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Israel: Three Imperatives For Progressive Jews

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Rosh Hashanah morning is our time to speak about Israel. I have long felt that at least 25% of sermon time on the High Holy Days should be devoted to our relationship with the Jewish state.

Learned observers tell us that there is nothing more controversial in the Jewish community than Israel. Increasingly, I meet rabbis who confess that they no longer even speak about Israel. "Israel has become too controversial," they say. "Too many people get angry with me."

Avoiding discussion because "too many people get angry" is not our style. The only way to address controversy is to address it - head-on. There is no other way to stay relevant. I think that I would disappoint you; you would think less of me if I did not address what I thought were the central issues of the day.

For those who disagree with my views I welcome your criticism. I realize that for some what I will say will be difficult to hear. Know that whatever position you hold, there are many others here who agree with you. Even I don't agree with everything I say!

I invite you to tell me where you think me wrong. I do not take intellectual disagreements personally. But just one request: can I ask you to set me straight after the service, rather than during the sermon. Write or set up an appointment; we will dialogue, and even if we have not persuaded each other, we will embrace as brothers, sisters and friends.

One wonders why Israel has become the most controversial issue for American Jews. Why don't we get agitated anymore about what used to divide us? In the past, different interpretations of sacred texts, diverse perspectives on the nature of God, or even what food is kosher for Passover – literally split Jewish communities apart.

Those controversies now seem tranquil in comparison to the emotional storms that Israel arouses. We feel contempt for those who differ with us. We can barely speak calmly. Within minutes we are at each other's throats.

Why?

What grand idea inspires such passion? Before we accuse one another of betrayal of principle, should we not at least figure out what is the great principle that we have betrayed?

As for me, I have never uttered a public word as a rabbi or marshalled a communal action that did not emerge from the biblical calling to Abraham:

Eescha le'goy gadol, va'avarechecha, va'agadla shemecha, ve'heye bracha...ve'nivrechu vecha kol mishpechot ha'adama.

“I will make of you a great nation...and you shall be a blessing to all the families of the earth.”

This is the Jewish calling. This is the great principle. This is our reason for existence: To be a people whose purpose is to bless all peoples. “I have grasped you by the hand, I created you, and appointed you a covenant people – a light of nations, opening eyes deprived of light.”

I oppose any idea or action that compromises, weakens or denies that we Jews are a distinct people. We are a family – not simply a family of the spirit binding like-minded philosophers and believers. We are a real family, of flesh and blood, with a shared history and a common destiny.

There have been plenty of Jews in the past who, by word or by deed, denied the principle of Jewish peoplehood, the result of which was their disappearance as Jews. There are plenty of Jews today who, by word or by deed, deny Jewish peoplehood. They, too, will disappear as Jews – whether their denial is active – they oppose the distinctiveness of the Jewish people on principle as primitive, racist, exclusionary, elitist, not-enlightened – or whether their denial is passive – they simply don’t care; they have already checked out.

At the same time, I oppose any idea or action that compromises, weakens or denies that the Jewish people’s purpose is to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. We have universal imperatives. “Let justice roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.” “Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?”

There have been plenty of Jews in the past who, by word or by deed, denied Jewish universal values – they only cared about Jews - the result of which was to render obsolete the very reason for our distinctive existence. There are plenty of Jews today who, by word or by deed, deny Jewish universalism. They, too, disfigure Judaism because they rip asunder the very principle that gave rise to our people in the first place: “I have selected Abraham to do what is just and right.”

These super-charged Jews threaten our future as surely as those who don’t care at all because we cannot survive, physically or spiritually, as a self-absorbed egotistical people concerned only with itself, not caring about the darkness of the world, and not interested in opening eyes deprived of light. We are too small – and in any case it is not Jewish – to be self-absorbed and unenlightened, and in the 21st century, this ghettoized view of Judaism will never claim the loyalties of the vast preponderance of our people, not here and not in Israel. They would sooner walk away from Judaism than live in the ghetto.

The reason that Israel so arouses us is that it is at the crossroads of these two foundational principles of Judaism – Jewish distinctiveness and Jewish universalism. The great principle we are constantly accused of betraying is either we have neglected the specific needs of the Jewish people or we have neglected the universal demands of the Jewish people.

