

## Criticizing Israel

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I want to speak with you today about criticizing Israel.

In early 1997, when I was heading ARZA, the Reform movement's Zionist arm, I organized an emergency delegation of Reform rabbis to Israel. I was deeply concerned that Benjamin Netanyahu, then, as now, the prime minister, would support legislation invalidating non-Orthodox conversions for Jews who wanted to become Israeli citizens.

Within a matter of two or three days some twenty senior Reform rabbis from across North America agreed to join me for twenty-eight hours in Israel, and off we went. We arranged a meeting with the prime minister for late afternoon, a few hours after our scheduled arrival, and separate meetings the next day with key Members of Knesset and other public officials.

We were on an airline called TWA – remember them? It stood for Trans World Airline. Now TWA stands for – They Went Away. One of the reasons they went away is that they were unreliable – and sure enough – we made an unscheduled stop in Rome.

It took five hours to leave Italy. I had no contact with my Israeli colleagues because it was prior to the age of blackberries, text-messaging and tiny cell phones that fit into your pocket. The only mobile phones were about the size of a small suitcase and they rarely worked anyway, especially overseas. I figured that the meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu was lost, and I hoped that we would be able to reschedule for the following day.

We arrived in Israel at about 9:30 p.m. By then, we were exhausted; the rabbis coming from the West Coast had been traveling for twenty-four hours. The only thought on our fatigued minds was to sink into clean sheets and rest our sleep-deprived souls. I'd figure it all out the next day.

But as we climbed onto our bus, amidst a swarm of international media that had been waiting for us throughout the evening my Israeli counterpart said to me, "We're going straight to the prime minister's office, he is waiting for you."

And so we went; un-showered, unshaved, un-groomed, unkempt, un-attractive, unfed and quite unappealing. We entered the prime minister's office at around 10:30 at night. As we were waiting for Netanyahu, sipping orange juice and munching on those stale Israeli biscuits they give to guests, I asked his senior aide: "Bobby, why is the prime minister

still up so late? Doesn't he have something else to do? Doesn't he want to go home? How does he have all this time to wait around for us?"

The aid responded: "Amami, when the government is at stake, there is always time."

At that moment I realized that all of our lobbying work, public advocacy and aggressive criticism of Israeli policy had paid off.

We talked with the prime minister until after midnight. I, not he, cut the meeting short because the rabbis were dropping like flies. It seemed that he could have gone on for another two hours.

To make a long story short: we politely threatened each other: He had the conversion bill hanging over our necks and I told him that if you pass this outrage you will lose American Jewry, the one asset that Israel could not afford to lose.

In truth, the Prime Minister did not want to pass the legislation in the worst way; and we did not want to bring American Jewry to the point of alienation. Even if we had that power in us we didn't have it in us.

By the time we left Israel twenty-eight hours later, the Prime Minister announced the creation of a special commission, buying enough time to diffuse the immediate crisis.

We did not have time to pray at the Western Wall, but that was something that I always tried to arrange when taking Reform rabbis to Israel. Inevitably, ultra-Orthodox protesters would gather around, foaming at the mouth, as they attempted to storm the barricades placed by the Jerusalem police to protect us. The ultra-Orthodox protestors always seemed to be especially agitated by the women rabbis that I always asked to lead the services. I don't know why!

Thirteen years later, the only thing that has changed is TWA. The ultra-Orthodox parties still monopolize religious life in Israel; they are still proposing legislation that strengthens their control and disenfranchises everyone else. There are still scuffles at the Western Wall. We are still doing everything we can to break the ultra-Orthodox monopoly. Benjamin Netanyahu is still prime minister.

We have won a few rounds; they have won a few rounds; essentially the situation is as it was. I could pull out one of my speeches from thirteen years ago and give it verbatim today.

Why do I tell you this story? First, to highlight that Israel is a uniquely fascinating country that is grappling with fundamental social issues that will not be resolved quickly. For those who take Israel seriously there is both exhilaration and frustration in equal measure. It will take many more years to resolve basic questions of religion and state in Israel. It will take many more years for Israel to reach peace with all of her neighbors. Were these problems easy they would have been solved long ago.

Like the United States, but all the more so, Israel is a work in progress. It took a hundred years and a bitter civil war in this country to settle the issue of racial equality, and, in truth, we are still grappling with it.

