

The Discomfort of Dissonance

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This summer, before heading to Israel, Hana and I spent a few days in Rome. It occurred to me that there are a number of places you can fly to Israel from that put the existence of the Jewish state into perspective. When you fly from the United States you experience the Jewish historical rarity of living in a time with both a robust and free diaspora as well as a thriving Israel. When you fly from Poland you go from encountering the history of Jewish powerlessness to what it means for us to be able to control our own destiny. When you fly from Rome and in the same 24 hours stand at the Arch of Titus and see the menorah depicted as war booty after the sack of Jerusalem and then see that very same menorah on the seal of the modern state of Israel, you experience the power of going from a persistent 2000 year state of dreaming to waking up to a dream realized.

Airplanes can shuttle us quickly and thoughtlessly between these realities. What airplanes cannot do is help us resolve the fact that these realities are actually persistent tensions in our identity as a people.

When it comes to thinking through what it means to be Jewish, do we think it through from a rights and choices based American perspective or from a tribal and peoplehood based Israeli perspective? When it comes to the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians do we see ourselves as historical victims of persecution running from Warsaw to Ramallah or with the opening of an American Jewish Committee diplomatic office in Warsaw do we see an unprecedented ability to determine ours and others circumstances that is more Gal Gadot than Woody Allen? When it comes to immigrants and refugees do we identify with the dreamers in search of the promised land or have we arrived and is our work to maintain the just, orderly societies into which we have integrated?

Each of these represent radically different ways of seeing the world and are deep fault lines that threaten to divide the Jewish people. In many ways its hard for us to even have conversations about these issues.

Why is it so hard? There is phenomenon that happens when we disagree with people on big questions called “cognitive dissonance.” The psychologist most well known for mainstreaming a conversation about this issue is Leon Festinger. In his 1962 book “A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance” Festinger explains that a person begins with some “knowledge, opinion or belief about the environment, about oneself or about one’s

behavior" and dissonance happens when a person we encounter or an experience we have contradicts what we know or believe. When this happens its uncomfortable and we will try different things so we can reduce the dissonance.

So, since its the high holidays, lets talk about the example of a situation where someone criticizes our personal behavior. Festinger suggests three possibilities: First, we can change our own opinion from, "I'm always a good person" to "I did something wrong, I try my best but I have certain weaknesses which are X and when triggered I tend to do Y so I need to constantly work to do Z." In other words, one way to reduce the dissonance is to change our minds.

Another way is to influence those around us who disagree in order to bring them back in line with how we view things by saying "you misunderstood" or "that wasn't what I meant." This is known as the adolescent solution. The second way to reduce dissonance is to change other people's minds.

A third way is to make another person incomparable to ourselves. The reason that person thinks the way they do about me or about the world is because they are different than me. So if I say the grass is green and they say it is brown I might reduce the dissonance by saying they are color blind.

But its usually not that nice. Usually making someone incomparable to ourselves or labeling them the "other" is a lot uglier than calling someone color blind. Typically its a moral condemnation. We like to think of ourselves as good people and when someone else challenges our worldview or threatens to steal our moral position we would sooner think of them as the immoral ones.

I'll give you an example. Hana and I were in line to see the Pantheon a Roman Temple later turned into a church. The line was long and snaked around the piazza. At one point a group of young women walked next to where we were standing, looked around for the beginning of the line which was a ways back and slowly as the line moved, merged their way in front of us. We told them that the line began a ways back, but they didn't turn around. We thought 'maybe they didn't hear us.' So we said it a little louder but they still didn't respond. 'Maybe they didn't speak English?' The third time we made sure to get in their line of sight and told them where the line started. They looked at each other startled and said "oh! oh!" and then one of them looked at us and said "wow, you are rude" which another repeated as they left the line to find the end. Since then Hana and I have been working on being less rude. Anyway, no one wants to be seen as a "cutter" which may have been the incentive for the shame shifting.

And truthfully it happens to all of us. We are driving and someone honks. We are startled and think how rude that person was. Maybe we honk back. We drive on thinking about how impossible people are and then we realize we didn't have the right of way. "Oops" we think, "my bad...but not as bad as how rude that person was!"

We are pretty motivated to reduce cognitive dissonance when our righteousness or our rightness is in question.

So what about the dissonance between the American Jewish community and the Israeli Jewish community? Well, it has been widening for some time but erupted this summer after a carefully negotiated deal to create a single entrance to both the traditional and the egalitarian sections of the Kotel was scrapped. It represented a low point in years of efforts to get the Israeli government to open up choices for Israelis when it comes to who performs their weddings, who guides their conversions and the inequity in government funding of religious communities that overwhelmingly favors Orthodoxy. And a kind of Orthodoxy that is headed by rabbis like Jerusalem Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar who recently compared Reform Jews to Holocaust deniers. Classy. The Kotel agreement was negotiated by Prime Minister Netanyahu, ultra-orthodox members of his government, Natan Sharansky the head of the Jewish agency and Conservative and Reform leadership. The unprecedented frustration was a result of having participated in a good faith process to come to an agreement with all the right players and still failing to make progress.

