

Israel and the Empathy Deficit



AS THE FOUNDER and long-time CEO of Hazon, the American Jewish community's largest environmental organization, I want to reflect on our inability to talk with those we disagree with—particularly about Israel—and to offer three suggestions for what we might do about it.

As ever, personal history influences my relationship with Israel. I first went there in the late '70s, when I was 15. It was a world gone by. New cars were few and far between. I hitchhiked happily and safely around the country. In those days, Jewish life came in three flavors—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform—but in practice there was just one religion: “support for Israel.” Memories of '73 and '67 were still fresh.

I grew up in England. As a young Jewish leader there in the mid-'80s and early '90s, I already didn't feel quite right about

this approach. I am eternally grateful that Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom showed me a better model. I was finishing my Georgetown M.A. at The Hebrew University, where I took his class “Politics and Religion in Jerusalem.” One class, we'd be in the classroom. Next class, we'd visit settlers. Then we'd meet with a Palestinian expert on West Bank land seizures, who told us that everything the settlers had said was untrue. Rav Froman, z”l, the Orthodox Israeli peace-maker, visited us. Faisal al-Husseini, the long-time PLO official who championed a two-state solution, couldn't, because the Israelis had him under house arrest—so we visited him.

It was from Jeremy's class that I understood, viscerally, that on Israel, people had different views about . . . well, everything. But understanding that there were different views didn't mean I had to agree with everyone. Looking back, I see that the time between my teenage years at a highly academic English boys' school and my mid-'30s at Pardes, a liberal co-ed yeshiva in Jerusalem, was a high-water mark for arguing about important topics with mutual respect and affection. Today, we seem to have lost the capacity to argue in a way that isn't sometimes scary—especially about Israel.

How and when did we lose this ability? I don't know exactly, but a profound shift happened during the years I led Hazon, starting in 2000.

In those 21 years, Hazon produced more than 40 Israel trips of different sorts. To me and others in Hazon, it was clear that our goal of “*a healthier, more equitable and more sustainable Jewish community, and a more sustainable world for all*” necessarily involved working in North America *and* in Israel *and* on the Israel-Diaspora relationship.

But over time, the (unrealistic) “Israel can do no wrong” of the '70s became the (equally bizarre and unfair) “Israel can do no right” of the 2010s and 2020s. So the default position on Israel for many became “let's not go there”—literally, in some cases. Anything one said ran the risk of offense.

One measure of the change is that when Hazon started its Israel

Ride in 2003 with the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (a program that involves Palestinian students), we were concerned we might be seen as too “pro-Palestinian” by some participants or stakeholders.

Skip forward to 2017, when we signed a grant with Israel’s Ministry of Diaspora Affairs for Hazon’s Hakhel program, which supports emerging Jewish intentional communities worldwide. A staffer asked me what to do with photos of me with the then-Minister Naftali Bennett (who was seen as a strong right-winger). I said, “Just make sure no one sees them.” I was smiling—but I wasn’t kidding. It was too easy to imagine a response and counter-response spinning out of control. I wasn’t the only Jewish nonprofit CEO starting to worry about this kind of thing.



This is strange. I’m proud of Hakhel, which today includes five communities in Ukraine. As I write, in the fourth week of this terrible war, nine delegations have now gone from Hakhel to bring humanitarian relief, including medication, food, and clothes, to Ukrainian refugees.

Was my self-censorship oversensitive? I don’t know. But I was certainly influenced by a growing number of conversations with young progressives who assumed that there were “correct” positions on Israel—and woe betide anyone who didn’t agree.

During last year’s war with Gaza, there seemed to be an extraordinary absence of empathy for Israelis. I’m baffled that people could feel that a misspoken *word* could make someone unsafe, and yet be untroubled by how actually unsafe people might feel as missiles were being lobbed at them from Gaza, or, for that matter, in the face of random stabbings or shootings.

I’m equally struck by the presumption that being “against the occupation” is axiomatic. I, too, am “against the occupation” in some senses. I was a founder of the New Israel Fund in the UK

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in the ’90s. I’ve worked steadily to build relationships with Palestinians in my time at Hazon. I co-chaired a multiday Encounter trip to the West Bank. Not all that long ago, I went with Rabbis for Human Rights and spent a day picking olives with a Palestinian family who had been attacked by Israeli settlers.

But I love Israel and Israelis more than I can say, and I hold with Beit Hillel in my determination to begin by explicating the positions of Beit Shammai: the settler, the Bibi-supporter, the anti-Zionists of the *Ha’aretz* op-ed page, the people who vote Hadash, the different worlds of Bat Ayin, Machane Yehuda, Pardes Hannah, and Umm al Fahm. And I’m also profoundly aware that Israeli Jews remember the second intifada. Many of them are not exactly in favor of the occupation. But they will live with it *if they feel that their lives will likely be endangered by withdrawal*.

This is why empathy seems crucial to me. I have empathy for people living within missile range of Gaza. I have empathy for Palestinians held up at Israeli checkpoints, and for Israeli Palestinians who feel like second-class citizens. For that matter, I have empathy for young Jewish progressives who feel that their voices aren’t fully heard in organized Jewish life.

So “end the occupation” seems facile to me. Yet the neutral Israeli position—“ignore the occupation”—may create the seeds of greater strife in the future. If we had more empathy, we might all be better placed to make a difference in Israel—and to talk more easily with one another. Without empathy, there’s not much space between condemnation and silence.

