

Yom Kippur 2014

Israel: Reflections and Appeal

Given the events of this past summer, it's impossible *not to* talk about Israel on these High Holydays, although it's undoubtedly a risky proposition. You might have read some of the articles, including a recent one in the New York Times, describing the messy aftermath for congregational rabbis when they speak about Israel from the pulpit.

The article cites the experience of Rabbi Ron Aigen, a Reconstructionist rabbi in Montreal, who asserted that Israel had endeavored to live up to the highest standards of Jewish teaching on ethical and just wars during the most recent conflict with Hamas. He received a letter from a member of the community announcing she was leaving the synagogue because she didn't believe there was room to express criticism of Israel. And on the other side of the spectrum, the article cites the experience of Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, senior rabbi at a New York City synagogue. She offered a prayer for peace in which she included the names of young Israeli soldiers as well as Palestinian children who were killed in Gaza –cautioning her congregants not to harden their hearts against suffering. Several members resigned accusing Rabbi Kleinbaum of spreading propaganda for Hamas.

The divisiveness around issues related to Israel seems to be at an all time high. Why is that the case? Why is it so hard to listen to each other and to remain civil when we talk about Israel? Why do we get so upset?

I would like to share with you a framework that helps me understand where this passion and divisiveness around Israel comes from. It's a framework that distills the core values that underlie the different perspectives on Israel. It does away with the traditional labels of "left" and "right" and replaces them with two new categories used by prominent Jewish thinkers, to help break down barriers. These two new categories used to describe Jewish supporters of Israel are "**Guardians**" and "**Prophets.**" The late David Hartman, founder of the Hartman Institute in Israel, named these categories for the central experience that informs the thinking of "Guardians" and "Prophets." He called these two central experiences "Auschwitz" and "Sinai," respectively.

For "**Guardians**" the memory of the destruction of millions of Jews in World War II demands that we ensure that we will never again be vulnerable. "Never again" is an organizing principle for those who hold to this world-view. *Never again* will Jews expose their lives to the political forces in the world.

Today, what fuels this worldview is the rising tide of anti-Israel sentiment as well as anti-semitism. We have seen how this plays out throughout the world, including in places like London and Paris. Sadly, it gives credence to the passage from the Haggadah that we say every year: "in every generation they rise up against us and seek to destroy us: *"she'b'chol dor va-dor omdim aleinu l'chaloteinu."*

And then, there is the ever-present threat of Hamas. The Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research conducted a poll of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza strip in the aftermath of the war, this summer, between Israel and Hamas. Despite what we might think – that Hamas has been a disaster for Palestinians, that they have brought about three wars in six years with the consequent death of so many innocent Palestinian civilians and the consequent destruction of buildings and homes, the latest poll reveals that a striking 88% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza support Hamas. The Palestinian authority lagged far behind at 36%. Eighty-eight percent of Palestinians approve of and believe in Hamas – an organization whose charter calls for the destruction of the state of Israel.

There is indeed a strong basis for the conviction among this group, the **Guardians**, that the price of Israel's liberty is eternal vigilance. And they look to Israel's powerful army to protect the State and to ensure that Jews will *never again* have to beg for pity and compassion from the nations of the world.

Then there are the **Prophets**. The prophets hear a call to action that they trace back to Sinai. It's a call that challenges them to build a moral and just society. They are concerned about justice for all members of the Israeli society, including Palestinians, Bedouins and the economic and political refugees who have found their way to Israel. They are concerned, for example, with the current wave of violence by Jewish extremists against Israeli Arabs. They are concerned with the lack of religious pluralism - the ways in which the ultraorthodox exert undue influence in Israeli society.

Our prophets of old, like Isaiah, imagined that the society established by the Israelite people would be a model society – a shining beacon to the world of ethical and righteous living. This vision is written into Israel's Declaration of Independence which says: "The State of Israel will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture."

Those who fall under the category of **Prophets** believe in the possibility of integrating the moral seriousness of the prophets of old with the realism and political judgment of the modern day Israeli statesmen.

But when **Guardians** talk, **Prophets** tune out; and when **Prophets** talk, **Guardians** don't listen. Each side can't imagine how the other could possibly have come to its views. Each side sees the other's position not just as wrong but, as threatening the future of the state of Israel.

But what I want to emphasize today is that this polarization is dangerous. Israel faces enormous problems and challenges, both external and internal. None of these can be addressed by our vilifying one another, by our expressing contempt for one another. Such acrimony only weakens Israel and the Jewish people.

We need to realize the obvious, which is that our love of Israel has the power to bring us together. Of course **Guardians** want Israel to be decent, humane, and just – *as well as* a place where Jews can feel free to live and flourish. And of course **Prophets** understand that Israelis have the right to be safe and secure.