Why else do I tell you this story; to emphasize that I believe in criticism, including criticizing those whom we most love. It is not that it is always easy for me to receive criticism, or that I necessarily believe that all criticism leveled at me is fair. Nonetheless, Judaism is insistent:

The book of Leviticus contains a verse that we will read on Yom Kippur: *hoceach tocheach et amitecha* – rebuke and rebuke again your fellow. All of Judaism is based upon social rebuke: on seeing something wrong and working to make it better. And if the initial rebuke does not work; rebuke again. These High Holy Days are dedicated to examining our deeds in the most critical way possible and resolving to act better.

Like all democracies, Israel too, rests on the principle of criticism. We believe in a self-correcting and self-repairing community. Israeli society, itself, is one big fishbowl of critics, everyone believing that they, not the guy in office, should be the prime minister, and have no hesitation voicing whatever criticism comes to mind.

I reject the idea that a supporter of Israel cannot also be a critic of Israel. I do not believe that Israel is perfect and I do not believe that Israel is beyond reproach. “Shaa, don’t talk,” is not a good policy.

A healthy relationship with Israel is one of unconditional, but not uncritical love. A vital relationship with Israel is one of unconditional, but not uncritical support. A productive relationship with Israel is one of unconditional but not uncritical dialogue. Some of us are much too quick to label those who disagree with us, or with the party line, as somehow, not supportive of Israel.

I, for one, am happy to see the emergence of Jewish organizations that believe their views are not being sufficiently heard and have organized to advocate their opinions. I do not believe that this weakens Israel or the American Jewish community; to the contrary, we are strengthened by additional voices heard around the table.

The primary threat to Israel comes not from those who are so engaged that they are prompted to voice their disagreement with this or that policy, but from an increasingly alienated and apathetic American Jewry that doesn’t care about Israel at all.

When it comes to American Jews and Israel, the real problem today is not our diversity of opinion. It is that all too many Jews have no opinion at all. It is not that we have too many activists; it is that we do not have enough.

So if you have some issue with Israel, raise it. If you have some criticism, voice it. If you have some concern, join others who agree with you. Do not be intimidated and do not get discouraged. Tell them that your rabbi sent you.

And fight hard; fight to win. Even if you are in the minority, rejoice in the elation of the struggle. Life is about struggle. Nothing great was ever achieved in tranquility. Social progress is won through creative tension and strenuous effort over a long period of time.

Only bear in mind: if you are vocal about what you believe is right you will hear from those who are vocal about why they believe you are wrong. It is the way of the world. As you are critical of those with whom you disagree, grant to them the right to be critical of you.

Let us not confuse disagreement with our views with suppression of our views. In truth, despite much debate in our community in recent years, no one is suppressing Jewish opinion on Israel. It is not possible. Jewish opinion is as irrepressible and as reliable as Old Faithful itself. Argumentation and diversity are in our very bloodstream. For heaven's sake; some of the organizers of the Gaza flotilla were Jewish.

In principle, I have no problem with anyone, Jew or non-Jew, who is critical of Israel. I, too, am critical of Israel. I have no problem with those who are sympathetic with Palestinians. I, too, am sympathetic with Palestinians. One can be sympathetic with Israelis and sympathetic with Palestinians at the same time; it is not a zero sum game.

My problem is not with those who point out Palestinian suffering. I, too, am pained by their suffering. My problem is not with those who disagree with Israel's settlement policy. I, too, disagree with placing settlements in the heart of the West Bank or in the center of Palestinian towns; and I am appalled by the messianism and fanaticism of some of the settlers and their propensity towards violence.

My problem is not with those who advocate a two-state solution. I, too, believe that this is the only viable long-term solution in the Middle East. One can be for a Palestinian state and a Jewish state at the same time; it is not a zero sum game. The majority of Israelis are in favor of a Palestinian state. Israel cannot indefinitely rule over Palestinians. It would then be impossible to fulfill the Zionist vision of a democratic and Jewish state.

My problem is with those who are unfair. My problem is with those who are duplicitous. My problem is with those who are hypocritical. My problem is with those who are cruel. My problem is with those who hate.

