

# Israel: Our Challenges Our Family

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Almost everyone who visits Israel for the first time, experiences a glow and sense of joy, of walking in the footsteps of history, of experiencing the biblical themes in real time. Almost every Jew who visits Israel for the first time, experiences a sense of home. “These are my people, this is my land” they will say. I’ve seen it over and over and I love sharing that feeling, like sharing my home and family with people I love. It is such a gift to experience that newfound wonder.

Almost everyone experiences it. But not everyone.

Recently, a dear friend made his first visit to Israel along with his family. I eagerly awaited the opportunity to hear about his experiences, to see that glow. I was disappointed. While he certainly experienced the wonder of walking Jewish history, feeling intimately the Divine Presence, exploring the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem as our ancestors did, seeing the marvels of a modern, booming state whose technological innovations are helping to spur the global economy – while he certainly experienced all that, my insightful friend also saw behind the veil of a tourist. He saw some of the social and political problems which are dragging down the limitless future. He saw some of the divisions in Israeli society which threaten the state as surely as do terrorist weapons. He saw an Israel not presented in the travel brochures, more real and more challenging. And we need to see it, too.

I am always reluctant to criticize or call out the difficulties in Israel, because I start from a place of love. I love Israel. I love the land, I love the history, I love the people. My goodness, I proposed to Ida Rae in Israel – how couldn’t I love it! My family is deeply ingrained in the modern history of Israel, most of my extended family lives there and I am an unabashed Zionist. I believe in the cause of a Jewish homeland, the normalization of the Jewish people. Thanks to Israel, we are no longer itinerant wanderers; no matter where we chose to live. Since only the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, we Jews have a homeland. It is family.

But nothing is perfect. And just as we might privately criticize parents or siblings, (you know you do!), in public we are protective of our family members and their honor. As many a newlywed has learned the hard way: I can complain about my mother, but don’t you dare!

But sometimes, because of someone or someplace we love, we have to speak with honesty.

Throughout Israel’s modern history, it has faced a harsh enemy on her borders and beyond who daily threaten her extermination. This threat has only intensified. For 20 years Israel has been warning the world about Iran’s relentless pursuit of nuclear weapons. Coupled with Iranian leaders’ consistent threats to wipe the ‘Zionist Entity’ off the map, Israel is justifiably nervous. It is the very definition of an existential threat – nuclear armed missiles aimed at Tel Aviv do not even have to be fired to be highly

effective. And, of course, the even greater and highly realistic threat that Iran would give a nuclear device to one of its proxy terrorist entities; Hezbollah and Hamas are only the most obvious ones, creating enough ambiguity about the source that Iran could claim innocence. Israel and America agree strongly on the nature of this threat which is real for both parties. Israel and America differ in size and proximity to Iran, and it is not surprising that there are differences in strategy about how to proceed. As New Jersey born Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren told a group of us rabbis in a recent conference call,

Israel's relationship with the United States is vast, multi-faceted, and deep. We agree on most things. Even when we disagree, we disagree as friends. President Obama continues to spend more time speaking with the Israeli Prime Minister than with any other head of state.

The President reiterated these themes in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly this morning.

But, even with Israel's real external threats, which grab the headlines, it is in many ways the internal issues that are most troubling. These are the areas which can cause some of us living outside to grow disenchanted with Israel. But I believe they are the reasons to be more engaged, not less. Because we love Israel we can help make it stronger. These problems are in three related issues: Religion, Gender and the Exercise of Power.

#### RELIGION

Israel's founding was a compromise between the secular Zionists and the religious Jews of Europe. Especially after the Holocaust wiped out the heart of traditional Orthodox study, a grand bargain was constructed, ceding religious authority in the land, including life-cycle ceremonies, to the ultra-Orthodox rabbinic councils while retaining all other powers of state to the secular.

That grand bargain is coming undone.

Thirteen years ago, then Prime Minister Ehud Barak appointed a special committee to deal with one of the most visible issues of this separation – the special exemption from military service granted to ultra-Orthodox Jews, and to Arabs. All secular and moderate religious Jews serve in the Israeli Defense Forces. None of the ultra-Orthodox do, unless they volunteer. This has caused an increasing rift in Israel society as the shared burden of Israeli life is carried by only one segment. Increasingly it has become clear that the exemption cannot stand and in February of this year, on a petition from the Supreme Court, the High Court of Justice ruled that the law is unconstitutional. The Israeli government is right at this moment considering the challenging details of how to incorporate thousands of ultra-Orthodox and Arab recruits into the army.

This is a ripping change in Israeli society and no one knows how it will play out. However, it has exposed the rift between the growing religious minority and the more established secular society. The old norms are changing.

