

Speaking of Israel
Rosh HaShana 5783
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Resh Lakish, a third-century bandit-turned scholar and study partner of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan, wanted to learn. A probing and curious student of Torah, he asked many questions and raised many arguments in pursuit of wisdom. One day he heard that two local rabbis were headed to the town of Asiya to do some work on the calendar. Their purpose was to intercalate the year so that the Jewish lunar calendar could incorporate just enough solar influence that Pesach would fall in the proper season. Thought Reish Lakish: “I will go along and see how they do it.” On the way, he asked the two rabbis many legal questions about what they saw people doing, and he criticized the two for rulings they made on various situations that were brought to their attention. The two rabbis grew annoyed with Resh Lakish, and when they arrived at Asiya, they ascended to the top story, pulled up their ladder, and left Resh Lakish below. They did not like his questions and they did not want to hear his perspective.

Resh Lakish was hurt. He returned home alone and to his regular study buddy Rabbi Yochanan. In his anger and disappointment he questioned whether the offending rabbis were fit to set the calendar for all the people, and then he wrote them off. Their views do not matter, he declared, because they are just bad people. The two rabbis returned from Asiya, and they complained to Rabbi Yochanan about the things that Reish Lakish thought. Rabbi Yochanan saw the sad truth. He understood that people tend to think they're right about the things they care about, and when challenged, may feel threatened and wish to marginalize or negate the other.

Living in a hyper-connected age, we know how easy it is to ostracize and “cancel” people who we perceive to have offended us or disagreed with us. That impulse is what left the brilliant Resh Lakish stranded and alone. And the other two rabbis? They are never mentioned again, anywhere. They might not have become irrelevant had they spent more time engaging with Resh Lakish, who became one of our best known sages (Ein Yaacov, Sanhedrin 3).

Today I want to talk about how we talk about a pillar of Jewish life, and that is Israel. It often seems to me that when we bring up the subject, we quickly pull up the ladder, just as in the story of Reish Lakish. We do this because we fear it will divide us or cause friction between us.

During the May, 2021 conflagration with Gaza, a member of Beth Israel Center shared with me that since her youth at the shul, she perceived serious and nuanced discussion of Israel to be nearly verboten. While I'm sure there have been exceptions, I do get the feeling that when I talk about Israel, I'm ripping off a band-aid and exposing some sore spots. That is not good for us. We should be able to talk seriously about Israel.

I want to be clear that by talking seriously about Israel I do not mean to push one, particular position. Of course I have my own perspective and I will share some of it with you today. But my goal is for our kahal to grow stronger by doing something we do well with regard to most topics: sharing perspectives and differences with curiosity and mutual respect.

Maybe you are wondering, why must we talk about Israel? How is Israel relevant to our lives here in Madison? As a committed Jew and Rabbi I believe that part of being a Jew is to be in relationship with Israel. Israel is a center of Jewish life, in many ways the heart of the Jewish People. For some of us, pride mixed with awe best characterizes our relationship with Israel. For some, it's longing; for some, family connection, or formative experiences. Others have a more troubled relationship. For many of us, it is more of a mixture. Regardless, Israel is our People's homeland. It has been our refuge from persecution and still is today. Israel is one of the few places in the world where Jews can live out their spiritual potential—especially Orthodox Jews. It is more challenging for me, as a committed, Conservative, female rabbi.

The Jewish People has spent about a third of our history living in that the Land of Israel and another two thirds pining for it. We can hardly daven without praying for Israel. It is the one place in the world that runs according to our calendar, where our language, Hebrew, is spoken, where Torah study, Jewish prayer, Jewish books and kosher food are part of the everyday culture. It is the one country in the world where every Jew can find shelter.

As I name those features, I am painfully aware that many of you are thinking of some of the more complicated aspects of Israeli culture and the territorial conflicts and abuses taking place. If I were in your seats I'd be doing that, too. Israel, along with the territories Israel occupies, and other adjacent stretches of land, is an extremely complicated place. Those complexities, however you slice them, must figure into how each person relates to Israel. As a kahal, we must make room to engage and not shy away from the questions.

