

Rabbi Kulwin
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In 1978 I flew to Israel for my first year of rabbinical school. The year was an eye opening, emotional experience, that planted within me a deep love for the Jewish state and a sense of connection that was more solid than granite. Actually, that's not exactly what happened.

What did happen was that I spent a year studying pretty intensely, living in a bubble of American students, worried about my classes, this unusual career path upon which I was headed, and all sorts of other things that were rummaging around in my twenty-year-old brain.

Israel never figured prominently on my radar screen until, ironically, I moved to Brazil.

Brazilian Jews, like Jews in most Diaspora countries, unlike Jews in the United States, are intensely focused on and connected to Israel. Proportionately, far more speak Hebrew, far more have visited Israel, far more make aliyah. There are reasons for this, I came to learn. A key one is that Israel could uniquely provide a sense of meaning and pride to small Jewish populations in lands that are not the American melting pot.

But I wasn't happy. I found Brazilian Jews so focused on Israel that I felt they were neglecting their own community, where, by and large, they were staying put. They saw themselves as second class Jews, and while they had means, they were reluctant to spend money on schools and synagogues and other institutions in a community that, they felt, really didn't matter.

As a proud American Jew, a product of the Diaspora, I was outraged at their self-abnegation. During my tenure an election was held for the president of the local Federation, which in Brazil is much more of an actual communal umbrella polity. Candidates were members of actual parties. I spoke out for my candidate, of the *Judaismo Brasileiro* party, interested in investing in Brazil's Jews, and against the candidate of the Zionist party, not understanding how someone who felt – theoretically at least – that all Jews should live in Israel could legitimately lead a Diaspora community.

My feelings toward Israel were mixed.

From Brazil I returned to America, to New York, where I began graduate studies in Jewish history at Columbia and simultaneously began my work with Jewish communities around the world.

The juxtaposition is important here. While in rabbinical school I of course studied Jewish history, but now I was studying history at an entirely different level, immersing myself in texts from ancient Israel, absorbing the story of a people that, in its lore, came from a land that God had promised its founder, a people that made its way throughout the world, then, thousands of years later, returned to again establish itself in that original land.

Moving.

It's not that I didn't know these things before. But as any graduate student, past or present, knows, in that kind of intense academic setting, what you are studying is always with you, always in your mind, and you cannot help but view the world around you through the lens of the texts that engage you.

As I travelled and worked, to be effective at the work I did I had to understand, as best I could, the dynamics of each community, and how they were different from one another. French Jews and Swiss Jews, Jews from Chile and Argentina, the Jews of Australia and New Zealand. Outwardly, these pairs looked identical. But they weren't. And success in establishing synagogues, success in recruiting rabbis, creating schools, depending upon grasping the fine points.

Israel was no different. For the first time, I began to spend time in Israel, not as a student, nor as a visitor, but as someone working there. My responsibilities involved working directly with Israeli institutions, so I was there frequently, travelling all around, working with colleagues, speaking Hebrew all the time, experiencing Israel far more like an Israeli than ever before.

I began to evolve. I am a product of the Diaspora. Life outside the land of Israel is more than firmly entrenched in Jewish tradition. But I began to appreciate, to

feel, the centrality of Israel in Jewish life in a deep, resonant, meaningful way. I became a believer.

What do I mean? The simplest way to explain this is in how Robin and I chose to raise our children.

We decided early on this was important. We wanted Israel to be central to them. I wanted them to know the country and the language well at an early age so that someday, if making aliyah were of interest, it would be to a place they knew, a place where they felt comfortable.

As soon as the kids were old enough, we travelled to Israel as a family. Through high school and even into college, they came with us on every Temple family mission. Each spent a high school summer in Israel. Each spent a semester of high school in Israel.

In 2003 Robin and Richard Dinar were part of an environmental fundraising bike ride from Tel Aviv to Eilat. When a Star Ledger reporter asked her why she would ride 300 miles in five days over rocky, challenging, terrain, she responded, "it's something I want my children to see."

Israel as a subject, as a cause, as an idea, was ubiquitous in our home. Our seeds bore fruit.

At 17 Noah chose to spend the summer in a total immersion Hebrew program, and he left high school a semester early to study at Ben Gurion University. One college summer was spent working in Israel for the Israeli ACLU, and as a journalist, Israel is one of his areas of expertise.

