

ISRAEL – PALESTINE: A PROGRESSIVE JEW’S DILEMMA

*Talk by Kay Halpern at Paintbranch Unitarian Universalist congregation
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I’m going to start with two stories.

Here’s the first one. Some of you know it. When I was a child in Hebrew school, we learned the story of two Jewish sages, Shammai and Hillel, who lived 2,000 years ago. Someone seeking to convert to Judaism goes to Shammai and says, “teach me the whole Torah while standing on one foot.” Shammai tells him to get lost. So the seeker goes to Hillel and asks the same question. Hillel says it pretty much boils down to this: “that which is hateful to you, do not do to others. The rest is commentary. Go and study.” We also learned another famous saying of Hillel’s. Some of you may know this as well:

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
If not now, when?*

Here’s the second story. When I was in grad school in the early 1980s, I went to hear an American general give a talk about the war in Lebanon. Afterward, as was the custom, a group of students took him out for drinks. We asked him his opinion about the war. “The Arabs,” he said, “have their claims, and the Jews have theirs.” Solomon the Wise. “Why is it, General,” I blurted as he poured me more wine, “that the Jews are just like everyone else – ” He finished my sentence: “only more so.”

These two stories infuse everything I am about to say. As a Jew I often feel tugged in two different, seemingly opposite directions: toward the Jewish People, on the one hand, and toward humanity as a whole, on the other. Toward myself, my tribe. And toward others. I am frequently reminded that this Jewish tension between the particular and the universal is part of the human condition. It is a dilemma that all of us – regardless of our ethnic or religious background – grapple with to some extent.

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As I stand before you here today I feel like I am straddling two very different worlds: the world of the “mainstream” Jewish community, and this world here, of peace activists focused on the Middle East. In an effort to promote communication and understanding, I will try to give you a little perspective from the Jewish side.

Some of what I have to say will no doubt unnerve people on both sides.

For starters, I am not what some might expect as a presenter of the “Jewish perspective,” since I am often critical of Israel. As many members of my synagogue could tell you, this criticism is not always welcome. There are members of my congregation – good, intelligent, people, many of whom would describe themselves as liberal or progressive –

who view much of what Israel does, including the January 2009 war in Gaza, as a justified reaction. As Jews, many of us find it hard to believe that we, too, are capable of fomenting cycles of violence and deliberately missing opportunities for peace. Sometimes, in a perverse twist on Shakespeare's famous line from the Merchant of Venice, I feel like shouting, "Hey – if you prick us, do we not bleed?" Meaning, we are no different – no better – than anyone else. When our people have both power and fear we are just as vulnerable as the rest of humanity to feeling ugly emotions and committing acts of cruelty. We are just as vulnerable to seeing others as less than ourselves. To return to Shakespeare's intended message of compassion for the vilified outsider, if you prick a Palestinian, does he, too, not bleed?

What is so jarring, so painful, for me as a Jew is that this message of compassion for *everyone* is the very core of Jewish identity: *v'ger lo tilchatz* – do not oppress a stranger – *v'atem y'datem et nefesh hager* – for you know the feelings, the soul, of the stranger – *ki gerim hayitem b'erezt mitzrayim* – since you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Do I think, for example, that Israel's war on Gaza was justified? Israel has a right to defend itself. But this war didn't have to be. Israel had many opportunities to avoid it – and the rockets that provoked it. Here is what Rabbi Arik Ascherman, of Rabbis for Human Rights, said:

We Israelis tend to believe that the laws that apply to the rest of the world don't apply to us... Most Israelis truly believe that we have the most moral army in the world... While I have very serious concerns about the conduct of the Israeli army in the recent Gaza War, and no illusions about the morality of some of those we face, I first ask whether we could have avoided the renewal of rockets on Sderot that precipitated the war. As I have written previously, few Israelis are aware of the connection between the mood in Gaza and our failure to uphold our commitments in the June cease fire agreement to open up the border crossings and let in essential goods. What would have happened if Gazan civilians had more of their basic humanitarian needs met and saw that Israel could be trusted to abide by agreements? What would have happened had we spoken to Hamas? What would have happened had we taken more decisive steps to ending the Occupation? We might have found ourselves in exactly the same position, but I suspect not. — April 7, 2009 "Passover Thoughts" email from RHR

As for the Hamas charter – which I have read, and yes, it is a blatantly anti-Semitic document, with explicit references to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – the PLO had a similar charter and yet it was able to set this aside and enter a new agreement in which it recognized Israel. Hamas has indicated in writing that it is willing to accept, if not formally recognize, Israel. Marc Gopin, an experienced mediator and negotiator – and a rabbi – has said that it is wrong for Israel and the U.S. to insist on such recognition as a *starting* point for negotiations, since, from Hamas' point of view, doing so denies Palestinian ties to Jaffa and all the other Arab towns that have been taken over by Israel. Recognition is a two-way street.