We should talk about what is going on religiously in Israel—the politics, how the ultra religious are gaining power and the implications of their control. We should talk about

the many rich opportunities for religious and spiritual expression that can be found throughout the country and what Conservative Judaism looks like over there. We should talk about Torah study, Jewish culture, art and literature there and here, and how we might forge more fruitful relationships and exchanges of ideas. We should talk about Israel's outstanding and diverse achievements. And, of course, we must talk about Israel's imperfections and our own hesitations to address them, which of course are the real reason we shy away from talking about Israel.

I am going to share some thoughts about the Israel-Palestinian situation with you because I perceive that to be the issue that looms largest for many of us, and I want to begin to open a space for respectful dialogue. As I open this particular conversation I want to be very clear from the start. Any criticisms I may have stem from a very deep love of Israel, a lifelong connection to the Land and People of Israel, a grounded sense of history, and my fervent hopes for Israel's success.

I have lived, worked, and studied in Israel. I have a daughter who made *aliyah* to Israel five years ago and lives on a moshav and I have led numerous student trips there. When I spend time in Israel, among everyday Israelis, I am struck by the sense of solidarity, warmth, and helpfulness just beneath the surface. Israelis may not enter a bus or train in an orderly line, but once on board they rise for the elderly and help people with their bags. At restaurants, waiters seamlessly offer Hebrew menus and just enough English support to help me feel comfortable. I take this to come from a shared sense of being in it together which emanates from that mixture of pride, trauma, and hope that is our heritage.

I grew up during the decades when Israel was a unifying force for American Jews and not the source of division Israel has become. For most of my life I have absorbed messages with regard to hostilities with our Arab neighbors, like "All we ask for is peace." "We give and give and yet we are still attacked." "We have no partner for peace." "The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." And more. There is truth there, and also untruth, and a lack of accountability.

There is another narrative. It has pained me to learn it. I am embarrassed by what I did not know—by the stories I believed about the nascent State *not* having driven Palestinians from their towns and *not* having appropriated their homes, fields, and olive groves; the stories of how much better life is for all people living under Israeli sovereignty; and the defensive responses and PR spin that attempts to defend the country from legitimate critique and evade real issues. It angers me to read over and over again about demolitions of Palestinian homes in the West Bank when Jewish settlements are established nearby; attacks by settlers on Palestinian olive groves; and

reconfigured highways and infrastructure, which cut Arab communities off from their farmland and restrict their access to work and family, while Jewish Israelis move effeciently without their presence. These acts are reported regularly, not only by Palestians but as well by concerned Jews— rabbis, Israeli soldiers, and Jewish human rights activists. Know that these people are committed to Israel; they have served and sent their children to serve in the Israeli army. With commitment to our highest hopes for the State of Israel, we must face the reality that, just like what we are learning about our own United States of America, many of the stories about Israel that we would like to reject are true.

Please, take a deep breath.

One of the most brilliant PR moves of the Free Palestine movement is a slogan which you may have seen on yard signs around Madison. The slogan proclaims: “It’s not complicated.” Well, that is not true. It is deeply complicated on *all* sides. Sometimes that slogan is accompanied by charges of genocide. Based on what I know, that is a false and dangerous libel. We must combat that fallacy even as we come to terms with uncomfortable truths.

Former students of mine, some affiliated with a group called “If Not Now,” demand to know why we did not tell them the difficult truths. A colleague of mine, a history major and prominent Jewish educator, gave her activist daughter the sad answer: We did not know. And not only did we not know. We were taught a different story from people we trusted—our teachers, rabbis, and university professors. The story we were told contained important truths a Jew should know about Jewish history, truths I cherish about Zionist history and the founding of the State. But it omitted and denied information with which we must also contend.

I want to use what I now know to make empowered choices about how to move forward as a Jew who deeply loves and is proud of Israel, visits Israel, and seeks a genuine relationship with her—and I hope we can do that together.

