-jews/>

While many of us were born into a world where a Jewish State is a foregone conclusion, 70 years is just a grain of sand on the beach of time. Even the United States of America, an established nation more than three times as old as Israel, continues to go through its own process of self-discovery. So it should come as no surprise that Israel is still figuring out who it wants to be as a nation-state.

In an article² about a complex Israel-related situation, Dr. Yakir Englander wrote about a conversation he had with an ultra-Orthodox rabbi. That rabbi said, “The ultra-Orthodox community is perfect for raising children, but at the same time, it is a bad place to raise adults.” He explained that the ultra-Orthodox world has answers for all of life’s questions - everything in it is painted either black or white - which works well for children who need clear boundaries to feel safe. But healthy, well-adjusted adults need a space where they can ask questions without receiving immediate answers - where they can explore and discover. Sometimes they will make mistakes, but these risks will also create new possibilities.

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<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/an-adult-jewish-identity-reflections-on-raising-a-palestinian-flag-in-a-jewish-summer-you-th-camp/>

In many ways, the American Jewish community has moved from a childish space to an adult space in its relationship with the State of Israel - where once there was only the black-or-white “with” Israel or “against” it, there is now room for gray. On a national scale, this most often plays out in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; witness the growing anxiety among families who thought they had raised proud Zionists - but whose children are now marching in protest at Israel events. Even as they find their children’s views misguided, they are still willing to give them the love and respect to speak their minds.

However, that shift toward allowing American Jews to publically criticize Israel has brought with it tremendous fear within our mainstream institutions that we are opening the door for non-Jews to do the same. All that is to say that the bond between Jews around the world - particularly in this country - and the Jewish State has never been black and white - but these days, it feels even more fragile and nuanced than it has in the past.

Judaism offers a beautiful framework through which we can examine our relationship with the State of Israel. Every morning when we begin davening, before we say Birkot HaShachar, we spend a few minutes

contemplating God as the Eternal Source of Life - who returns our souls to us and readys our bodies to begin prayer. The last thing we say before our morning blessings is a daily affirmation, a continual reminder; **ואהבת לרעך כמוך**, *v'ahavta l'ray'echa kamocho* - “love your neighbor as yourself.”

But what does that mean?

Understanding this phrase requires us to go back to where the verse first appears. In the very center of the Torah, in the middle of the book of *Vayikera* (Leviticus), we find what is called “The Holiness Code.” This is “the very core of what it means to live a life in the shiny rays of the Divine, a life worthy of our relationship with God.”³ And it is here that we find the command to love your neighbor as yourself. The verse right before this command tells us how we should fulfill this commandment: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of them.”

This juxtaposition is worth unpacking a little bit. In the course of two sentences, the Torah encourages us not to hate our brother, to offer rebuke when it is needed, and to love our neighbor. The stark progression - from hating to loving - requires rebuke to bridge the two extremes.

³ Rabbi Ita Paskind

Without love, a rebuke is often hurtful - criticism with no intent to improve the recipient tends to be more malicious than effective. But in the context of a deep, fulfilling relationship, that same critique serves a different purpose. It is only from the security of shared history, mutual respect, and unwavering love that critique can have a meaningful impact.

On a personal note, I have a deep love and respect for Israel. Although at the moment, my relationship with the country is strained and my respect doesn't feel particularly reciprocated, my affection for, and defense of, the country is unwavering - and it is from that place that I share my gentle rebuke.

When the founding fathers of the State of Israel were putting the finishing touches on Israel's Declaration of Independence⁴, a draft of the wording was brought forth to the Moetzet HaAm, the People's Council, for a vote. There were two issues hotly debated before settling on the final wording - and they are the two issues that continue to plague the Jewish state today: borders and the role of religion.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_Declaration_of_Independence

The religious question was over the inclusion of God in the text. The draft of the Declaration included the words, “and place our trust in the Almighty”. The rabbis around the table strongly argued for its inclusion, while the secular Zionists vehemently opposed it. The compromise is that the phrase “Tzur Yisrael” - “Rock of Israel” - was used - since it could be interpreted either as referring to God or to the Land of Israel. David Ben-Gurion said, “Each of us, in his own way, believes in the ‘Rock of Israel’ as he conceives it.” This result still didn’t make the secular Zionists happy, but the vote passed.

Compromise worked in that moment, but minds weren’t changed and ideological entrenchments weren’t lessened.

Each nation has its foundational mythology, built and continually rebuilt upon concepts that those in power often wish would remain buried. In America, we are perpetually haunted by the roles that race and religion played in the formation of our country - and by how those continue to impact the lives of so many, even today.

6,000 miles away, Israel continues to struggle with those same topics - race and religion - but in very different ways. It has been said that if we ever stop fighting our Arab neighbors, we’ll fight each other. We appear to have

decided these endeavors are not mutually exclusive. For decades, the Kotel has been both the subject and the site of one example of this infighting - in an all-too public fashion. Progressive, egalitarian Jews have fought for the opportunity to pray with equal access at this holy location - and have been continually embarrassed by the Israeli government, even as the rest of the world watched.

