

The Unraveling of American Zionism?

“Last week, The New York Times Magazine reported on ‘The Unraveling of American Zionism,’” says Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch. “Our Reform institutions have an opportunity — an obligation — to state what it is we do believe: that the Reform movement is a Zionist movement, theologically committed to the centrality of the Jewish people and the Jewish state.”

Last week, The New York Times Magazine published a long article entitled “Inside The Unraveling of American Zionism.” The piece focused on 93 rabbinical and cantorial students enrolled in multiple non-Orthodox American seminaries — including our own Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion — who published a letter during the May hostilities between Israel and Hamas, harshly criticizing Israeli policies and actions.

When the letter was released, I did not address it publicly for two reasons: First because, frankly, there were more important things to worry about than the opinions of 93 American seminary students. I was worried about my Israeli relatives, my friends and our people subjected to an indiscriminate and terrifying 4,000-missile barrage.

Second, I didn’t comment because, while those students are our future colleagues and your future leaders, they are not that now. They are in training. Out of deep respect for the need to provide as much safe space for students to express whatever is on their minds, I am reluctant to comment publicly on anything students say — even if they, themselves, want their views in the public domain. I was once a rabbinical student, too, and I wouldn’t have wanted ordained rabbis to comment on — let alone criticize — every idea I expressed in rabbinical school.

It seems to me that these discussions, debates and disagreements should properly take place in the classrooms, or perhaps, clergy networks established for these purposes. These are healthy debates, and we should encourage them. And even if we fail to convince each other, part of the training for the rabbinate should be to learn how to disagree agreeably.

So I didn’t comment on that initial letter until today. What changed? Once this episode received in-depth treatment from The New York Times, everything changed. After all, most American Jews learn about Judaism and Israel not from me — not from rabbis, Jewish leaders or Jewish organizations (be honest) — the learned staff of The New York Times instructs most American Jews about Judaism. Upon publication in the paper of record, the issue was no longer an internal seminary or Reform discussion — or even a Jewish one — but a matter of public record: one that the students themselves wanted, which is their right.

I will make five points:

One:

I honor and respect all those who are troubled by the moral ramifications resulting from the unresolved Israel-Palestinian dispute. I am troubled, too. Most Israelis and most Palestinians want what most people worldwide want: dignity, a decent job so that they can provide for their families, and they want peace. Palestinians do not want Israeli soldiers in their lives and Israelis do not want to send their children to fight wars. Both peoples have an indisputable claim to the land.

Israel has made plenty of mistakes along the way, but so have the Palestinians. They rejected every Israeli, American and international peace proposal – beginning with the partition plan of 1947 and continuing to our very day. Had the Arabs accepted the United Nations plan, as the Jewish community did, rather than launch a war of annihilation against the Jewish community, there would be a Palestinian state today on territory substantially larger than what the Palestinian Authority now demands. Had the Palestinians accepted the U.N. plan, there would have been no Palestinian refugees, and the 6,000 Jews who were killed in the war — one percent of the entire pre-war population — would have lived.

Furthermore, elements of Palestinian society have embraced terrorism, believing it to be a legitimate weapon against Israel. The war initiated by Hamas was a terrorist war, perpetrated by a terrorist organization. Hamas believes that no form, act, or means of Palestinian resistance is terror. All Israelis are soldiers. All Palestine is occupied. All means are legitimate.

How is it possible for current or future Jewish leaders to write an open letter to the public in the middle of a war with missiles raining down on Israeli civilians — our people — without ever mentioning Hamas, the instigator of the war? How is it possible to write of “tears that flow” without weeping for our own brothers and sisters, killed, maimed and scrambling to underground shelters at all hours of the day and night?

It is right to point out that military force must be employed in accordance with the laws of war — and when there are violations, offenders should be held accountable. But no one should have any illusions: Were it not for the Israel Defense Forces, Jews would be massacred. Look at what Hamas does to its own Palestinian enemies. Look over the border at Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and just imagine what they would do to the Jews if they could.