We ought to be able to talk about all of the following: our People’s need for a safe haven, Israel’s right to safety and security, the national religious vision of “Greater Israel,” good reasons to study and travel in Israel; and yes, we also need to talk about violations of international law that happen all too frequently in the Occupied Territories. We need to talk about Israel’s ongoing campaign to make occupied territory a de facto part of Israel, and the multifaceted complexities that keep the parties involved from finding tenable solutions. Besides fascinating aspects of Israel, such as elections, how Israel leads the world in so much technology, and the variety of cultures dwelling there,

we need to come to terms with the fact that *our* national independence was for the Palestinians a *Naqba*, a catastrophe. We have so much to talk about.

Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, who heads the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism (USCJ), with which our shul affiliates, recently was asked to prepare words of Torah for AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which is the strongest lobby for a strong US-Israel relationship. Rabbi Blumenthal chose to use his platform to do what I am doing today: to argue for respectful dialogue and open listening to one another about the topics that make talking about Israel so difficult. He quotes our Holiness Code, in Leviticus, which says: "You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Rebuke your kin—'*hochei'ach to'chiach*'—but incur no guilt on their account. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people. Love your fellow as yourself. I am the Eternal" (Lev. 19:17-18). Reflecting on those words, Rabbi Blumenthal writes: "In the face of disagreement, the Torah doesn't suggest staying silent. You have an obligation to do so not with hate, but with love—with a sense that the person is your "kin," your family...(Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal in the AIPAC Annual Rabbinic Resource Guide 5783, p. 42).

Likewise, JTS Chancellor Shuly Rubin Schwartz spoke a few weeks ago at the Zionist Conference in Basel, Switzerland. There, she shared her vision for "a new Zionism for the Jews of today and tomorrow, a Zionism devoted to strengthening Israel as a Jewish, democratic State," a Zionism "forged through deep learning, active listening, and engaged dialogue." She argues for "open dialogue and radical empathy."

Like the leaders of our Movement, my intention is for us to engage in these conversations as family—like many, many families do in Israel—with the premise that many of us—and certainly I—love Israel, that we want to believe Israel deserves to be called "*reishit tzmichat g'ulateinu*," the "dawn of our redemption," and that we share concern for Israel's flourishing as a Jewish state that reflects the best of who the Jewish People can be.

I just returned from a few weeks in Israel. As on each of my numerous trips to Israel, my Jewish identity grew stronger from being in the only place in the world where we as Jews are able to control our own destiny and where our culture can flourish openly. I will never tire of the grocer wishing me "Shabbat shalom", and laws that protect my rights as a Jew.

Also during my visit there, I was more aware than usual of the glorifications of Israeli statehood that proliferate—canons and discarded war paraphernalia at roadsides, on

corners, at children's parks; and flags—flags everywhere. Often those memorials bear the name of a Jewish hero whose courage routed Israel's enemy forces and saved the lives of locals. I have spent time living in communities with memorials dedicated to young men and women who fell defending their country, and I understand the value of those memorials.

One day, I found myself walking through one of those parks, across the street from where I had just shopped in an Arab store, whose Arab clerk was dispensing homework advice to his child on the phone and proffering delectable looking, handmade Arab sweets at the register. I am grateful for Israel's military victories. But I wonder what entrenched attitudes those persistent symbols of Jewish dominance perpetuate. It's a struggle to see these things and to feel pure pride when the children and grandchildren of those we have conquered continue to suffer injustice with no end in sight.

Maybe another deep breath here?

Some would claim that any critique of Israel is antisemitic by definition. I, too, was taught for many years to conflate criticism of Israel with antisemitism. The temptation is obvious: If it's antisemitic, we don't have to consider the substance. And it's visceral because Jews have been persecuted and blamed through so much of our wandering history that we may be inclined to see critique of Israel as more of the same, as critique of us as Jews, simply for asserting our right to live anywhere in the world. But writing off all criticism of Israel as antisemitism is intellectually dishonest and morally blind. Further, it diminishes both our ability to fight real antisemitism and our ability to advocate for Israel. And I think we all know how earnestly we must fight antisemitism right here in Madison.

Criticizing Israel can be, and often is, antisemitic, like the sophomoric chalkings on the UW campus the first week of classes, that associated anyone affiliated with certain organizations, like Hillel, with genocide. I believe the University was remiss in its duty to call out more strongly those acts of antisemitism.