Molly spent an entire year in Israel before college, worked in Israel one college summer, does much related to Israel now as a Jewish educator in Chicago and like her brother, has been active in a variety of Israel-oriented causes.

Yes, I'm proud. But that's not the point. It was important to me that my children be as strongly connected to Israel as their parents. And they are. But once that connection was made, it was up to them what to do with it.

We often disagree when it comes to Israel. Dinner table conversation sometimes turns lively. But that's not the point either. We are connected. Israel's place in our lives is fixed.

When conversation turns to politicians and Israel, there is a phrase we inevitably hear. Is so and so good for Israel? Is she pro-Israel? And my favorite, is he a friend of Israel?

What does it mean to be a friend of Israel? I find much of what Israel has accomplished in 70 years inspiring, and given my priorities in raising my children, given the priority I have placed on Israel within this congregation, given the large percentage of my personal tzedakah that goes to Israel, I should certainly qualify.

But maybe not. Sometimes I disagree vigorously, with Israeli policies. Generations of Israeli governments have effectively endorsed a theocracy that discriminates against women and nonorthodox Jews. The current Israeli government uses scare tactics to inflate a sense of threat, thereby turning attention from some of Israel's social ills. I am uncomfortable with the ties being forged with the leaders of Hungary, Egypt and Saudi Arabia...none of them countries that remotely resemble the nation aspired to in Israel's Declaration of Independence.

I don't sound like much of a friend, do I? So am I a friend of Israel? I don't know. And I don't care. I think it is a singularly meaningless term.

I am an American citizen, born and raised here, and as such I am obligated to, cheer what I admire, criticize what I don't, serve if needed, and as we discussed on Rosh Hashanah, participate in American civil society, with the knowledge that what's best for us as a people may not always be best for me as an individual. And that's fine. My job is not being a friend; it's to be a citizen.

As a Jew, I have come to view Israel in a similar light.

Sunday afternoon Robin and I attended a reading by Nathan Englander, one of the most acclaimed authors in contemporary American fiction. Someone asked, "why are your novels so Jewish?" He laughed, and responded, "Yeah, they are

pretty Jewy, aren't they. Except to me they are not. It's not that I think like a Jew. I am a Jew."

Englander grew up in an Orthodox home. He attended Yeshivah. He lived in Israel for five years. His point was, he is not actively attempting to engage a Jewish imagination. That's just the way he naturally sees the world. To someone else, a novel of his seems Jewy. To him, it's a novel.

That how I feel about Israel. I am not a friend of Israel. I am not a not-friend either. Those are meaningless terms. I am a Jew, ergo Israel is central to my life. I am a rabbi; ergo I want Israel to be central to your life as well.

A few times a week I receive a chain email, or see a Facebook post, about how wonderful Israel is, gushing about the field hospital built by the IDF in Haiti, the medical treatment of thousands of Syrian refugees, the agricultural projects in India. The truth is, they are pretty neat, and various Israeli agencies have partners in over 100 countries to share Israeli know-how and pitch in when a fellow country needs a hand. This is truly lovely.

But in recent times, Israel has begun to detain people entering and leaving the country whose politics the government finds unfriendly, people like activist Simone Zimmerman and Professor Peter Beinart, and even Meyer Koplow, chairman of the board of Brandeis University, who was detained after a brochure entitled *This Week in Palestine* was found in his suitcase. Koplow said he picked up the brochure in a Bethlehem hotel lobby, and added, "I applaud the careful security, including examining people's luggage. But not for materials they're taking out of the country that aren't in the nature of what you would call classified materials. Why would you do that other than to send a message that the government doesn't welcome your engaging in any kind of inquiry?"

Why indeed. Israel opening its borders to refugee Syrians is wonderful. Detaining people like Meyer Koplow is chilling. We should laud the one and criticize the other. Both loudly.

I have strongly held opinions about Israel today. I am happy to discuss them heatedly all day long. (Just make a reservation.) But what is important is not those opinions. What is important is the foundation upon which they rest.

God called to Abraham and said, “to you and your ancestors I give this land, that you might flourish upon it.” We did, and then for 2,000 years we didn’t.

In the 1880s, motivated by the pogroms in Russia, Leon Pinsker founded Hovevei Tzion, the Lovers of Zion, which soon numbered in the thousands and tens of thousands, Jews of all types, responsible for the initial aliyah to late 19th and early 20th century Palestine. Their motivations were political, religious, economic; they sought a Jewish presence, a Jewish place, in the ancient land of Israel.