My problem is with those who are against, not the policies of Israel, but the very existence of Israel. My problem is with the Helen Thomases of the world, who hide under the thin veneer of enlightenment, and who believe that "the Jews should just get the heck out of Palestine and return to Europe...or America...or wherever."

My problem is with those who believe what the respected mid-century Italian intellectual, Natalia Ginzburg, believed: “To the sun-burnt sabra, the Hebrew soldier with the weapons in his hand, I prefer the bent Jew who studies the Bible, the fragile, weak and sick Jew.”

My problem is with those who believe that all of the problems of the world are Israel’s fault. If only Israel weren’t created; if only the Jews would slink back into the ghetto.

Oscar Wilde attributed this thought to Thomas Carlyle:

Carlyle said that it is possible to write an entire biography of Michelangelo that would make no mention of the works of Michelangelo.

Reality is so complex, said Carlyle, and so fragmentary, and history is so simplified, that you could write a history of Michelangelo’s dreams; a history of his medical conditions; a history of the mistakes he made; a history of all of the moments he thought about food – but never actually mention the sculptures of David and Moses or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. There might be 13,000 facts of Michelangelo’s life, and you could write many biographies that would never mention that he was a sculptor and a painter.

Reality is so complex, history is so fragmented, current events are so simplified and the media are so sound-bit, that it is possible to speak about Israel without ever mentioning Israeli democracy; the rule of law; and a renowned and respected judiciary that often rules against the most powerful public officials.

It is possible to speak about Israel without ever mentioning its respect for human rights, safeguarded by a free and raucous press that is home to more journalists per capita than any other country in the world; and where at least eighty human rights organizations toil. It is possible to speak about Israel without ever mentioning that gays serve in the military. It is possible to speak about Israel without ever mentioning that Israel has taken in millions of immigrants and refugees.

It is possible to portray Israel as some third-world backwater state without ever mentioning its vibrant and open economy; its great institutions of higher learning, home to a self-critical and politically active intellectual class. It is possible to speak about Israel never mentioning that it has the highest number of scientists and engineers per capita in the world and is a global leader in technology and agriculture.

If those Turkish activists on the flotilla only knew: The cell phones, computers and plasma screens they were using to inform – and misinform – the world, contained hardware and software developed in Israel. Their voyage would not even have been possible were it not for Israeli technology.

The country described in public discourse is not the country I know, and I know Israel well. It is like the guy who looks for “an eye and ear doctor.” “There is no such thing,” he is told. “What is your problem?”

“My problem,” he said, “is that what I hear is not what I see.”

What I hear about Israel is not what I see.

It is possible to speak about Israel without ever mentioning that Israel has already signed two peace accords with Arab neighbors; already withdrew from most of the territory of the West Bank; and that it has offered on at least two occasions during the past decade to withdraw from 95% of the West Bank – at one point prompting President Clinton to admit that he thought that the Israelis had made a mistake; that then Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, offered too much at Camp David.

It is possible to speak about Israel without ever mentioning Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran and a host of other extremists threatening Israel’s way of life and very existence. It is possible to speak about Palestinian civilian deaths that resulted from the Gaza Operation Cast Lead without ever speaking about why they died; that ten thousand missiles rained down on Israeli border towns after Israel withdrew completely from Gaza, and it was Hamas that recklessly and criminally put its own civilians in harm’s way. It is vicious slander to accuse Israel of purposely targeting civilians.

It is possible to speak about Israel’s military operations without ever mentioning that no military in the world has taken the precautions of the Israel Defense Forces, certainly not the allied forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. It seems like every week an errant missile is fired at a wedding party or other civilian gathering in Pakistan or Afghanistan. There are no calls for international investigations.

It is possible to speak about nine regrettable deaths on a humanitarian flotilla without ever mentioning that some on that flotilla were hardly humanitarians and were awaiting Israeli forces with pre-mediated malice. It is possible to inflate the importance of this flotilla over the lives of millions of oppressed people worldwide, many of them Muslims.

It is not that I hide or paper over Israel’s faults. It is that by speaking only of these faults and not the 13,000 other details of Israeli life; by allowing unimpeded Israel-bashing masquerading as justice, human rights and international law, we are, in fact, distorting reality. We have made Michelangelo a brute rather than a genius.