How do we find the balance? This is the question.

Finding the balance between particular needs and universal obligations – both fundamental to being Jewish - is what causes our angst.

What we have discovered in the past century is that it is much easier to sit in the academy and debate moral problems, than to stand in the arena and deliver moral policies. It is one thing to think about Jewish values. It is another thing to apply Jewish values.

In seeking to find the balance between particular needs and universal demands, let me offer you three imperatives for progressive Jews:

First:

We must be in the arena. It is not only a question of rabbinic cowardice, not speaking about Israel. It is self-destructive blindness because we cannot have Jewish life in America without Israel. Israel is the flesh of our flesh the bone of our bone. Israel balances the two weight-bearing pillars of Judaism – Jewish peoplehood and Jewish universal humanism.

We can't walk away. We can't expect that on Rosh Hashanah we dedicate ourselves to renewal without renewing our bond with Israel. We can't repent for the sins of neglect and not repent for neglecting Israel. That is avoidance, not avowal. The place for us is in the fray. Israel needs us and we need Israel. We are interdependent.

Get involved. Go to Israel and see for yourself. Join the March mission. Call the office on Wednesday, inquire, ask anything you want, and then sign up. You will not regret it. You will be awe-struck by the vigor and vitality, the ingeniousness and ingenuity; the robustness and resolve of the Israeli people, our people. Israel is the most astonishing country. Israeli scientists, researchers and high-tech geniuses are bringing light to those deprived of light, inventing, wiring, and securing computer systems and distributing medical devices that improve and extend life. Israel's water technology slakes the thirst of even first-world countries. Just the fact of Israeli democracy, 90% of its citizens having come from non-democratic countries, is, itself, a miracle.

While Israel has lost past supporters, it has also gained new friends. Businesses and corporations are flocking to Israel to take advantage of the vibrancy, creativity and problem-solving capacities of the Israeli work force. The recent wave of international terror has softened some of Israel's harshest critics, who now see in Israel a role model of how democracies can fight extremism. Even previously hostile Arab countries now realize that their true enemy is not – and never was – Israel; that Israel is not a threat to them, but an ally.

Second:

We liberal Jews should fight for what we believe. We should be a powerful voice for Jewish peoplehood.

Precisely because so many progressives nowadays, Jews and non-Jews, are conflicted about pride and patriotism, we have a critical role to play. Come on: if the thousands of delegates to the Democratic National Convention can wave flags for four straight days, sing patriotic songs and pledge allegiance to the American nation; if the First Lady can unabashedly remind us that America “right now is the greatest country on earth,” then certainly liberal Jews can unabashedly remind us that the Jewish state right now is the most eloquent expression of Jewish peoplehood in two millennia.

The restoration of our family to Zion is a miracle of biblical proportions. We did it. We did it together, collectively. Out of the ashes we reconstituted our dying people and restored ourselves to life and vitality. We were driven by the idea of Jewish distinctiveness – what Americans might call “exceptionalism.” Zionism is a movement to liberate the Jewish people, so persecuted, oppressed, despised and decimated throughout history. Grounded in ancient Jewish

values, modern Zionism is a secular liberal idea, that was conceived and propelled by mostly secular and liberal Jews. Contrary to the accusations of our foes, Zionism is the pinnacle of enlightenment; the very manifestation of the great humanistic ideas of our age: the self-emancipation and self-determination of a proud and ancient people that contributed so much to the human spirit. This is what liberals believe: self-realization, freedom, liberty.

We should always be open to criticism. We should not be afraid of it. Pluralistic societies invite and encourage dissent. Israel is far from perfect. She is often well-served by domestic and international critics, Jewish or not. True friends share their concerns.

But we need to stop being so squeamish about anti-Semites, anti-Zionists, Israel bashers and apologists for terrorists, even – especially - when they come from the progressive world. I, too, am a liberal. There is nothing in liberal thought that suggests that of all the nationalisms in the world, the only illegitimate one is Jewish nationalism.