So. I am critical of Israel. How, then, can I stand in my 11-year-old's Hebrew school class (parents are encouraged to attend) and sing *Hatikvah*, the Israeli national anthem? It's not that we are pledging allegiance to the Israeli flag. The kids get to choose several songs to sing at the end of class; sometimes they choose religious songs; sometimes they choose *Hatikvah*. *Hatikvah* means "the Hope." The lyrics speak of a Jewish soul, a longing for Zion, and the hope of two thousand years to be a free people in our land of Zion and Jerusalem. Many in this room will see these lyrics as chauvinist and exclusionary. How, for example, could I sing this song if I were an Arab citizen of Israel?

And yet the lyrics resonate with me as a Jew. Even for the vast majority of American Jews who, like myself, are more secular than religious, we know that, through the centuries, our people have always prayed facing Jerusalem. The powerful ritual of the Passover seder, the meal at which we retell the story of the exodus from bondage in Egypt to freedom – a ritual that even the most secular among us tend to keep – ends with the words, "next year in Jerusalem!" And what does it mean to be a free people? Freedom from a long history of persecution. Freedom to take charge of our own destiny.

And what of Zion and Zionism? There are some who claim to be working on behalf of justice, peace, and reconciliation who use the term "Zionism" as shorthand for all the evils of the world. They speak of Israel, or of Zionists, as the root cause of strife. They focus only on Israel and ignore unjust or violent acts committed by other nations or groups in the Middle East or elsewhere. To call Israel to task is fair – and necessary. To attribute all ills to the Jewish state alone is anti-Semitic. If one is going to focus on Israel, there are legitimate reasons for doing so that need to be voiced so that those – Jews and others who might be hostile to criticism of Israel – will listen. For example, it is relevant for Americans to focus on Israel because it receives more of our tax dollars than any other country, and because, as the only remaining superpower with a long history of close association with Israel, we have a great deal of influence over it.

Words matter. While there are many things that are and have been done in the name of Zionism that I abhor, Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. It is first and foremost not a colonial enterprise but a movement of self determination. It started in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair and the pogroms in Eastern Europe and gained critical momentum during the Holocaust, after which many Jews simply had nowhere else to go. (The United States infamously refused entry to a ship with Jewish refugees.) [hold up page on St. Louis refugee ship from 6-21-09 Wash Post Outlook section] To disrespect the national aspirations of one people – Jews – in the name of promoting those of another – Palestinians – does not help.

Because these topics are so sensitive, so volatile, I am compelled to continue this talk in a very Jewish way, by asking questions and having an argument with myself. Asking questions and grappling with big, sticky issues are a central part of the Jewish tradition. The name, "Israel," given to Jacob after he struggled with the angel of God, literally means "he who wrestles with God." So here goes...

Wait a minute, Kay – don't you have it backwards? Aren't the Jews denigrating the national aspirations of Palestinians while promoting their own?

Yes, in many ways. Israeli historians documented the expulsions and atrocities of 1948 and today the facts on the ground and the defensive mood in Israel, with the rise to power of an openly racist politician like Avigdor Lieberman, are making things much worse for Palestinians. But my point is, if you're trying to improve communication and prospects for peace, each side has to recognize where the other is coming from. It is just as important for Palestinians and other non-Jews to understand what Zionism means to Jews as it is, for example, for Israel to recognize that it bears some responsibility for the creation of Palestinian refugees, or that a Hamas negotiator may find it hurtful to recognize Israel without Israel also acknowledging its capture of Arab homes, towns, and land.

So, Kay, are you a Zionist?

If being a Zionist means that I believe there is an entity called the Jewish People, with a deep, spiritual and emotional attachment to *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, then yes, I am a Zionist.

If being a Zionist means that I believe this people, just like any other people, has a right to survive – especially in the face of millennia of persecution, culminating in attempted annihilation – then yes, I am a Zionist.

If being a Zionist means that I believe the Jewish People, like any other people, have a right to self determination, then yes, I am a Zionist.

If being a Zionist means being for my people, then yes, I am a Zionist.

