

Why It Isn't Easy to Talk about Israel

What are the pillars of the American Jewish community? Since I can remember, striving to lead an ethical life and advocacy of Israel have been driving forces of Jewish identity and mainstays of Jewish concern and conversation. These two values can and do compliment one another. They at times may feel in tension with one another. God forbid they might ever contradict one another. Sermonizing about Israel is hard for me. It is mainly hard because I fear that those who care the most that their rabbi address this topic are likewise the most certain that doing so is easy. Easy, because it is so obvious what a rabbi is supposed to say. Easy, because in a world of “us versus them” the rabbi will enthusiastically root for “us” and unambiguously condemn “them.” Easy, because pleading for righteousness and justice for the vulnerable and oppressed is simply what rabbis and synagogues do. Easy, because it is uncomplicated. I can't be sure, I think it was pretty easy for my childhood rabbi. Arabs were trying to kill Jews and the Israeli army was trying to stop them. Simple as that. Maybe it was actually more complicated then. Regardless, it is more complicated now.

I care passionately about Israel. Israel advocacy is a key component of my Jewish identity. I am also in the minority. According to the Pew study, only 43 percent of

American Jews would say the same. By all accounts, younger American Jews, the millennials, are trending away from Israel in even greater proportions. Put in religious terms, faith in Israel is weak in the American Jewish community, and is getting weaker. The same Pew study revealed something else about us, which is either paradoxical or ironic, depending upon one's point of view: While only 43 percent of American Jews deem caring about Israel essential to their Jewishness, over 2/3rds of us call "leading an ethical and moral life" essential to being Jewish and well over half believe that must include "working for justice and equality." Let that sink in. Assuming Jews want their rabbis and synagogues to reflect their Jewish values, significantly more American Jews want me and my colleagues to take a stand for justice and equality than for the defense of Israel. Of course, this should not be at all a problem, provided one can do both. That's what I want to do this morning; both. I stand for Israel. And I stand for justice.

Tomorrow we read the Akeidah; the story of the Binding of Isaac. God makes of Abraham the inexplicable, outlandish demand that he slaughter his son Isaac on an altar as a sacrifice to God. Abraham was the first to commit to representing and spreading the belief in ethical monotheism to the entire world. He severed familial ties in order to follow a God who transcended clan. Loyalty may

exist in tension with integrity. Reaching out sincerely to all entails compromising favoritism toward any. The universal inevitably demands the sacrifice of the particular; the tribal. One may well ask, “How could Abraham contemplate sacrificing his beloved son Isaac to his God?” One might well answer, “How could he not?”

A new and radical vision deserves a fresh start in a new place. Avraham’s commitment to God is accompanied by his journey to reside in a promised land, Eretz Yisrael. From there, all peoples are to be “blessed through Abraham.” Abraham welcomes others to his tent to recognize God’s blessings, but he cannot always pitch that tent in the special new land. Hardship and famine drive him out, as it will his grandson, Jacob. Of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, only one, Isaac, never leaves the land of Israel. Isaac, alone, spends not a single moment of his life outside the land. This distinction is not lost on our midrash. Isaac is called a “olah temimah” a “complete sacrifice.” Just as Jewish Law requires that an olah animal sacrificed in the ancient Temple must never be taken outside the Temple, so too Isaac was not to leave Israel. Let that sink in: Of the Biblical patriarchs, who are our models, only Isaac was asked to sacrifice his life and only Isaac never left the Land. The “isaacs” of our people today are the Israelis, and they risk their lives as Jews by living in Israel.

I hope you all join me in formulating, and refining, opinions on how Israel should cope with threats from Gaza, complexities in the middle east, the West bank settlers and Palestinians who live under Israeli control. I hope we all want passionately to be proud of Israel, even when we disagree vehemently over Israeli actions. We should train ourselves to have the tough conversations and debate civilly and respectfully. We need to make it safe to criticize without being attacked for disloyalty. We need to make it safe to defend without being attacked for inhumanity. The inability to expose ourselves to a contrary view, when it is held in good faith, is a sign of moral weakness, not strength. We need to make it clear that hearing contrary views forces us to examine and clarify our own views, and this process makes us stronger Jews and better human beings.

But I think we need to also bear in mind that we are not “isaac.” My kids are not serving in the Israeli Defense Forces. The government does not require my wife and I to have a fortified concrete room, in anticipation of missile attacks on our home . I do not risk being killed by a suicide bomber when riding the bus-while-Jewish. It is a mitzvah to live in Israel. As far as I know, everyone of us enjoys the option of moving to Israel if we really wanted to. It would

be a great sacrifice. We could go this week. But we haven't. We won't. We are not "Isaac."

We call Abraham the founder of ethical monotheism. Some people think belief in God comes before commitment to a moral life. I think Abraham took the opposite view. According to the midrash, Abraham saw the world as a palace on fire. He demanded to know, "Where is the master of the palace?" Abraham saw a world burning to ruin. He demanded justice, and reasoned that justice demands a judge. He committed to a moral life, and that led him to God.