These people have distorted liberalism. Honey-sweet their tongue, but hatred is in their hearts. They poison the chalice of liberty, draining the concepts of “human rights” and “social justice” of their wholesome meaning. They place our hard-earned Western principles of freedom in service of tyranny. A bomb that kills ten children is always freedom fighting. An Israeli response is always disproportionate. Preemptive action is always illegitimate.

They speak the language of liberty to enslave; words of peace for war; humanism for barbarism; rights for coercion. Israel is, of course, flawed, like every country in the world. Some of its flaws are severe. We should not hide these blemishes, minimize them, or deny them. But Israel is still a liberal democracy. You are supporting despots. It is not moral courage; it is moral preening. It is a disturbing form of political correctness that cannot be honest about third world atrocities. It sees no evil, hears no evil and speaks no evil – and Israel is caught up in, and victimized by, this political correctness gone amok. Suddenly we are subjected to a litmus test of liberalism. You can't be a true liberal if you are supportive of Israel in any way. How the mighty have fallen!

It is one thing to make a case against Israel at the Berkeley student union. Would those very young people on campuses; their learned professors; the folks who tell us how bad Israel is at every rally, retreat or resolution – would they be willing to live even one month as a gay Christian, or as an advocate for free speech and a free press, in Hamas-controlled Gaza, or Hezbollah-controlled southern Lebanon, or Iranian-controlled Syria, or even Ramallah? Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered who live in the Muslim and Arab world are often oppressed and killed, thrown from rooftops. LGBT Muslims and Christians escape to Israel to avoid persecution. I hope to introduce some of them to you when we are there in March. Would the Presbyterian Church that recently voted to divest from Israel hold its convention in Gaza City and resolve that its delegates stay for a year to minister to Palestinian Christians who are increasingly tormented? The very idea is preposterous. The only state in the Middle East where Christians are free is the Jewish State.

To thine own self be true! What business do liberals have supporting those who oppress women, gays, minorities and Christians? What business do liberals have in turning a blind eye to the suppression of free speech? What are liberals doing giving aid and comfort to anti-democratic, religious fundamentalist extremists? And they are not even embarrassed about it: The luxury of

thought detached from the austerity of responsibility. Concepts without context. The comfort of denial with no denial of comfort.

What business does the British Labor Party have defending anti-socialist, religious fundamentalist, misogynistic, anti-Semites as Hamas and Hezbollah? Why does the leader of the Labor Party consider Hamas his “friends?” Just because they are anti-Israel, and that’s enough to outweigh everything else that European socialism affirms? And by what measure of decency do they thus abandon liberal Muslims who challenge the rejectionists and are trying to change their societies to look more like European social democracies?

The world is turned upside down and inside out. You pretend that Israel is the worst abuser of human rights in the world and are willing to excuse the inexcusable. This is the fashionable bunk of our times: Mass myopic moral malignancy; the rage of the self-righteous. It is a form of fundamentalism. It is one of the well-known tendencies of liberalism that the great liberal thinkers of the ages have pointed out: illiberal liberals. We can be as dogmatic, as doctrinaire as absolute as the absolutisms we scorn.

It is good to be held, and to hold ourselves, to high standards. But we should not allow in friend or foe the license of holding us to unrealistic standards, demanded of no other nation. Context is not incidental to reality. Context is reality.

We should be more tolerant and more understanding, less dogmatic and less certain. The real world is complicated. The study of diplomacy is not diplomacy. A lecture on human rights is not human rights. A class on the proper use of force is not the proper use of force. Implementation is much harder than intellectualization. The responsibilities of power weigh heavier on those who have the power of responsibility. How quickly France adopted many of the very security measures that it so criticized Israel for after Paris was terrorized.

Problems become real, not when you read case studies in a textbook or stories in a newspaper. Problems become real when they become yours. For a certain type of person who has never experienced anything but Western freedoms, “terror” is just a word, too opaque to be terrifying. “Extremism” is a cliché, not extremely concerning. Knifing a grandmother in the back is too remote to cut you up emotionally. This type of person can apologize for, and even justify, wanton cruelty because they, themselves, have never been knifed on the way to school; never been targets of missiles; never been at the scene of a mass murder; never had to pick up the body parts of a baby. All they know is the beneficent gift of Western liberty that they inherited without having to fight and bleed and sacrifice for the blessing.

