

**Erev Yom Kippur-5782**  
**Power Versus Compassion- Settling on an authentic Zionism for the New Year**  
**Rabbi Mara Nathan**

This past spring, when the conflict in Gaza was at its worst I received a text from a young professional I know, who is not Jewish. She wrote: "I know it's a sensitive topic and I've been building up the courage to ask: Is there a safe space to have a conversation about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?"

I sent her some links to articles, opinion pieces and educational sites and we set up a time for coffee. She did her homework, read everything I sent plus more and she came prepared with print-outs, maps, and lots of questions.

She began: "I'm embarrassed to admit, but when I looked at a map of the Middle East to get a visual 'lay of the land' I couldn't even find Israel. I had to zoom in. I had no idea it was so TINY."

Of course, we all know that for such a TINY country, the State of Israel has an extra-large presence on the world stage: Leader in COVID protocols and research. Pioneer in ecological innovation and technology. Generous volunteer in global disaster assistance and rescue. But also, occupier of controversial territory, human rights abuser and sly master of covert military action.

I felt like my goal that day was to defend Israel. As many would say, if we don't, who will? But the truth is I am deeply conflicted.

I feel a strong attachment to Israel. I've lived there, visited and brought groups. I have dear friends and some family living throughout the country. The older I get, the more I take Israel's security personally, and the more Hawkish I become. That tiny country is surrounded by enemies whose goal is to destroy it.

And yet, my heart is broken for the innocent people stuck in the decimated city of Gaza. I am uncomfortable knowing that Arabs are treated like second class citizens. I look at proposed scenarios for a two-state solution and see that there is no real solution in sight. Yet I cannot fathom a unified democratic state whose majority is not Jewish.

Yossi Klein HaLevi articulated the exquisite pain of the current reality in the New York Times this past May: "An Israel that would no longer regard itself as a continuity of the Jewish story and

protector of the world's vulnerable Jews would lose its soul, an Israel that would no longer aspire to fulfill its democratic values would lose its mind.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the tension that thoughtful pro-Israel activists live with every day. Even if the terrorist tactics of Hamas make us feel like we are on higher moral ground, a Palestinian family who loses their home or a loved one from retaliatory fire would say otherwise.

Both sides of the conflict have valid claims. It's gut wrenching and frustrating and terrifying all at once.

I think that tonight- Kol Nidrei- is *the* night to take a hard look at our moral compass and recognize and even honor the inconsistencies and the conflicting emotions that surface when we talk about Israel.

Can I love Israel and be disturbed by Israel at the same time?

Can I be a committed Zionist *and* a vocal advocate for change?

Can I feel a strong sense of justice when Israel rightfully defends its people and its land, while also feeling compassion for the civilians in Gaza who suffer as a result?

To answer yes, is an authentically Jewish response. It reminds us that we are made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, whose attributes of justice and mercy are seen in Torah and our High Holiday prayer book again and again.

In our Torah service we proclaim God's mercy:

יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת: אֵל יְהוָה

Adonai! Adonai! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.

This is Exodus 34 verse 6 and the first half of verse 7.

But if we read ahead and finish verse 7... A contrasting aspect of God's presence is revealed:

לֹא יִנְקֶה פְּקֹדָה אֶת עֲוֹנוֹת אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנָיִם וְעַל־בָּנָיִם בְּנֵי בָנָיִם עַל־שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל־רְבָעִים:

“Yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/17/opinion/israel-arabs-jews-citizens.html>

There is no question in Torah that God's power is absolute. But there is also ample evidence that God prefers to show compassion and mercy. To forgive our inequities, our misdeeds and our sins. AVINU...our loving and forgiving parent...MALKEINU....our just and all powerful ruler. Isn't that what Yom Kippur and the concept of Teshuvah is all about?

Rabbi Josh Weinberg connects our theology that reveals God's justice and mercy to the existential crisis in Israel today. He asks, "What is the appropriate balance between the need for power in order to maintain our safety as a nation and community, and the need to ensure that any use of that power is, like God on the High Holy Days, balanced by compassion for those less powerful?"<sup>2</sup>

In a 1990 essay, Professor Emil Fackenheim, responding to the 1st Intifada, reflected on Israel's necessary exertion of power and the ambivalence many Jews feel about it. "Whereas in some circumstances powerlessness may indeed be made a moral virtue," he wrote, "in others it is indulgence in a moral luxury...."<sup>3</sup>

For Fackenheim, there is no question that in order to survive, Israel must exert its power. It's what sovereign nations do. That Israel finds itself having to resort to force over and over again, actually shows its power is insufficient because it remains unable to broker a more permanent peace. But, he writes "the fact that there is a 'deep Jewish anguish as Jewish soldiers [take down] stone-throwing Arab youths speaks well for the moral fiber of the State..... even after forty years of siege.' [Now it's over 70 years].