Guardians and **Prophets** are just typologies. Few of us are entirely one or the other. We should be able to listen to one another and work together. But too often we let-haughtiness, arrogance and self-righteousness get in the way.

Last night, when I spoke about the *Al Chet* – our communal confessions, I highlighted the fact that the sins we confess are commonplace sins, like arrogance and self-righteousness. But when this approach defines our interactions, what we sacrifice is any sense of *curiosity* about “the other.” We deprive ourselves of being able to listen with an open mind to a point of view that is not our own.

There is a famous story in the Talmud about a contentious debate that lasted over three years between the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai. One day a *bat kol*, a voice of God, is heard in the House of Study interrupting the debate: *eilu v’eilu dvarim elohim hayim*; “These and those are the words of the living God.” The *bat kol* is making clear that both views are right and true. But then, this *bat kol* goes on to say that in such cases the judgment will favor the school that presents their view with *humility* and that *honors* the opposing view by raising it first.

The rabbis place before us a “high bar.” Sadly, however, when it comes to discussions about Israel we don’t often meet this challenge. We fail to engage with humility and truly listen; we become defensive and forego the opportunity to reflect critically on our own perspective. Given the complexities surrounding Israel and its policies, we do ourselves a huge disservice. Whether Guardians or Prophets how can we *not* benefit from conversations that help us evaluate our own position with honesty and humility and gain a more nuanced understanding?

During this past year, many of us were immersed in Ari Shavit’s book, *My Promised Land*. It was his nuanced approach, his effort to understand Israel and the Palestinian conflict from a broad-based perspective that made the book so compelling to read. In our own dialogue about Israel here in Brookline we can learn from an approach that is open to hearing a “different” narrative. Most importantly, however, Shavit shows us what being deeply in love with Israel and deeply committed to exposing its shortcomings looks like. He teaches us that loving a country is not that different from loving a person: it means defending but also critiquing; it means loving unconditionally but knowing that love does not mean overlooking serious flaws.

In a conference call with US rabbis, including myself, Ari Shavit spoke about the urgency he felt in providing Jewish American audiences with a nuanced understanding of his beloved country. He is especially worried about college students and believes that there is a real risk that they might write Israel off unless they are presented with a

nuanced approach, with a perspective that is deeply committed to the State *and* that is honest about its shortfalls. And as many prominent Israelis have pointed out, this approach to Israel is one that we, diaspora Jews are welcomed to embrace as well.

I am always inspired when I hear prominent Israelis addressing American audiences by saying: “Israel is too important to be left *just* to Israelis.” As the homeland of the Jewish people, Israel must be the project of the Jewish people *worldwide*. It is indeed *our* project -to both criticize and love.

This is why this past August I appealed to *you* to join me at the pro-Israel rally. Several of us turned out for the rally at City Hall. The rally was sponsored by a range of organizations -including CJP and the Jewish Community Relations Council. A cease-fire was in place at the time but there was no certainty that it would hold. Israel had spent most of the summer defending itself from hundreds of rockets fired from Gaza and from harsh criticism by the media for its handling of the war. The organizers of this rally made it known that participants could bring their own signs. It’s as if they were saying to us: *yes, bring your opinions, we don’t all think alike about Israel’s policies, but make sure you are here. The time for unity is now. Let us stand together at this time when Israel is attacked with missiles and with biased coverage. Let us come together despite our differences of opinion to show the world that Israel is not alone.*

As you know, a sermon about Israel during the High Holydays is often a prelude to an appeal for a financial pledge. This morning, however, if you look at the pocket in front of your seats you will *not* find a donation envelope for the United Israel Appeal. Instead, I appeal to you:

*To place Israel at the forefront of our communal agenda and consciousness.

*To explore the complex issues facing Israel, including the Palestinian conflict, with *curiosity, humility and respect.*

I am proud that over twenty congregants took the I-Engage class on Israel we offered and that in the coming years our newly created Israel Committee will bring us many more learning opportunities.

*To recognize that the goal of our dialogue is not to *convince each other* but to *learn from each other* and to find areas where we *can* work together.

I offer as an example, the upcoming World Zionist Congress elections. Whether we think of ourselves as Guardians or Prophets we should be able to mobilize our community to vote so as to advance an agenda of religious pluralism and ensure that Reform marriages, conversions and burials are recognized in Israel.

*To experience Israel first hand. Join us on our Israel-trip scheduled for February 2016 and encourage your children to participate in Passport to Israel, a program we are now re-instating.

I am proud that in the past two years five of our congregants joined a CJP sponsored mission to Israel in order to better understand how transformative of an experience a trip to Israel can be for our youth.

My hope for *us* in the coming year is that despite our differences we can come together to engage more deeply with Israel. My hope for *Israel* in the coming year is one we all share –whether Guardians or Prophets, the hope that Israel will be ever closer to achieving a lasting peace.