Third

We liberal Jews should fight for what we believe. We should be a powerful voice for Jewish universal humanism.

We should stop being so squeamish about the growth of right-wing Jewish extremism. It is a threat to Israel’s existence. It is not only a matter of staying true to our Jewish spirit. It is also a matter of physical survival. International legitimacy is a security imperative. Every Israeli leader knew this: it is why Ben Gurion accepted the Partition Plan of 1947 despite its betrayal of past territorial promises.

We need to keep fighting for a just compromise with the Palestinian people, without which Israel's security is at risk. Israel cannot sustain international legitimacy without sincere efforts towards resolving its dispute with the Palestinian people. Israel cannot be both democratic and Jewish while continuing to rule over a growing population of four and a half million Palestinians. There is a fateful choice to be made: either democracy or a Jewish majority. Both will soon become impossible. And a non-democratic Israel is a contradiction in terms; a perversion of Jewish values.

It is not a one-way street. It takes two to make peace. Palestinians share much of the blame – more in my opinion. But still, we need to remind the Jewish world that Judaism is about tolerance, respect, human dignity, and peace. And that hatred and intimidation of Palestinian villagers, uprooting olive trees, violence against civilians are abhorrent and un-Jewish, and a mortal threat to all that we hold dear.

We should stay true to our conviction that the purpose of the Jewish state is not only to repair the state of the Jews; it is also to repair the world. The objective of the Jewish state is not only freedom for our people, but freedom for all people. The precondition of the Jewish state is equality, not only for Jewish citizens but for all citizens.

And we should stop being so squeamish about the intolerable discrimination and discrediting of non-Orthodox Judaism in the Jewish state. It is outrageous and self-defeating that religious power and control is granted to only one small part of the Jewish people, the most narrow-minded and unrepresentative element of the Jewish world. This, too, is a threat to Israel's security and a blot on her moral fiber. It drives away millions of American Jews who cannot stomach ongoing discrimination in the name of Judaism. Israel is the only country in the Western world that does not recognize the status of the non-Orthodox movements. What a disgrace.

Before I conclude we should spend a few moments on our college-age children. I would like to make two brief points:

One:

Young Jews are facing the same dilemmas and conflicts as we, except more so. I love these kids; they are an inspiration to me. In many ways they are better than us; they are free of discriminatory sentiments. For the life of them they cannot understand why gender, race, religion or sexual orientation should make any difference whatsoever.

Temperamentally and philosophically, most of our children are liberal. Given that much of the new left has turned away from Israel, they are under enormous stress. It is much harder to be pro-Israel today than when we were in college. Our kids are exposed to all of the new venom manufactured against Israel, and they have not developed antibodies. Nor is the Jewish community supplying them with the anti-venom.

The BDS movement - single-mindedly devoted to boycotts, divestments and sanctions against Israel - has skillfully argued that all minority grievances are interconnected: That you cannot support the rights of African-Americans, Black Lives Matter, Latinos, or the LGBT community – and be pro-Israel at the same time. By definition, they claim, to support Israel is to support white privilege and colonial exploitation. Many of our youngsters are persuaded. Jews are significantly overrepresented in the BDS movement.

The problem is that BDS and some other groups opposed to Israel are not about peaceful coexistence, two-states for two peoples. BDS is a radical, dangerous, sophisticated group, with anti-Semitic tendencies, seeking the destruction of Israel as a Jewish state. In the name of self-determination for Palestinians, it seeks to deprive the Jewish people of self-determination.

One consequence of inadequate attention to progressive young Jews who are disturbed by, and disagree with, Israeli policies, is that they are attracted to the most extreme leftist claims. These post-Holocaust, post-Six Day War Jews have never experienced persecution. They have never had their Jewish identity questioned, or their physical and emotional safety threatened. They do not even consider themselves members of a minority group. They have little appreciation of how pervasively our people has been hated or how precarious was – and is – Jewish existence. They believe Israel to be a colonial superpower, rather than a small island of eight million citizens, the size of New Jersey, surrounded by rabid anti-democratic foes who have never accepted even Israel's basic right to exist.