In the end the Prime Minister chose the stability of his governing coalition over an agreement he personally put significant time into because those who actually vote in elections, the Israeli population, by and large do not treat equity at the Kotel as a priority issue. But the failure of the deal represents a deep difference between Israeli and American societies that was on full display in a meeting I attended last week with members of the Knesset.

Along with 7 other New York area rabbis I was invited by the Jewish Federations of North America to meet with 8 members of the Israeli Knesset most of whom are members of the current ruling coalition. They were shocked by the American Jewish reaction to the Kotel situation and to their credit organized a listening tour in America. In the room were representatives of various Israeli political parties: likkud, yesh atid, bayit yehudi, yisrael beiteinu and there were rabbis representing Orthodox, Reform and Conservative communities.

So how did it go? I want you to think of the most heated and argumentative dinner you have had with extended family, now dial that up a few notches. Pretty much like that. I

have never participated in a more contentious meeting with Israeli leadership. By the way there was one Druze member of Knesset there. The Druze are not Jewish but loyal members of Israeli society who serve in the army and participate in governance. He sat there wide eyed like he wanted to be anywhere else but there.

There were some attempts to convince each other of our positions. We explained that in America, Jewish communities don't fight for government funding and recognition so relationships between the various denominations are warm, each community has their own standards and creativity flourishes.

The members of Knesset explained that Orthodoxy is accepted as authentic Judaism in Israel even by the secular who don't practice but when they engage prefer it.

In response to that we pointed out that a significant percentage of Israelis leave the country to get married in order to avoid the Chief Rabbinate which creates an irony that the only Western country in the world that doesn't allow a Jew to choose the religious context of their wedding is the Jewish state. And when you hear the Jerusalem chief rabbi compare reform Jews to holocaust deniers who can blame Israelis for not thinking of rabbis as moral leaders.

To which the Likkud member of Knesset assured us that they were going to deal with Rabbi Amar when they returned to Israel. To which I said "you're actually making me feel some empathy for Rabbi Amar. I answer to a wonderful board of directors, that poor guy has to answer to the Knesset!"

Things quickly deteriorated into Festinger's third approach to reducing dissonance: turning the person who challenges your understanding of the world into "the other." One of the Knesset members said "if we bring your kind of Judaism to Israel won't we also bring all of your assimilation and intermarriage?" They were actually proposing that our religious communities were the catalyst of assimilationist trends instead of solutions to them. They also said they didn't appreciate being told, as some American Jewish leaders did, that American Jews would withhold funding and support over these issues. They were depicting American Jews as blackmailers and irritants. I can't remember exactly but I think that's when the Druze guy climbed under the table.

I said to them "I have no interest in being your political consultant, so I'll be your rabbi. When I meet with people I have two responsibilities. First, I have to see them. I have to see and appreciate who this person is sitting in front of me. Second, I have to ask what am I called to be for this person in this moment? What is my responsibility? You can think about us as just another interest group fighting for a piece of the pie or you can think of the tremendous responsibility that you have on your shoulders to maintain a

sense of Jewish peoplehood, to ensure that Israel is a homeland for all Jews and that we don't end up with two distinct peoples: the Israelis and the Jews."

In the end the huge divide between American and Israeli Jews is based on our very different societal and cultural experiences. One of us said to one of the religious MKs "what gives you the right to make religious decisions for millions of people? Are you afraid of the choices they will make? Are you concerned that your preferred Judaism will lose out in the marketplace of ideas?" American Jews think in terms of rights and markets, Israeli Jews think in terms of authority and authenticity. These differences have been festering for a long time but now we are actually talking about them.

So how did it end? Well, we got up, hugged each other with great affection and wished each other a shana tova. Isn't family great?

The plane ride between America and Israel takes hours but it marks miles of difference in how we see and relate to Judaism. How can we continue to deal with our cognitive dissonance by appreciating each community's positions without turning each other into foreign objects?

The plane ride between Poland and Israel also pits two conflicting parts of our identity against each other: are we vulnerable to a world that has not treated us fairly and in need of taking care of ourselves first and foremost or are we more free to make our own decisions than at any point in history and therefore must lead with Jewish values? In many ways the American Jewish conversation about Judea and Samaria / the West Bank represents these two conflicting parts of our identity. There is a segment that remembers the vulnerability of 1967 and 1973 and is concerned about a Palestinian state representing a significant threat to Israel. There is a segment of our community, primarily although not entirely younger that experiences Israel as a regional military power and is concerned about the quality of Palestinian life. So are we vulnerable and in need of self protection or are we powerful and in a position to change the reality we face?

The conversation between these two segments of our community is growing more difficult.