Abraham struggled to transcend the particular. He left behind his city and its gods for a fresh start in a strange land. It is essential that the land be alien to him. He must learn that even wicked unfamiliar communities may contain 10 righteous individuals, that even strange kings maybe God Fearing, and even foreign landowners can be fairly and respectfully negotiated with. He must know what it means to be a stranger, which becomes the basic moral refrain of the Bible - "Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt." The God of Abraham is a demanding God. The most demanding of all. He demands, "Sacrifice your beloved son Isaac."

As Immanuel Kant pointed out, the ethical requires the universal. Justice is impartial or it is not just. Tribal loyalties must bend to the call for righteousness. Abraham represents the universal. Isaac represents the particular. The Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, means that the universal must be prepared to go so far as to even sacrifice the particular. Prepared, but not executed. God says, “Stay thy hand!” The willingness to sacrifice our beloved has to be enough. God forbid we should actually plunge the knife!

It is well known that Muslims have a tradition that it was Ishmael, not Isaac, who God ordered to be sacrificed. In our own Talmudic tradition, the siblings argue over who is prepared to sacrifice more. Ishmael says, “I submitted to circumcision at age 13, when I could have resisted, whereas you, Isaac, was circumcised at 8 days of age, when you had no choice in the matter.” “Oh, yeah,” replied Isaac, “Circumcision is a trivial sacrifice; if God demanded my life, I would willingly grant it.” Immediately, God tried Abraham. What an odd and disturbing contest, to compete over who is God’s intended victim; over who really was willing to give it all up for God; over who is owed Divine recognition. They tell their story; we tell ours. On both sides it is imagined that there is enough room never have to share our stories, but the world is getting smaller, and walls are not making it bigger.

But Ishmael aside, what if there are two Isaacs? According to PEW, an impressive 73 percent of American Jews feel “remembering the Holocaust” is essential to what it means to be Jewish to them personally, a far higher number than for “caring about Israel.” By coincidence, Josephus, the famous Jewish historian of antiquity, uses the term “holocaust” to describe the sacrifice of Isaac. Indeed, whereas Israelis live with mortal risk, and the Biblical Isaac was ultimately spared, the six million were murdered for being Jews. Even a scintilla of holocaust denial is a great sin in the modern Jewish religion. Controversy broke out this past year over a new Polish law which made it illegal to accuse Poland of complicity in the Holocaust. After months of intense negotiations, the Israeli government reached a compromise with Poland and issued a joint statement earlier this summer intended to resolve the issue. Israel’s Holocaust memorial, Yad Veshem, issued a statement rebuking the Israeli government of acquiescing to “grave errors and deceptions” in that statement. In its rebuke of the Israeli government, Yad Veshem expressed concern that Israel’s agreement might harm the “historical memory of the Holocaust.” Those of us who have believed it is wrong to criticize Israel are now forced to ask ourselves, “What do we think about Yad Veshem criticising Israel?”

A second example: Also this summer, we learned that a Conservative rabbi was arrested and jailed for the crime of officiating at a Jewish wedding in Haifa. There are couples in the room today who were married by me. I would like to think that those of us who would normally shudder at the thought of criticizing Israel, would be willing to speak up for me, had I performed those weddings in Israel regardless of Israeli law.

But hold on a minute. Remembering the Holocaust is our mitzvah; incumbent upon us, the Jewish people. Perhaps we could say it is even greater than that; it is a moral obligation that rests upon the shoulders of all humanity never to forget. But it is not an obligation of the government of Israel in particular. Israel must act in the interests of its citizens. If the democratically elected government of Israel feels that this statement at this time with this Poland is in Israel's national interest, and in endorsing it they undermine the memory of the Holocaust, then the remedy is for Israelis to vote their consciences at the polls. If Israelis have decided that the way to safeguard the Jewish character of their society, or to preserve political gains on more compelling fronts, is to give one group of rabbis a monopoly, then it is up to Israelis to decide whether or not to strike a better deal for pluralism. It is up to Isaac to submit to the altar of sacrifice; because it is up to Isaac to pay its price.

Would I do it differently? Sure. But I am here and not there. It must be exciting to be a part of the grand historical experiment of how to live modern life under Jewish sovereignty, to participate in deciding how to best exercise Jewish power in our promised land. However, I am a bystander, albeit one with great vested interest, yes, but a bystander nonetheless. I'm not living the life of Isaac. I've been given the chance to rise to the example of Abraham.

The American Jewish community's position in America, and by extension in the world, grants us an opportunity that has existed for us before only rarely, if at all. Today we have the chance to contribute to a global conversation on issues affecting everyone. We can offer our ideas and our ideals, and lessons drawn from our history, and it is finally possible that virtually everyone can hear us. We have a chance to realize the Biblical dream - to become a "light unto the nations." We could, on the communal level, reengage and reinvest ourselves in the very best our nearly four thousand year old tradition has to offer. We could draw from and adapt that glorious heritage. Diaspora Jewry need no longer feel left on the margins of history. We can develop a way of being Jewish that helps shape our shared human destiny. We have become full partners with our neighbors as agents of history. We are thriving in *not a*

promised land but a land of promise. We have a chance to teach our universal truths; to realize the potential of Abraham.

Should Israel not live up to our ideals, let us resolve to stand up for what we believe. But let Israel remain our beloved son. Criticize; even protest, if and when justified. But remember that God declared long ago, on the date which became this awesome day, “Stay thy hand” - do not harm him!

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