Part of the solution is to invest in these young people, even if they express perspectives that are difficult for the Jewish establishment to hear. We want them to be able to speak openly about the imperfections of Israeli society and to encourage them to get involved in programs and initiatives designed for them, so that they can participate fully and energetically in the great and ongoing Jewish drama of repair and self-repair. Better that they express themselves through us than through those who despise us.

These young adults care. They are passionate. They are our own. If you are one of them and you are here today, or listening online, contact me. The door is open. Come in and persuade me, and give me a chance to persuade you.

Two

Everything I said up to this point applies mostly to Jews who care. Argumentation, agitation and activism - these are all good signs that many of us are engaged.

But we should be honest with each other on this day of honesty. The central crisis of American Jewry is not that Israel has become the most polarizing of issues. It is that so many young Jews simply don't care. They are our children; the next generation: the future of our people. In many ways, our arguments about Israel are a Jewish thermometer; they measure the temperature of our commitment to Judaism, itself.

Anyone who has spent any time in the fields of Jewish education knows that identification with Israel tends to be in direct proportion to identification with Judaism. Identification with Israel is the consequence of Jewish identity, not its cause, especially for younger Jews. Jews identify with Israel if they identify with Judaism. If they do not identify with Judaism, they tend not to have strong feelings for Israel.

The main lesson from the campuses is not what it says about this or that Israeli policy, though I do not underestimate the role these policies play. Rather, what campus activity demonstrates more than anything else is how miserably we have failed to provide our youngsters with the basic language of Jewish life. Many, I think most, are Jewishly illiterate. They have little appreciation of Jewish peoplehood and little understanding of Jewish values. They have universal sentiments – we have done a good job on that; but Judaism's universal mandate ripped from its particularistic moorings, is not Jewish universalism, it is just universalism.

Jewish illiteracy, in my view, is the main reason that young Jews are completely overwhelmed and outmatched by people who actually know what they believe, even if such beliefs are noxious. Our kids, so intelligent, articulate, curious and resourceful, are struck dumb by aggressive, single-minded Israel-bashers and Jew-haters, and have no idea how to respond. They can speak so convincingly about racism, sexism, elitism, classism, and chauvinism; they move us with their idealism, optimism, egalitarianism, pluralism, liberalism, humanism, and altruism. But they are inarticulate about Judaism, let alone, Zionism.

And now when they are in college – now – we want to invest Judaism in them! How, and with what? Now – when they are in college we remember that love of Israel is a value we cherish!

The investments need to be made earlier. By the time our youngsters get to college it is too late. They are empty Jewish vessels that cannot be quickly or comprehensively filled. We need to invest much more in the Jewish future. It is not too late, but it is late.

We need to invest in Jewish schools. We need to invest in Jewish camps. And above all, we need to invest in synagogues, where most families who still want to be Jewish congregate.

Last year I spoke with you about our city-wide teen initiative intended to attract many hundreds of New York City Jewish teens. We have not yet launched because despite dozens of interviews, we have not identified a leader we feel can do the job. We are still interviewing continuously. I am optimistic that we will find our person. When we do we will notify you and ask you to hold us to the promises we made. And when we deliver what we promised, we will ask for your financial support. Teens are the weakest link in the American Jewish community.

For most of Jewish history it has been hard to be a Jew. America is exceptional. Outside the United States it is harder to be a Jew. For some reason God has decreed a rocky and thorny road for our people. Looking back through the centuries, it has been a long, hard, tragic march from Sinai. But the journey has also been filled with exhilarating accomplishment, transcendent meaning and noble purpose.

I am grateful to God for making me a Jew, and for allowing me to reach this season. I feel blessed to spend a few days in the sun linking the generations in our eternal quest for meaning. I hope that our children will do what their ancestors have done: walk the hard path with faith in the ultimate redemption of our people and all people.

I hope they will not lose faith. I hope they will continue to seek peace and pursue it. I hope they will find the way, hidden from their parents, to make real the vision of the prophet Isaiah: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.”

And I hope that our children will not stop there. In the words of the great Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai:

Don't stop after beating the swords into ploughshares

Don't stop!

Go on beating and making musical instruments out of them.

Whoever wants to make war again

Will have to turn them into ploughshares first.