#### GENDER

The clash with the Ultra-Orthodox minority is being felt most profoundly in the role of women in public and religious life. Although secular Israeli society is very gender neutral, with full opportunities for women's advancement, Israeli religious society is not. The Israeli military, for example, was one of the world's first to be integrated – but a woman still cannot read from the Torah at the Western Wall. In fact, Anat Hoffman, leader of the group “Women of the Wall” was arrested by Israeli police, fined and issued a restraining order, just for holding a Torah scroll at the most holy site for all of Judaism. Horrifically this past December a case of discrimination against women was highlighted as a group of Ultra-Orthodox men lined up to spit at a girl they perceived as dressing immodestly. That girl, Naama Margolese, was 8 years old – the child of American immigrants, and is Orthodox herself. The case riveted Israeli society and has exposed the simmering tensions of a liberal egalitarian society and a rigidly separated religious society.

Here again, progress is being made. The efforts of groups like “Women of the Wall” are remarkably leading directly to modifications of the tiny Women's section of the Western Wall. The Supreme Court just issued a ruling requiring state planning authorities to examine plans to expand the women's section as part of ongoing construction in the area. This is highly controversial but a sign that the old status quo is breaking down.

#### USE OF POWER

Israel's image of itself is as a small country overwhelmed by the size and might of its hostile neighbors. And while this is surely true, it is also true that, with America's help, Israel has maintained a formidable military advantage and has grown accustomed to power. For 45 years Israel has been an occupying force in the West Bank. A unilateral withdrawal from occupying Gaza led not to peace but to continued rocket fire by a terrorist government on civilian populations. In response, Israel continues to control the borders of Gaza to restrict the flow of arms. This has become especially important with the collapse of Egyptian control in Sinai. But all of this continues to enforce Israel's military world-view. For all of Israel's modern existence while it has grown stronger, it has tried to encourage partners in peace. It was successful in Egypt, it was successful in Jordan. It has been completely unsuccessful in the West Bank and Gaza, and the remainder of the Muslim world. In every official way, Israel declares a readiness to negotiate a peace based on the principle of “two states for two people.” But this moment shows no hope for progress in the near future. Meanwhile, the Palestinian people suffer from the failures of its own leadership and an Israeli society which turns its eyes away from the brutality of the status quo.

This collapse of the peace process has begun to infect Israeli society with a deep-seated xenophobia. Over this past summer, this showed in public fears and lack of compassion for the fate of African refugees who have found their way into Israel. It is showing it with a deep division which has solidified between Israeli Jews and Arabs. This was horrifically seen just a month ago when scores of Israeli teens in Jerusalem's modern Zion Square were caught up in the beating of randomly picked Palestinian youth. Hundreds watched the scene, but no one intervened. It is clear that the subjects were selected and the attack tolerated by the crowd only because the victims were Arabs. Some of the Jewish attackers were as young as 13. That so much anger and hatred can be in the heart of a Bar Mitzvah age child has caused much soul-searching in Israeli society.

## THERE IS HOPE

This has been a difficult summer in Israel, as long-held tensions, fears and divisions have boiled to the center. These are divisions along the fault lines of religion, gender and power, held with a backdrop of a grave existential threat and the increased probability of war – a war which could affect Israel’s heartland in ways it has not seen in decades. This is the tension that my friend felt in his first encounter with Israel.

But it is not the whole story. Israel has confronted serious challenges in the past and has survived and thrived. Israel is a remarkable place and that is part of the story, too. Even in the most modern terms, during a worldwide economic crisis, the Israel miracle is continuing. A strong growth rate and one of the lowest unemployment rates in its history shows the Israeli economy humming. Tiny Israel is #3 on the Nasdaq, after China and America. Remarkably, with all its internal and existential problems, Israel is rated in world surveys as one of the happiest countries on the planet. Tourism, another sign of economic health and the accurate perception of Israel as a safe and exciting place to visit, has been exceptional. 2011 had the highest rate of tourism in Israeli history; it was exceeded in 2012 by 27%. Israel has strong relations with China, India and with the former Soviet bloc. And peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt continue, despite the grave unrest in the Arab world.

And there are signs that the Israeli people are anxious for change. In a survey released just today by Hiddush – Freedom of Religion for Israel, the vast majority of Israelis – 71% - view the struggle between the secular and the Ultra-Orthodox as “the most acute conflict within Israeli society.” 64 % of the public, including 56% of religious Jews, support making segregation of women in the public domain a criminal offence. Reform Rabbi Uri Regev, President of Hiddush wrote about this, the fourth annual ‘Religion and State Index’, which is the largest ongoing public opinion study on matters of religion and state in Israel:

Once again, the Index reveals the unacceptable gap between the positions of the public which desires freedom of religion and equality in shouldering civic burdens, and the government coalition’s positions, which avoid any confrontation with the ultra-Orthodox parties. The public wants equal military service for all, the implementation of core curricular studies, civil marriage, public transportation on Shabbat, a decrease in subsidies for yeshiva students, and action against public discrimination of women.