Today, an ohev tzion, a Lover of Zion, refers to someone swept up by that ideal, by the importance of a Jewish home in our ancient homeland. I am, passionately, an ohev tzion. Eretz yisrael, Jews in the land of Israel, that moves me. I want that to move all Jews.

In *Hatikvah* we sing of modern Israel as the culmination of two thousand years of hope. But sometimes it feels like, rather than attempting to inspire people to be moved by the reality of the modern manifestation of that hope, we insist that they be its cheerleaders.

American Jewry is concerned by the BDS movement on campus. And not without reason. But at the same time, many Hillels have become places where students who see some legitimacy to the idea, or even whop just sympathize with the motivation, because they don’t like the occupation, are told to stay away.

BDS is dangerous. I think many who support it have a malevolent purpose beyond the cause of Palestinians. But the situation of the Palestinians is intolerable and Israel cannot evade some of the responsibility for that. To the extent such words are not silly, Israel won that land fair and square in a war it did not start. But 70 years later, not enough has changed. And it is not all because of Palestinian intransigence.

Perhaps you disagree with my analysis. Fine. Let’s talk about it. But in many Hillels that is not easy to do. It is also not easy to do in many federations, or in many synagogues.

Do you remember that viral 2008 video Senator John McCain, of blessed memory, campaigning in Pennsylvania? A woman said to him, "I'm scared of Obama. He's an Arab." McCain responded, "no ma'am. He is a decent, family man, a citizen, that I just happened to have some disagreements with." One man said that people in his area were scared of an Obama presidency. McCain's answer, "I think I'll be a heckuva lot better as president, but you don't need to be scared of him."

These answers are impressive. They show a certain class. But in another sense, they are really impressive. Because Senator McCain could easily have given different answers, and stirred up the base in a state he did not win. Maybe it would have made a difference. But he knew that he and Senator Obama wanted the same thing, a country that was safe and afforded liberty and opportunity for all its citizens. They differed on how to get there.

Do I like the state of Israel? Some days more. Some days less. My feelings about the United States are similar. The "Israel can do no wrong" mentality that I find so prevalent today scares me. And it's not that I disagree with it though I do. It is because I think it is genuinely not in Israel's best interests. It is based on half-truths, accentuating the positive, rewriting or playing down the negative. Israel is not a mythical place. It is a real flesh and blood country.

Sometimes it feels like we are supposed to love Israel because it is a great place, rather than love Israel because it is Israel.

I would care as deeply about Israel as I do even if it were a terrible place, based not upon what Israel does, but upon what it is. I agree with *Hatikvah*. It is the manifestation, the coming to life of 2,000 years of hope. I care about Israel because I am a Jew; existentially, Israel is a part of me.

My greatest fears about Israel do not come from the left. Nor do they come from the right. My greatest fear is apathy; that people, Jews, stop caring. And there is no better way to make someone stop caring than to say that their opinions, their beliefs, their concerns, are not rooted in sincere Jewish feeling, but are omens of suspicious intent.

The Jewish people should be a big tent. Some see safety in keeping the tent as small as possible, administering a litmus test of loyalty to those who would come inside. I believe just the opposite. When we push the walls of the tent as far out as possible, when we work to include everyone possible, we inevitably bring ourselves closer to one another. We become a conversation in which everyone takes part.

These are tumultuous times in Israel, in America, in the world. Which means these are tumultuous times as well for us Jews. We have different opinions about Israel, about politics, about economics, about race, about immigration, about every subject “tachat hashemesh,” the Book of Proverbs says, every topic under the sun.

Making sure everyone fits into the tent is difficult, maybe more difficult than ever. But if so, that means it is more important than ever, because that is how we keep our people one, that is how we continue to share with the world the special gifts we Jews possess, that is how, as Isaiah taught us, we fulfill our mandate to be a light unto the nations, that is how, as God’s people, we endure.

In the Mishnah we read, “Kol Machlechet l’shem shamayim....” Every dispute that is for the sake of heaven, its conclusion, will be for the good.”

I believe that with all my heart. If another Jew sees the world differently than me, I will always try to listen. If his words are words of sincerity, I will reach my hand out as far as it can go. If he shows me respect, I will bend over backwards to see the world through his eyes.

Residing in the big tent is one of the greatest joys I can imagine. We may have our differences; we do have our differences. But as long as we only look upon one another with love, we will achieve what God wants us to achieve.