But – if being a Zionist means being *only* for my people and ignoring Hillel's admonition to treat others as we would want to be treated, then...no, I am not a Zionist.

Some in the Jewish community would consider me a “traitor to the Jewish people” for even asking this question. So let me try to flesh out my answer.

There are many things about Israel that I admire. The incredible revival of Hebrew as a modern, everyday language. The vibrancy of its institutions of higher learning, medicine, research, and its artistic and cultural scene. The fact that many Israelis freely speak out against their government's policies, document unjust acts, and seek to build connections with Palestinian counterparts. And there was Ilan Ramon, the Israeli astronaut. A son and grandson of Holocaust survivors, he died with his colleagues when the space shuttle Columbia broke up on reentry on February 1, 2003. A few days later, I remember sitting on the metro on my way to work, staring at a picture of the fallen astronauts on the op-ed page of the Washington Post. I could not take my eyes off the Jewish astronaut and the Star of David on the Israeli flag sewn onto his orange spacesuit. I was sad but also very proud: this was not a yellow star of shame but a symbol of Jewish vitality. For the entire

25-minute ride, I could not stop staring at Ramon and that Jewish star through eyes filmy with tears.

And yet there are many things about Israel that make me cringe: the treatment of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and even of Israel's Arab citizens. Is it fair that I can automatically become a citizen of Israel even though my family and I have only been there a few times, whereas Palestinians who were born there and grew up there and whose families have lived there for generations, cannot? Can a Jewish state be both Jewish and democratic? Many in the Jewish community would say yes; the key is making sure there is a sizeable Jewish majority. But how will this demographic ratio be maintained? By trying to get more and more Jews to immigrate to Israel? By expelling non-Jews? By forcing a drop in the Arab birthrate? By building walls and living in a self-imposed ghetto of domination? And what of the rights of the minority population? It is helpful to remember that in the decades leading up to Israel's establishment as a state, there were divergent views regarding the meaning of Zionism and how it should be implemented. Some Jewish thinkers, like Martin Buber and Ahad Ha'Am, spoke of returning a Jewish presence to the ancient land of Israel, but not one that would displace or dominate the indigenous population. Doing that, they said, would negate what it means to be Jewish.

Shamai Leibowitz is an Israeli lawyer who has defended Palestinians in Israeli courts. He is a religious Jew and grandson of the late Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a revered and often outspoken Israeli intellectual. In a February 2009 blog entry, he said, "If we want an Israel that is really true to the best of Jewish values, it cannot be exclusively Jewish." Prophetically, Yeshayahu wrote in 1968 that Jewish rule over Arab populations in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as inside the green line, would lead to a "catastrophe" for the Jewish people and corrupt both Jews and Arabs. He went even further, calling the religious-nationalist attachment to the land a form of idolatry. These are strong words. What do they mean to me? That our attachment to Zion, to Jerusalem, is not – cannot – be purely physical. That if we make it *only* physical, these sacred places lose their power. They lose their promise of a better world for all – for a *sheynere und bessere velt*, as generations of my forebears dreamed of in Yiddish. When we say "next year in Jerusalem," we are not talking about booking an El Al flight there. We are talking about hope, about striving for a more just and humane existence. Having obtained physical control over Jerusalem and the Holy Land and all its inhabitants, we seem to be losing the moral force that has propelled our survival as a people.

What's the point, then, of having a Jewish state if it's Jewish in ethnicity or shared history only, without the values that – to echo the *shehechyanu* prayer – have kept us together, sustained us through adversity, and brought us through the centuries to this critical point in time? In a sense, this is what we wanted – to be a nation just like all the other nations. To no longer be special, "chosen," different. To be left alone, free to shape our own destiny. But the direction we are shaping it is increasingly ominous. We are acting more and more like Pharaoh every day, with myriad structures and actions that control and humiliate another people. While some of these measures may protect Israel from suicide bombers in the short run, they do nothing to make it more secure in the long

run. In fact, the Palestinian frustration and rage they engender do just the opposite. Is this how we will survive as Jews? Do we need the humility and sense of “otherness,” the identification with the stranger, that living in a multi-ethnic society provides?

What does it mean to survive as Jews? How do we resolve the tension between the tribal, the exclusive, the desire for a state of one’s own, and the universal moral imperatives that underlie Jewish identity?