But critique of Israel is not always antisemitic. Rabbi Jill Jacobs, a Conservative rabbi who heads T'ruah, The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights," an organization of which I am a member, published a booklet on antisemitism, in which she notes that "Human rights activists and organizations almost always choose a focus for their efforts...and it might be reasonable to conclude in some cases that Israel attracts disproportionate attention not because of antisemitism, but because it is a top recipient of U.S. foreign aid." Israel is, she states, "the only western democracy currently carrying out a military occupation of another people. Its territory is sacred to three major world religions. The existence of

a strong U.S.-based lobby dedicated to promoting the policies of the Israeli government unsurprisingly generates a counter response. And Palestinians have built a national movement over the past five decades, unlike more recently displaced people. Those facts, and not always antisemitism, can explain the disproportionate attention on Israel.”

We weaken our own credibility when we accuse even harsh critics of antisemitism unless their language evidences prejudice against Jews. Avoiding the difficult issues plays into the hands of Israel’s enemies. I am genuinely concerned that Israel might become a pariah state. We must not let that happen. Israel will be much more secure, and we as Jews will be much more secure, when Israel can stand proudly as an “*or lagoyim*,” a light to the nations.

At least three former Israeli Prime Ministers [have] used the word “apartheid” to describe where Israel was headed if it did not find a way to exit most of the West Bank and achieve a two-state solution. I am not commenting on whether or not Israel behaves as an apartheid State , but would we say that Rabin, Barak, and Olmert used antisemitic rhetoric when they issued those warnings?

Two former Israeli ambassadors to South Africa wrote just last year that Israel's actions in the occupied territories constitute apartheid, in part because they perceive that "the occupation is not temporary, and there is not the political will in the Israeli government to bring about its end." We don't have to agree with them, but can we really accuse two Israeli ambassadors of antisemitism? (This, and the above paragraph, based on Daniel Sokatch's book [Can We Talk About Israel?](#) and described by Steven Sheffey in a recent newsletter).

I believe we will fight antisemitism more effectively if we do not conflate it with criticism of Israel. I know the line can be excruciatingly thin, but as my friend and public policy writer Steve Sheffey says, “We can be pro-Israel by supporting the values and interests that bind the U.S. and Israel and by speaking out when either country weakens those pillars of support. Being pro-Israel does not mean blindly supporting the policies of whatever government happens to be in power in Israel or the United states, and support for Israel and Zionism does not preclude support for Palestinian nationalism.”

I have never had a close Arab friend or met a Palestinian on the West Bank for coffee. Israeli buses don't run in much of the defined city limits of Jerusalem, in the areas largely populated by Arabs, including an actual refugee camp, Shuafat, which is located within the city limits of Jerusalem. But from what I know, over the green line that divides Jerusalem, literally on the other side of the train tracks, they also rise for the elderly and help each other out on their buses. I am quite sure that there, people feel a sense of

being in it together that, like ours, emanates from the mixture of pride, trauma, and hope that is *their* heritage. In the case of Israel and the Palestinians, we are dealing with two profoundly traumatized peoples.

And yes, real enemy territory exists, from which Arab missiles are fired into Israeli communities, and thousands of Israelis left their homes, in unilateral withdrawals that seem to have done no good. There are areas where a Jew might not be safe. Israeli citizens have good cause to wonder why they ought to make more concessions, and that is why I understand why so many Israelis don't want to make further concessions to the Palestinians. Yet I also know that common ground is being found at the grassroots level, between Jews and Arabs who can imagine a better way to coexist.

In Judaism, we also have two, authentic, voices that inform those thoughts. First and foremost, we are responsible for guarding our own family and protecting our own land. From the Torah through Hillel's famous adage "*Im ein ani li mi li*"--"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" a.k.a. "Put on your own oxygen mask first," our priority must be the safety of our own people and the defense of our borders.