And then, almost 2 years ago, the Israeli government accepted a deal that would create a third area at the main Kotel plaza - one set aside for mixed-gender, egalitarian prayer. Instead of separating from our family members as we approached the Wall, you and I would finally be able to express our Judaism in Israel just as we do here - together.⁵ Those of us to whom this matters were excited - it seemed more than we could have hoped for! As it turns out - it was. This past June, Prime Minister Netanyahu caved to pressure from the ultra-Orthodox parties in his coalition and reneged on the deal. In the process, he deeply damaged his own relationship - and his country's - with Jews around the world.

“Furious” would not be too strong a word to describe how many of us feel; nor would “betrayed,” or “angry,” or any number of more vitriolic emotions. But we still felt a certain ambivalence - after all, it's Israel, and

⁵ From Ita's KN sermon 2017

we love Israel. But while the Torah teaches us not to hate our brother, this surely does not feel like the time to love him. This is where we need to employ the *tochecha*, the gentle but necessary rebuke. Netanyahu has always seen himself as both the leader of the State of Israel and the ambassador of world Jewry - our representative to the rest of the world. Although he's had his ups and downs, he earned himself a measure of respect with the Kotel deal in 2016, and progressive Jews thought we would finally have a place in Israel. Now, it appears that the ambassador only represents the parts of world Jewry that prove politically convenient for his own ends.

As one of our own politicians would say: Sad!

Another flashpoint, growing in recent years, has been the issue of who is a Jew. Just three months ago, the Knesset passed the Conversion Bill, a law proposed by the right-wing Orthodox parties, that will grant the Chief Rabbinate total authority over Jewish conversions in Israel. The law would make all conversions outside of the Chief Rabbinate's supervision unrecognized - which of course, has consequences for all changes in personal status and impacts people worldwide.

Like the Kotel situation, international Jews sprung into action, petitioning the Israeli Supreme Court to prevent passage of the bill. The response was

strong and swift -- and Netanyahu found himself once again between his political backers, the ultra-Orthodox, and everyone else. He managed to get both the petition and the bill tabled for six months... a deadline which is rapidly approaching.

It is easy to direct our anger at Netanyahu. And at the Rabbinat of Israel-- because when in doubt, always be angry at the Rabbanut, *especially* if you're a non-Orthodox rabbi. But the truth is, I'm angry at the complacency of Israelis who don't seem to care about our hurt. Daniel Gordis wrote a passionate letter in The Times of Israel this summer. It was titled, "Israelis don't Care that You're Insulted: An Open Letter to American Jews."⁶ In it, he eloquently laid out an argument on why we don't have any skin in the game on the Israeli-Palestinian issue and thus won't have any impact, but why we DO have tremendous influence on the issues of the religious nature of the state and Peoplehood. He wrote:

The issue is whether the State of Israel will stand for the notion that there are a variety of ways in which Jews define Jewishness. Haredim do not want to consider people converted by Reform rabbis Jewish? They don't want those converts marrying their children? That's their

⁶ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israelis-dont-care-that-youre-insulted-an-open-letter-to-american-jews/>

right. They don't want to pray at the part of the Kotel where women and men worship together? Also their right. But that's not the issue. The issue is whether you will fight for the principle that you, too, should matter in this country, because you are a part of the Jewish people.

We have been “betrayed, taken for granted, and sacrificed for political expediency,” and we should do something about it. Gordis continued, “Your righteous indignation will get you nowhere. Israelis don't care that you're insulted. They don't even care that you're angry. They will care if your indignation affects them.”

So I say to you: let's make it affect them.

In a book called, “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty” Albert Hirschman wrote that it is natural for entities - from corporations to countries - to experience rises and falls in success over time. Those in management positions learn of the decline in one of two ways - either customers stop buying products and walk away, or they take their dissatisfaction directly to management.

In the first scenario, the leadership is kept guessing as to how to improve. Hirschman says that when there is an option to walk away, most people will do that. But the second scenario is the one from which change is born. When constituents take the time, in spite of their anger, frustration, hurt, and disappointment, to express both their loyalty *and* their needs, the entity is given a chance to turn things around.

To this point: some rabbis have decided to cancel congregational trips to Israel, effectively removing their tourism money from the country's economy. Others plan to stop donating to Israeli organizations. "Hit 'em where it hurts," the saying goes. But that speaks to Hirschman's first scenario, and I'm not sure it's the best answer..

The ideal answer is to find a way to express our passion, our outrage... and our deep commitment to Israel.

Next week, on Kol Nidre night, you'll find a card with your name on it for Israel Bonds. Every year at this time, Jews around the world invest millions of dollars in the Israeli government. I come from a long line of Israel Bonds purchasers. My grandparents were honored by Israel Bonds for their lifetime commitment of supporting the State of Israel - and I was proud to be the keynote speaker at that celebration, especially since those same Israel

Bonds helped pay for my college education. For years, I've looked forward to doing the same thing for my children, as a means of supporting both their future and that of the Jewish homeland. But now I'm not so sure.

If you're happy with the actions of the Israeli government; if you'd like to continue supporting the State of Israel in ways that demonstrate that you're fine with the status quo, then please take your card and donate. In fact, let me urge you to donate more; this is a scary time in a scary world and Israel could use all the support you're willing to give.