Despite the reality that security remains a necessity, we still desire the Prophetic ideals of our faith to be made real, not discarded when they become inconvenient or challenging to attain. As committed Zionists we should forcefully advocate for Israel to fulfill the core values set out in its Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948, promising "*freedom, justice and peace for all inhabitants, complete equality of social and political rights for everyone irrespective of religion, race or gender [and] freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.*"<sup>4</sup>

These values have yet to be fully realized for all of Israel's citizens. But we also know that many of our brothers and sisters are striving to get there. They have not given up- neither can we.

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<sup>2</sup> Annual Rabbinic Resource Guide- AIPAC Synagogue Initiative, pg. 48

<sup>3</sup> Annual Rabbinic Resource Guide- AIPAC Synagogue Initiative, pg. 48

<sup>4</sup> <https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/about/pages/declaration.aspx>

There is no question that Israel has a right to exist. That Israel's enemies are real. That Israel as a modern nation faces higher standards and stronger criticism than any other nation in the world.

So, we must push back against voices on both the left *and* the right who call for abolishing either Israel's Jewish identity or its democratic identity. As Yossi Klein Ha-Levi writes, "We know that Israel's long-term viability depends on managing the tensions inherent in our identity and reality..." [And we can no longer afford to avoid the] "hard questions that threaten our certainties, [or keep insisting] on the absolute justice of our side."<sup>5</sup>

Each of us can do a better job of living in that same tension as we educate ourselves on current events and opinions as they pertain to Israel.

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Bennet Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, better known as Ben & Jerry made news this summer when the company, they founded in 1978, but no longer own made a decision to stop selling Ice Cream in the West Bank starting in 2023.

On the right, Knesset members were outraged! How could these famous Jews so publicly engage in BDS?

On the left, progressives felt good about high profile Jewish businessmen calling out Israel for refusing to stop expansion on the other side of the Green Line.

Ben & Jerry wrote an opinion piece in the New York Times telling the world that they are supporters of Israel, but that they were proud that "Ben & Jerry's took the step to align its business and operations with its progressive values."<sup>6</sup>

Commentator, Brett Stephens' among others responded to the high-profile decision, calling the company's move "a feckless political gesture, a corporate fiasco, [and] a de facto boycott of the Jewish state."<sup>7</sup> And explained in great detail why the move was ineffective, unenforceable and disappointing all around.

A friend, who knew I was writing about Israel, sent me a link to the Ben & Jerry's piece. I asked her if she had read Brett Stephens.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/17/opinion/israel-arabs-jews-citizens.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/28/opinion/ben-and-jerry-israel.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/10/opinion/israel-ben-and-jerry.html>

“I couldn’t.” She said, “I started to, but it made me to upset.”

I get it. When you feel strongly about something you don’t want to hear that a big public statement- has no teeth at all. And for those who were outraged by Ben & Jerry’s decision, Was it really so upsetting? As if depriving people of their overpriced pints of ice cream has any impact on global diplomacy or *peace* negotiations.

Is it possible that both sides are right or both sides are wrong at the same time? How will you know if you don’t take the time to consider all perspectives? The issues are so complex, so multilayered, so infused with emotion. If there was some straightforward, equitable and sensible solution don’t we think it would have been agreed upon by now?

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I want you to love Israel. I also want you to be critical of Israel. I don’t want you to avoid reading Brett Stephens just because you liked what Ben and Jerry wrote. But I also don’t want you to only listen to the Hawkish pundits who claim that Israel can do no wrong. Pick at least one article a month written by someone you would generally avoid.

Turn the page back and read it!

I want you to travel *to* Israel. Our interfaith trip in February is full, I’m proud to say But we will have others.

And I want you to speak with people who feel strongly about Israel even if their passion comes down on a side different than yours. There are more than two sides to this challenging situation. Don’t shy away, and always remember that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict impacts millions of individuals--Jews, Muslims, Christians- grandparents, parents, and children every single day.

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Israel has a right to defend itself. It should be proud of its strength and power and continue to do what is necessary to keep all its citizens safe and secure.

At the same time, Israel’s political and military leaders must always keep their Jewish values and their sense of compassion at the forefront of every decision they make.

And we- we can keep grappling. We can try to move beyond our insistence on the absolute justice of *our* side, whatever that may be.

I saw my young friend the other day. I know she has a lot of unresolved questions about the way the arc of justice seems to be playing out in the Middle East. She'd like there to be good guys and bad guys, to be able to place clear cut blame on someone for the never-ending tensions and tragedies that continue to unfold.

But she has a better understanding now that while it's not so easy to be in the middle. It's the truly compassionate place to be. She sees that inconsistencies, complications, and confusion are part of every aspect of our lives. And that to be conflicted shows she is a thinking and caring human being. I hope that's where you can find yourself too.

Tonight, as we pray for God's mercy and compassion upon us for our own missteps, we pray that the leaders of Hamas will begin to put the needs of their people ahead of their desire for power....and their desire to destroy *our* people.

We pray that Israel's leaders continue to strive for a balance between compassion and power.

We pray that more Palestinians will join more Israelis in working to find ways to dwell together in peace.

And we pray for the wisdom to thoughtfully navigate the complicated landscape of our world. God, give us the strength we need to question our certainties and open our hearts to the human frailty of others.

AMEN