Judith Weis, a Canadian Jew and self-described “former Zionist,” speaks out eloquently against Zionism on a youtube video. While I would not unequivocally condemn Israel the way she does, one of the last things she said touched me deeply. It was meant to touch the heart of every Jew. “Here O Israel,” she chanted, echoing the *Sh’ma*, the most sacred prayer in Judaism that every Jewish child knows by heart, “we are all one – humanity is all one...” The prayer goes, “Here O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” When I was little, what made the most sense to me – and still does – is, *we are God – when we are one*. If there is a God, the presence of the Divine becomes manifest when we are in harmony with each other, when we recognize ourselves in each other. When we see that the Palestinian youth with humiliation and anger in his heart and a rock in his hand, and the Israeli soldier joking with his comrades while squinting at him through crosshairs do not have to be defined by the circumstances that set them against each other. We sense the presence of God when we realize that both these young men are made in the image of what we all hold dear.

There’s something missing, though, from this we-are-one message. Is universal all good and particular all bad? Is it best to lose our specific identities in a universal melting pot? Perhaps the very things that make each of us distinct, that separate us as individuals and as peoples, enable us to connect with one another. Think about it. A good novel conveys a universal message but we can only apprehend it through characters rooted in a specific time and place, with nuances that bring them to life. Listen to what the Quran says:

*O Mankind! (God) created you from a single pair of male and female
And made you into Nations and Tribes, that you may know each other
Not that you may despise each other... (Sura 49:13)*

There are Israeli Jews and Palestinians who have found a way to connect through their common grief and specific stories. Members of the Bereaved Parents’ Circle are people who have had children killed in the conflict. They are parents of Palestinian militants and Israeli soldiers. And they are parents of the victims of both. As these families who have suffered the deepest loss teach us, our differences do not have to translate into threats. We do not have to condemn ourselves to playing a zero-sum game. When we harden our hearts against others and seek to destroy their dignity, we poison ourselves as well. Ultimately, we cannot advance ourselves at others’ expense. As we remind ourselves on Passover, we are never truly free until all people are free. *L’shanah ha’ba’a b’Yerushalayim*. Next year in Jerusalem, with freedom and dignity and justice for all who live there.

Word count: 3345

SOME POINTS FROM THE Q & A DISCUSSION THAT FOLLOWED

- *Doesn't Jewish self-determination mean a Jewish state?*

Not necessarily. The cultural Zionist vision articulated by Buber and others was mentioned. And there was Moshe Sharett – Israel's first foreign minister and second prime minister – who was much more open than Ben Gurion to living and working with the indigenous population. It is interesting that many Jews in the U.S. have never heard of Sharett. His views did not prevail, and his diaries, which were very critical of Ben Gurion's approach to the Arab population, are not widely available.

- *Since the views of Buber, or even Sharett, did not prevail, isn't the above point just theoretical? We have a Jewish state. Do you want to see that destroyed? What do we do now?*

Given the current situation, a Jewish state is what we have, so the way to move forward is a two-state solution. Many Jews, obviously, but also many Palestinians (for different reasons), are more comfortable with this option than a one-state solution. However, the viability of a Palestinian state is increasingly threatened by the settlements, particularly those poised to encircle the envisioned Palestinian capital of East Jerusalem.

- *What's to prevent a two-state solution from becoming a two- "stage" solution, where the second stage ends up being one bi-national state?*

The only way to keep a Jewish-majority state is by continuing to restrict citizenship, land acquisition and home building in that state primarily to Jews, and possibly expelling non-Jews and limiting intermarriage. Because these actions run counter to human rights and the Jewish emphasis on justice itself, they are not sustainable in the long run. It's true, other peoples, like the Italians or the French, say, take their homelands, their states, for granted. Don't the Jews, a long-lived and persecuted people, deserve – and need – a state of their own as well? The problem is, these other groups have been living in the same general area for many years, where they form a natural majority. We Jews had our ancient homeland, but the simple fact is, we haven't lived there in large numbers for 2,000 years and others have been living there for many generations. Another thing to consider is that history is dynamic. If a two-state solution is actually achieved and the two peoples begin trade and other peaceful exchanges so that the two states eventually begin to function more as some kind of single, federated entity, is that a bad thing? Consider also the Jewish community in the U.S. Jewish life in this country is different than that in Israel but in many ways it is just as vibrant, and in some ways, such as religious options, perhaps even more so. The challenge is, whether in the diaspora or in the land of our forebears, how do we maintain our identity – our values, our history, our culture, our religion? How do we continue to evolve as a people, navigating between assimilation and isolation? How do we avoid passivity when threatened without abusing power?