But if you're not happy with the message that sends, please don't pull your money! Instead, take the same amount of money - or maybe even double - and invest it in the parts of Israel's society that support our collective Zionist dream. Donate to the Masorti movement, the Conservative movement's representation in Israel, which is virtually unsupported by the State, and for which we'll be collecting donations next week as well. Or support another organization which is working to fulfill your values in Israel⁷. Daniel Gordis points out that American Jewish donations represent

⁷ **The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC)** fights discrimination against non-Orthodox Jews in Israel by working to ensure the recognition of conversions and access to the Kotel, and is launching an important new anti-racism initiative. **Tag Meir** responds to hate crimes. When farms were targeted in the Arab village of Wadi Fuchin, Tag Meir organized residents of neighboring Jewish towns to help clear up the greenhouses, replant olive trees, and assist in submitting a formal complaint to the police.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel advocates for equal rights. They are protesting discriminatory legislation to help Palestinians in East Jerusalem gain equal access to public education.

5% of Israel's GDP - let's make sure that money supports people and causes that are consistent with who we are.

On the other hand, one of the benefits of Israel Bonds is that it is actually an investment - and that you (or someone you love) will see that money again in the future. If the idea of supporting Israel while garnering a return is what speaks to you, then consider using those funds to buy stock in an Israeli company. If you're willing to take a risk, consider investing in a fledgling Israeli company; start-up database AngelList shows more than 2,500 companies that are based in Israel⁸, and MassChallenge, a Boston-based start-up competition and incubator, has an Israeli cohort with some very exciting companies⁹.

Let's stop giving blindly to the government that is effectively saying, "we don't want *yom* - but we'll happily take your money." While boycotting our homeland entirely would send a heck of a message - it is also dangerous, irresponsible, and most of all, self-defeating. Withdrawing all of our support from Israel takes us away from the table, effectively cutting us out

Sikkuy works to create a more equitable society. The organization led the charge to pass a government resolution that ensured equal allocation of funding for Jewish and Arab municipalities and committed major funding to address barriers to economic development within Israel's Arab communities.

ZAZIM-Community Action puts progressive issues on the public agenda. In 2016, Zazim mobilized tens of thousands of Israelis to take grassroots action against segregation in maternity wards.

⁸ [https://angel.co/companies?locations\[\]=1649-Israel](https://angel.co/companies?locations[]=1649-Israel)

⁹ <http://israel.masschallenge.org/mc-startups>

of a conversation that we're desperately trying to enter. The impact of changing where we send our money but still supporting Israeli causes sends a more productive, powerful message: we believe in your potential. We have unconditional love for you. But we will *not* continue to support your poor choices.

Before you think that you got the short end of the stick, let me assure you that you are far from the only congregation hearing their rabbis criticize Israel during these holidays. Jewish communal leaders around the country are fed up and furious; every rabbinic colleague with whom I've discussed sermons this year is sharing a similar message with his or her congregation. And it's not just rabbis who are speaking out - when the Rabbanut published a blacklist of 160 Diaspora rabbis no longer considered rabbis in Israel, Steven Nasatir, the head of Chicago's Jewish Federation, responded with his own list of Members of the Knesset no longer welcome in the Jewish community of Chicago¹⁰.

For years we've been saying that Israel is held to a different standard. We see this over and over again at the UN, on college campuses, and at

¹⁰ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/mks-backing-conversion-bill-not-welcome-in-chicago-jewish-leader-warns/>

political rallies. In truth, Jews outside Israel have always held the country to a different standard as well; it's just been a *different* different standard. We are invested in the government, the land, and the country; we see our values at play, although not always in the ways we would like to see them. We feel personally and deeply hurt when Netanyahu's government announces a new settlement - outwardly angry at the NY Times for reporting it, but internally seething that there was a story to report at all.

“We would have done better if we had been in charge,” we think. We dream about a Zionism that accepts us for who we are as Jews; a homeland that is as innovative in its expression of Judaism as it is in the fields of technology, medicine, and agriculture. We long for an Israel that stands as a light unto the nations - a model for how a religiously-based nation state can enable and empower an observant lifestyle while living in the modern world. We fantasize about a time when Israeli society will show non-Orthodox Jews the same empathy and compassion it grants to people in need all around the globe.

As Theodore Herzl said, “אם תרצו, אין זו אגדה”, “If you will it, it is no dream.” We can't just dream about the kind of Zionism, Judaism, and operational ideology that we want to see in Israel. We have to put our money where our mouths are and make it a reality.

Would we do better if we were in charge? I don't know. But Israel's government is not currently demonstrating a capacity to fulfill the Zionist dream. It is up to us - every one of us who loves Israel, who binds our personal future to its destiny, and who looks with longing towards Jerusalem - to hold them accountable for bringing this dream to fruition. As Rabbi Tarfon taught, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world]... but you are not free to ignore it either" (Pirkei Avot 2:16). It's up to us to participate, influence, and stand true to our values.

May this year bring blessings of peace, security, inclusivity, and genuine openness to the differences that make us stronger.

Shana Tova.