But there is another voice, which demands that we be concerned with all of God's creation and care for every human being as one created in the Divine image. Hillel also taught, "*Uch'she'ani l'atzmi, mah ani?*" "What am I, if I am only for myself?" We are devoted to justice, righteousness, kindness, and compassion, as our entire Torah, prophetic, and rabbinic traditions teach. The voice of justice and compassion calls us to cry over the death of all children, Israeli and Palestinian, and call for an end to the injustices brought about by the Occupation.

The tension reverberates within me as a Jew and a rabbi who hopes and prays every day for Israel's thriving, who is proud of Israel's achievements in Science, Technology, and the Humanities, and celebrates Israel's good works all over the world. I don't expect Israel to be perfect, and I understand that there is no easy way out of the challenges Israel faces. But as one who preaches what I believe to be our Torah's strongest charge, that we must strive to be a holy nation bent on justice and compassion, I see that much work lies ahead.

This Israeli columnist Leah Solomon writes on this quandary: "We tell ourselves a reassuring bedtime story that we are the good guys, and they are the bad guys...This story allows us to look away, to exempt ourselves from any nagging sense of complicity, to go on with our comfortable lives. But I am so devastated and angry because this is not who I want us to be. I want to cry out as loudly as possible...to my fellow Jews, those of us in this country and around the world who are stakeholders in this greatest

project of the Jewish people in 2000 years, to join me in making this state not a place run by fear and an iron fist but rather a place that upholds the infinite value and right to life and dignity of every human being. But then the fear kicks in: the awareness of antisemitism and the toxic flow of anti-Zionism into antisemitism which has begun to permeate so many communities around the world. And once again I hesitate to raise my voice...I find myself forced into an unacceptable choice between speaking up for my own people and speaking up for my neighbors, those living under the sovereign roof of my own government. **I refuse to choose”**

<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/fight-antisemitism-like-theres-no-injustice-and-injustice-like-theres-no-antisemitism/>. August 1, 2021).

Here in Madison, let us not force that choice, either. Let us talk about these things together. We are not a community that pulls up the ladder. Instead, let us talk together about the odd mixture of pride and disillusionment, hope and frustration, admiration and disappointment that many of us feel about Israel. We will not all agree, and that will be okay. Our tradition does not teach us what to believe, but how to think, question, push back, and wrestle. That’s what the name Israel literally means. We wrestle with God and with one another. Jewish discourse always makes room for minority positions, answers one question with another, and fills the margins with more thoughts. We never pull up the ladder because we understand that when we struggle for truth, we are doing holy work. When it comes to Israel, we need to acknowledge *hamar v’hamatok*, the bitter and the sweet realities, without sacrificing one for the other. I want to know what you think and feel. I want our community to be a place where we can push ourselves and each other to see more clearly and to make room for opposing views. We will be wiser and better for it.

On this day, the Jewish People dwell in the space between the real and what could be possible. That is where holiness lives. My fervent hope is that this moment generates a year of meaningful and open conversation about Israel that brings us into that holey (h-o-l-e-y), holy (h-o-l-y) space, and that through those encounters we will become more whole.

I am excited to share with you that together with our shlichim, Hanna and Oz, we will be offering a series of monthly discussions about Israel, at different times of day, some on Zoom and some in person. Hanna and Oz kicked off this initiative with an outstanding Kolot Kehillah presentation a few weeks ago about Israeli elections. They are nuanced thinkers, good listeners, knowledgeable and aware, and they love Israel. They are here today, and I shared these words with them in advance. I believe we have much to learn from our conversations with Hanna and Oz, and that we will become stronger and better as a kahal by having them. I am grateful to our members Bob Factor and Madeline

Tyner for serving as point people and helping to coordinate these conversations. As our discussions evolve, I'm sure we will call on scholars from our own community to share their expertise and perspectives so that we can expand and broaden our understanding. And maybe, just maybe, conversations like ours will begin to instantiate the hope we carry in our hearts. As Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, once quipped, "In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles." We have always been people who seek truth, people who hope for what seems impossible and are not totally surprised when it happens. That is what this season is all about.

So, can we talk about Israel? I believe that we can, and we must. It is time to put down the ladder. *Ken y'hi ratzon*—may that be God's will, and may it be ours.