## OUR ROLE

In a few months’ time, Ida Rae and I will be leading a group of our Temple members to Israel. We will be there in time to celebrate Israel’s 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary. For some, it will be their first trip there – and I will love to see the wide-eyed wonder as they experience the beauty and majesty of Israel. We will remind them of the history on every cobblestone, how for centuries Jewish, Christians and Muslims have looked to Jerusalem as the city of Peace, the central axis of their religious experience. For others it will be a return to the ancient land which has changed mightily since their last visit – whenever that was. We will not flinch to look at the real problems, the tensions that boil up in our ancient and modern homeland. But this is a sign that what we do there is significant. We are passionate about our heritage and that passion sometimes leads us astray. But it is not enough to see it from a distance, to experience Israel

through the pages of the New York Times. Israel is our people's homeland and we have a stake in its future. We can help make it better, but first we have to fall in love.

There are those who want to de-legitimize Israel, to define it by its problems. The Pacific Northwest is one of the centers of this movement, known as "Boycott, Divest, Sanction" or "BDS." The movement grew out of the anti-Semitic rants at the UN Durban conference in 2001 and seeks to link Israel with the Apartheid government of old South Africa. They are gaining, particularly among the Liberal churches. This year the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church USA considered multiple divestment resolutions against Israel, which were narrowly defeated.

We have to acknowledge Israel's problems while we build its solutions. Israel is not a perfect society. The divisions are deep. But so is the passion. It is a pluralistic and democratic society and has many self-correcting institutions, like a free and critical media and an independent judiciary, lacking in most countries in the region.

And like our own messy, imperfect and passionate families, Israel is our family.

Our American passion for truth, for honesty, and justice; for egalitarian values and the limits of civil religion, can help Israeli society as it struggles with this issues. These are values we share. Although the problems are large, Israel is moving in the right direction. It is confronting and overcoming its social challenges. Our engagement, compassion and dedication, our willingness to stand up to those who delegitimize her, can and do make a difference.

Anat Hoffman, Head of the Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) wrote this statement to us:

IRAC is passionate about fighting for social justice in Israel. The reason we are so zealous about our work is that we believe that one day Israel will be a pluralistic society; one day we will remember the time when women were forced to sit in the back of the bus, kept from speaking on the radio, and forced off billboards, and look back at it as a crazy blip on Israel's road to becoming a mature democracy.

To realize this vision we need Jews (and non-Jews) living outside of Israel to be aware of the challenges that we face, but also to feel hopeful that these challenges can be overcome.

We need to answer Anat Hoffman's call. She who was arrested for the crime of holding a Torah scroll. Had that happened anywhere else in the world there would have been wide-spread outrage and condemnation. The voice of pluralism we feel so strongly in America needs to be heard in Israel. The easiest thing is to be discouraged and disconnected. But the Jewish people can't afford our absence. Israel is too important for that. We cannot give up, just as we don't give up on our family. We stop and help them through their difficult times.

That help can sometimes be painful. Two years ago when Anat Hoffman was arrested at the Western Wall, our Temple's Sisterhood wanted to write a letter of protest to the Israeli Government. I asked them not to, out of fear that it would add to the ammunition used against Israel. I want to be clear: I was wrong. Our Sisterhood, our Brotherhood, all of us – myself included – need to speak out when the power of government is used to suppress women's religious and civil rights. And we need to defend Israel against her enemies as well.

We need to be the knowledgeable voice which defends Israel, just as we defend our family. We would not let others speak ill of our loved ones and we cannot let Israel's enemies here and abroad use Israel's internal tensions to denigrate her. Despite Israel's challenges, it is still a beacon of light in a difficult part of the world. In a region where Democracy is violently emerging and can easily be turned to destructive purposes – as we have seen these past weeks – Israel is a shining example of a mature, vibrant and functioning Democracy; through all administrations and eras, one of America's closest and surest allies.

Throughout this year our Temple's Adult Education committee will be learning about all aspects of Israeli life – well beyond the headlines. This will culminate in a remarkable trip to Israel where you can see for yourself. I call on us to all to get involved. To inform ourselves. To be for Israel a good member of the family.

With our help, the next time my friend visits Israel, he will find a far more just, tolerant, pluralistic and secure society.

This Yom Kippur - as we hear the final shofar blast, that blast which blew in the years of the Israelite judges, prophets and kings and blows anew over the Israeli parliament and supreme court today - may we be inspired to unity and support for our homeland – for our family – and help it to be the great land of freedom, equality and justice. Amen.