The strategy of Israel’s opponents — the BDS crowd, the “Israel is apartheid and committing genocide” crowd — is to minimize threats against Israel because that allows them to delegitimize Israel’s military response. They seek to deprive Israel of the right to self-defense. They argue that terrorists are not really terrorists; they are freedom fighters. That the threat is not really a threat. That Israel has all the power. That Israel uses disproportional force.

Israel’s opponents know what they are doing. Some American Jews play right into their strategy, providing Jewish cover, wittingly or not, to forces that seek not coexistence with Israel, but Israel’s destruction.

Two:

I am not sure that I would point to the students’ letter as evidence of the “unraveling of American Zionism,” because my guess is that many of the students who signed the letter consider themselves Zionists or strong supporters of Israel. Many say that they are trying to improve Israel, not dismantle the Jewish state. If that is the case, more power to them. Nonetheless, public opinion surveys suggest that there is a distancing from Israel, especially among the younger generations. The more liberal, the less attached to Israel. It is a serious challenge that should preoccupy all of us, whether liberal or not, because as liberal Jews go, so goes the future of the American Jewish community.

Three:

The student letter gave us an opportunity to restate what it is we do believe. It was a teaching moment for our institutions. There was no need to call out anyone individually, certainly not students. Call me out: I have institutional standing and responsibilities. I am accountable to you, and by extension, to the

Jewish community. Students have no such leadership responsibilities. However, the Reform signatories did speak in the name of — and identified themselves as — students of the Hebrew Union College. The HUC even permitted The New York Times to take photos in the sanctuary of the New York campus for an article eventually entitled “Inside The Unraveling of American Zionism.”

It seems to me that our Reform institutions have an opportunity — an obligation — to state what it is we do believe. Why are we so reluctant to state what we believe? The Jewish and non-Jewish worlds are watching us. And we are losing younger Jews who do not know — and are never taught — what we believe.

For the record, the Reform movement is a Zionist movement. Every single branch of our movement — the synagogue arm (Union for Reform Judaism), the rabbinic union (Central Conference of American Rabbis) and our seminary (HUC-JIR) — every organization separately, and all together, are Zionist, and committed ideologically and theologically to Israel.

We are theologically committed to the centrality of the Jewish people and the Jewish state. We have said so repeatedly. We have obligations to fellow Jews. We are commanded to be *ohavei Yisrael* — to love fellow Jews, and to support them, especially in times of war, hardship and struggle. We have a right, and an obligation, to teach future leaders our values and commitments. We have a right to insist that some values and beliefs held by some American Jews are inconsistent with our beliefs. The student letter calls for a rethinking of American Jewish education about Israel. Fair enough, but our movement has a right to encourage some American Jewish seminary students to rethink their approach to *ahavat Yisrael*.

This week’s Torah portion, *Vayishlach* contains the following passage that expresses the central theology of Judaism: “*Va’yerah Elohim el Yaacov...va’yivarech oto...*”

“God appeared to Jacob and blessed him, and said to him, ‘You whose name is Jacob you shall be called Jacob no more, but Israel shall be your name.’ And God said to him, be fertile and increase, a nation shall descend from you...”

“*Ve’et ha’aretz asher nattati le’Avraham u’le’Yitzhak – lecha etnena – u’le’zaracha acharecha eten et ha’aretz*” — “That land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I give to you and to your offspring to come will I give the land.”

Jewish leaders have an obligation to speak about Jewish peoplehood and our struggle to survive. Jews want to live. Why is that so hard to speak about? Every living organism, from the smallest cell to the largest political entity wants to live. Why is it so hard to speak about the war crimes inflicted on our people, and the blood curdling threats to commit another genocide? The issue is not that you are critical of Israel — go ahead — we need critics. The issue is that you never seem to speak about our people’s enemies or their threats against us. We have enemies who seek to destroy us, both here and in Israel, three generations after the Holocaust. That is the root cause of the unresolved conflict: the inability or unwillingness of Israel’s enemies to accept a Jewish state in any dimension, within any borders.