What is to be done? One observation, and three suggestions.

My observation: With regard to Israel, there are four distinct groups of young American Jews—and the organized Jewish community has horribly dropped the ball on one of them.

- Group 1 is a traditional “pro-Israel” group. They skew Orthodox. From a pro-Israel perspective, they are fine—although they *should* go on an Encounter trip, or start to listen to some different voices, lest they succumb to bigotry and intolerance *by* Jews, even as they stand up for Israel and the Jewish community.
- Group 2 isn’t especially connected to Israel, or especially interested, and they’re not very political. They are well served by Birthright Israel, and the more that Birthright deepens and broadens its programming, the more positively it will affect this large cohort.
- Group 3 is liberal, progressive, and well-educated. Many went to day school or Jewish camp. Their grandparents rallied for Israel in ’67, and their parents have integrated a commitment to both universalism and particularism into their lives: Their parents’ connection to Israel is not uncritical, but it is genuine.
- Group 4 consists of the young Jewish anti-Zionists. They’re the ones who passionately support JVP, or start conversations with “*I’m Jewish, but ...*” They’re deeply antipathetic toward Israel, sure that they are right and that everyone else is wrong. I doubt any systematic intervention is likely to have much impact on most of them.

It is Group 3 we must pay far more attention to. They are confused, troubled, and unsettled. They feel that their parents are

too supportive of Israel, too blind to the occupation, too willing to ignore Israel’s mistakes or crimes. They live in a multicultural world of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. They take it for granted that one must strive to ally with disadvantaged minorities—including the Palestinians.

I agree with much of this, which in many ways feels deeply Jewish. The Torah’s repeated refrain is to *love the stranger because you were strangers*. Isn’t this group applying that mitzvah, full force?

Well, yes—and no. *Love the stranger* is indeed a strong injunction in the Torah. But so, too, is each generation’s fight against Amalek. The Torah recognizes that there’s evil in the world, which must be confronted. This is a view many young progressives aren’t comfortable with. But you cannot relate to *all* “strangers” oblivious of the fact that Israel has real enemies.

This third group is deeply conflicted about Israel. *And the organized Jewish community has neglected to develop the targeted and specific programming that is vitally needed for engaging progressive twentysomethings*. This is especially problematic, given that a large proportion of the leadership of the non-Orthodox community—including rabbis—will come from this group.

My suggestions:

First, we must create programs that will bring people in this third group together with young, Israeli changemakers. My greatest regret in the time I ran Hazon was that we couldn’t raise permanent funding for *Siach* (“conversation”), which did precisely this. Five times, over five years, we brought together Israeli, European, and American environmental and social justice leaders. It was profound, intense, sometimes hard—and it was deeply impactful.

It is too easy to find reasons not to fund this work. Yes, it’s complicated, and yes, many participants will express themselves in ways that make some uncomfortable. But if young idealistic Jews

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are *not* in relation with Israelis who share much of their critique but who live in Israel and deal, every day, with the complexities of living there—if we don't put young liberal Jews in relation with Israelis, then some will surely be pulled, inexorably, into the fourth group: people who find it almost impossible ever to defend Israel.

One clear example: Teenagers in Israel who are part of *ha'noar l'ma'an ha'aklim* (“Youth Protest for The Climate”) share a deep passion with the American teenagers in Hazon's Jewish Youth Climate Movement. But these young Israelis and Americans certainly see Israel differently. Bringing them together won't just strengthen Jewish environmentalism; it will also strengthen Israeli-Diaspora relationships in powerful ways.

Second, we must integrate into Jewish education a new way of addressing the particular and the general. We live our lives in concentric circles, out from family and friends to the 8 billion people on the planet. Between these two groups lies the Jewish people. I put family and friends in particular before Jews in general—but I put Jews in particular before the planet in general. This was once obvious. But today, “preference for” (good) is hard for many to distinguish from “prejudice against” (bad).

Because of this, many see preference *for* Israelis as prejudice *against* Palestinians—and thus tantamount to racism. This is the presumption that underpinned the rabbinical students' letter criticizing Israel during last year's war in Gaza. *We cannot address progressive anti-Israel sentiment without first addressing this underlying tension between preference and prejudice.*

Third, we don't just need more empathy and more relationships among young changemakers; we also need to *relearn the habit of arguing.*

My friends Abi Dauber Sterne and Robbie Gringras have developed a new project, For the Sake of Argument, to re-teach people how to disagree. They have spent 20 years working in Israel education; but at a certain point, they realized they couldn't help people engage with Israel if those people couldn't argue peaceably.



I end by noting that the Ukraine war erupted as I was writing this essay. Our young people have lived through four years of immense political polarization—two years of Covid, now this war, plus the climate crisis, burning down upon the future of their lives. We should not be surprised that they are unsettled, or have mental-health issues, or are critical of the generations who came before them.

It's against this backdrop that I think of the distinction drawn by the late Rabbi Sacks, z”l, between optimism and hope. Optimism is the expectation that things will get better. Hope is a positive vision for the world we want to create—and a determination to create it.

So: I am not optimistic.

But I am genuinely hopeful.

Our task is to listen and learn; to build relationships across difference; to have empathy for all; and to learn to argue with respect. That's how we might yet build a healthier and more sustainable world for all. *Kein yehi ratzon*—may it be so . . . *