You would think that the Muslim world would express some concern, demonstrate some passion and mobilize some international agency to address the subjugation of millions of Muslims, including the oppression of Muslim women, wouldn’t you?

You would think that enlightened nations and human rights advocates might also muster some passion about the endless civil war in Congo; the Iranian massacres and persecution of its own citizens; the thousands upon thousands of Chechnyans killed by the Russians. You would think that these might be worthy of an investigation, no?

Wouldn't you think that those who are concerned about occupations, would want to raise the issue of Russia's occupation of part of Georgia, or Turkey's now thirty-six year occupation of a third of Cyprus, after having ethnically cleansed the Greek Cypriot population and resettled ethnic Turks in their stead?

What should we make of people mostly from our side of the equation – progressives, liberals, academics and intellectuals – who accept these outrages with sublime composure and relative indifference, but are apoplectic about democratic Israel's every perceived minor violation?

We should be clear: other people's crimes do not excuse your own crimes. Palestinian crimes do not excuse Israeli crimes. Muslim crimes do not excuse Jewish crimes. No one has the right to wrong someone, even if they have been wronged themselves. But this excessive preoccupation with Israel shuts down any capacity for self-reflection or reasoned discussion and leads to a form of moral paralysis.

All those who truly care about preventing bloodshed in Gaza; where are you? Now is the time – before the next war – to address the root cause and restrain the brutal fundamentalist regime of Hamas. Instead we hear news of additional flotillas: flotillas of futility; a form of moral paralysis.

All those who truly seek to prevent loss of life in Lebanon; where are you? Now is the time – before the next war – to address the root cause and restrain Syria and Hezbollah. Instead blind eyes turn to the continuing stockpiling of ever-more accurate and deadly missiles. Hezbollah has three times more missiles today than before the 2006 war. Where are you, you who claim to care about Lebanon?

Increasingly, criticism of Israel has become an anti-Israel religion. As Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan said recently: The world views the swastika and the Star of David together. Come, come, now.

All of the world's problems can be traced to one single state, Israel, born in original sin and surviving only through violence and occupation, supported by an America that is hostage to the Jews who have formed an alliance with evangelical Christians. If only we rid ourselves of this fascist state, peace would break out in the world. We could solve the issues of global warming, economic distress, religious fundamentalism and political extremism.

...But we have nothing against the Jews...and don't accuse us of anti-Semitism.

The psalmist, in a fit of exasperation and disillusion, turned to the heavens and cried: "Why do the nations rage and imagine things that are not?"

Why do the nations rage, imagining things that are not? What are humanitarians, who insist that they are not anti-Semitic but only anti-Zionist – what are they doing on the side of the Iranian-supported Hamas and Hezbollah? Hassan Nasrallah, the head of

Hezbollah, said recently: “If we searched the world, we would not find anyone more cowardly, despicable, weak and feeble of mind than the Jew.”

What are democrats doing on the side of autocrats? What are the enlightened doing on the side of those who live in medieval shadows, perpetrating terror on their own citizens and shooting rockets at Israeli civilians?

It is deeply distressing and politically dangerous that support of Israel in our country is increasingly seen as a partisan issue. It is deeply distressing that those who define themselves as Republicans or conservatives are far more supportive of Israel than those who define themselves as liberals or Democrats.

It is reflective of the mass confusion of our era when we allow a small democracy fighting for its life in the world’s worst neighborhood to be savaged as if it were an anti-democratic dictatorship; savaged by forces that are, themselves, anti-democratic dictatorships and who perversely appropriate the very language of human rights that we progressives developed over centuries of hard struggle. They have drained the language of human rights of meaning. They have drained liberalism of meaning.

It only goes to show yet again – as if we needed further evidence – that education does not prevent error; and degrees do not ensure decency. Philosophers can be fools and rectors can be wrong.

It is fashionable in some liberal quarters today to bash Israel as the latest litmus test of liberalism. “We’ll let you into the club but show us your anti-Israel credentials first.” It is actually the opposite: Israel is the ultimate test of liberalism; the testing grounds of theory and practice.

Can we develop a liberalism that relates to the world as it is, not as we would want it to be? Do we offer a compelling vision of the future or just stale liberation theories? Are we prepared to make hard moral choices or shall we be satisfied with easy moralizing slogans?