Israel has become so successful in such a short period of time that many of us take the Jewish state and the Jewish people for granted. Two generations of American Jews have grown up thinking that the era of Jew-hatred is over. They regard Israel as a military superpower, and breezily discount the threats against Israel. One of the key lessons of Jewish history is that no Jewish leader can take anything for

granted when it comes to Jews. What higher responsibility does a Jewish leader have than to love and protect fellow Jews? Are we so emotionally distanced from our own people that we cannot even bring ourselves to condemn war crimes against Jews in the middle of a war?

Four:

Where you sit often determines where you stand on an issue.

If you are sitting in a lecture hall on an American campus or seminary, you might come to view the Israel-Palestinian dispute differently than parents of three children who are spending the night in shelters five miles or 50 miles from Gaza. If you are sitting in an American seminary or university, you might be influenced more by those around you who view every social problem as a racial one — or one of oppression, patriarchy, or colonialism: that every issue is intersectional with every other issue.

In this vein, the students wrote: “So many...[American Jewish] institutions are silent when... racist violence erupts in Israel and Palestine” — as opposed to vocal American-Jewish leadership in reckoning with racial violence in our country.

What are you talking about? You think that American racial problems have anything to do with the Israel-Palestinian dispute? You think that the problem of Hamas is a racial problem — that Israel fought Hamas because Israelis are white and Gazans are people of color and Hamas is simply a civil rights organization that is being discriminated against?

Even a casual tourist, walking the streets of Israel, will notice that most Israeli Jews are Jews of color. And millions came to Israel penniless, desperately fleeing oppressive Muslim regimes. Israeli hospitals are filled with Jews, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Druze of every color and race serving as doctors, medical personnel, pharmacists and patients. Often, wounded terrorists are attended to by Jewish doctors in the same ward where Arab doctors treat their Jewish victims. Even a casual newspaper reader knows that an Islamist party holds the balance of power in the coalition government.

It doesn't mean that there are not still many inequities and unresolved issues — there are — but that strikes you as apartheid? Really? You really think that Hamas launched 4,000 missiles, every one of which was a war crime, because indigenous people of color rebelled against white colonial Jews whose sole purpose is to exploit and oppress?

We need to be aware of the effort of Israel's opponents to excuse the Palestinian community from moral agency by portraying them as victims of Israeli oppression. Palestinians, too, must reflect and repent for the all the grievous sins they have committed — and continue to perpetrate — on fellow Palestinians and Israelis. It is patronizing and destructive to view the Palestinian community as possessing no political or moral agency, because if you are a victim, there is no need for you to be morally accountable.

Five:

Here is what I have learned from decades of studying and embracing liberalism: the liberal mindset is one of openness, and doubt. True liberals are never so sure of themselves. We acknowledge and embrace complexity. Every place where people live is a place that requires repair.

One of the key insights of liberalism is that I could be wrong, and I am open to being convinced. Life is complicated — more complicated than a lecture, a sermon, a book, or a thesis. We are each entitled to our own views, and to express them as forcefully as we can, but true liberals avoid the assumption and the appearance that our views are the only legitimate views. It is hard to do, because it is hard to express strong opinions, while also conveying that these are not the only legitimate opinions. I confess that even for seasoned public officials, even for experienced rabbis, it is hard. I confess that as some now insist on trigger warnings, I am triggered emotionally when people use words like “apartheid,” “ethnic cleansing,” “fascist,” “racist” and “colonial” about Israel.

As hard as it is, liberalism demands of us to consider other opinions. Not every opinion is legitimate, but we have an interest to carve out as much public space as possible to argue, debate and disagree with each other. Liberals can never embrace an operating assumption that anyone who disagrees with my moral analysis is, by definition, intellectually ignorant, morally blemished or willfully evil: That my way of seeing things is the only possible righteous way. For to believe that, is to betray liberalism, no matter how left-sounding our views.