In our new world, where democracies engage insurgents who hide among civilian populations and use them as shields; where terrorists store weapons in, and fire from, hospitals, houses of worship, ambulances and universities – can we develop a liberalism that fights injustice justly? That is the question.

To our university students here today: stand your ground. To parents of university students here today: nerve your children with some courage and teach them to defend themselves. To our university professors: help your students and don’t give in. Do not allow higher education to advance lower values.

To all the rest of us: Israel is the most fascinating place on earth. We cannot fully understand the Jewish experience, and we cannot fully understand ourselves, if we do not engage the State of Israel.



Get yourself over to Israel. Do it alone, or, frankly, the best way is to do it with us. Join the March synagogue mission that will land in Tel Aviv just in time for Purim. See the miracle for yourself: a small country with a giant heart; a new country with an ancient past.

I will show you the rock from which you were hewn and the quarry from which you were dug. I will show you where your father, Abraham, wandered and where your mother Sarah sojourned. You will see with your own eyes the fulfillment of the prophecy: how the wilderness blossoms like Eden and how the desert blooms like a garden of God. You will hear in the streets gladness and joy, thanksgiving and the sound of music.

Get on the plane. Make a decision; this is the year.

I spent one morning this summer in Dachau, outside of Munich. It is not that I normally spend vacations this way, but we were with our daughter who is now a freshman in college, and she was eager to see the concentration camp. So, of course, we went.

Dachau was an evil place. Not as many people died there as in other concentration camps, but Dachau became the symbol of Nazi atrocities because of its location, right outside of Munich in the heart of a German suburb; and because of the now-famous film made by American soldiers upon liberating the camp that showed corpses piled upon each other and left to rot in the open.

I had been to Dachau many years ago, before my daughter was born; but when you go with your own children, you can't help but to personalize the experience. I was struck this time by the utter normalcy of the place. Dachau is a town. It has everything every other town has. It was a town back then as well.

To get to the camp you walk about a quarter of a mile from the parking lot. You cross a street and some houses. We came very early, so everything was so quiet and so normal.

I saw a typical German family walking down the neighborhood lane. They were young parents, the mother was holding in her arms her bouncing, bubbly, burbling baby, and a shaggy dog was prancing along with them. I spent a long time looking at this family, just letting my mind wander as they faded away and became small specks in the distance. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

From inside the concentration camp, you can see houses that abut the main building that was used to process prisoners. In that building you can still see the hooks they used to hang prisoners for hours, lashing them with whips and canes. Typical red-roofed houses literally overlook the torture room. The roofs are studded with antennas and satellite dishes – all the trappings of normal modern life. It is what you would expect to find in any middle-class neighborhood in the Western world.

I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong here. I am certainly not suggesting that the younger generations are personally responsible for the deeds of their parents and grandparents.

I simply noticed that people are prepared to live right on top of the place where some two hundred thousand souls were imprisoned, and where some thirty-thousand were killed. Their first view in the morning as they drink their coffee is overlooking the outer perimeter wall into the concentration camp square where tens of thousands of starving, bedraggled, beaten and tortured prisoners lined up every morning for roll call and selection.

And I thought to myself: In the end, life moves on. Your tragedies are your tragedies, but others get on with life. Thousands of visitors a day, including, by the way, group after group of German youth, visit those twenty acres, but the people who live right outside overlooking that spot, they live normal lives there. They have families there. They raise children there. They have pets. They have satellite television.

Your tragedy is not their tragedy. They live as if nothing happened there. After all, it has been sixty-five years since the liberation of Dachau.

In the end, Jewish history is our history. If Israel were to ever lose a war; if, as the Iranian president has said many times, one nuclear bomb is dropped on Tel Aviv that will destroy the Jewish State, there would be many headlines. Many books would be published. Many people would express real and sincere sadness. Some would weep. A few might repent.

But in the end they would move on. We would be left with the tragedy. To this day, two thousand years later, we Jews mourn the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans. For everyone else it is a small piece of history, if they are even aware of it. For us, after two millennia, it is still an open wound. It will never fully heal.

So in the end, Jewish history is our responsibility. Jewish destiny is our responsibility. Jewish life is our responsibility. The Jewish State is our responsibility.

May we prove worthy; and may we endure, now and forever.