One segment is motivated by loyalty to the Jewish people. As a Jew your first priority is to stand by your brothers and sisters and if they are in danger, *kol yisrael arevin zeh ba zeh*, all of Israel is responsible one to the other. You support them. If we learned anything from Jewish history it's that our vulnerability is our responsibility to address.

Another segment is motivated by Jewish values of how we treat others. We should be an *or l'goyim*, a light unto the nations and the moral measure of our success is how we treat people when we are in charge as compared to how we were treated when other people were in charge. An active group of young Jews who are products of our best day schools, camps, youth groups and synagogue communities have formed an organization called If Not Now and their goal is to end American support of Israel's occupation of the west bank in order to improve Palestinians' lives. They are in no way a fringe group and in many cases were actually leaders of our youth groups and leaders on campus. They take Judaism seriously wearing tallis and tefillin at their protests and singing Hebrew songs.

So what happens when the "loyalty to the Jewish people" group and the "how we treat other people" group speak to each other? Well, too often they enter very quickly into Festinger's third approach of turning each other into foreign objects. If you are working to end the occupation you are disloyal to your people. If you support the Israeli government you are perpetuating a moral tragedy.

How do we help these groups talk to each other so that they recognize the values that each represents?

Is it possible that you can even be both? Is it possible to be loyal to your people AND be concerned about the welfare of palestinians?

One of the scholars at Hartman I spent time with this summer, Micah Goodman tried to articulate this hybrid approach. In his book Catch 67 he explains how 50 years after the 6 day war Israel is neither able to implement the two state solution of peace nor is it able to achieve an exuberant return to the whole land and so the conversation is frozen between two cognitive dissonances. Its made it hard to even talk about small steps that would improve palestinian life, like building highways in the west bank that connect palestinian areas to reduce the number of checkpoints. But instead of common sense, incremental improvements...perfect solutions and entrenched positions simply lead us to discredit each other.

The plane ride between Poland and Israel represents a schizophrenia of vulnerability and fidelity to one's people on the one hand and a mandate to exercise power justly and enact a moral vision on the other.

Between Rome and Israel we think about how post Temple, a displaced people relived the wandering of the book of Numbers keeping a 2000 year dream alive while passing through many lands some more hospitable than others and always dependent upon the

good graces of our hosts. On the other hand we think about arrival and feeling responsible for building a state with laws, norms, borders and a definition of citizenship much of which is discussed in the book of Deuteronomy. This journey more than any other defines the fault line amongst American Jews on domestic issues in the United States. Are we strangers who are responsible for how we treat strangers or are we the people of the land enacting a vision of a society based on law?

As the immigration issue has risen in prominence in the United States Jews have felt pulled, with some in our community feeling a mandate to be sympathetic to immigrants and others feeling a mandate to emphasize the importance of law and order in a country we truly feel is our home.

At its most difficult, conversations between these two sides have echoed the twitter battles with one side accusing the other being “open borders advocates” who are in favor of amnesty and don’t take safety seriously. And the other side calling people “racists” and “xenophobes.”

After I spoke about immigration last Yom Kippur and as we planned the Mt Kisco March in Support of Our Immigrant Neighbors many of you felt proud to be a part of a community that would heed the call of our tradition to stand by the stranger. Many of you felt that our efforts liberated the Torah from the sanctuary and brought it alive in the streets of our Town. Many, but not all. Some of you felt differently and you told me over the phone, in email exchanges and over coffee.

The first thing you need to know about these coffees and phone calls is that when it came to labeling immigrants as criminals and rapists everyone I spoke with agreed that that kind of scapegoating was absolutely out of bounds, mean spirited and irresponsible. Because that’s not what Jews do and its not what human beings do. Full stop.

The primary concern from these members of our family was that in supporting undocumented immigrants we would be undermining a foundational value in our country of the rule of law and its equal application. Let’s be clear, that is not a xenophobic concern and we should not let irresponsible rhetoric in America tempt us into collapsing all dissent into a group we call the “incomparables.”

In many ways the shallowness of our national conversations has led too easily to cognitive dissonance when someone raises an objection.

I shared with those who raised concerns that human beings who were vulnerable in our society were being spoken of in dehumanizing ways and that I and others felt compelled to be there for them. To say clearly that it is not ok, it is never ok to debase a

human being. And so we sought to have immigrants tell their stories at the rally so we could re-humanize the conversation.

Every one of those conversations ended with love, respect and a hug. As a result of these conversations we established a committee to draft a statement of principles that Bet Torah leadership can refer to as societal issues arise. The principles articulate the healthy and necessary tension of, on the one hand speaking out and standing up for people in our society and on the other making sure that our community stays as cohesive as possible. This is not a tension to be resolved but to be lived with.

We have come a long way since the Romans made us homeless, we are now not just state dreamers but state builders integrated as we are in America and established as we are in Israel. We feel both a kinship with the stranger and the responsibility of building a fair society based on law.

One of my teachers at Hartman who also works for the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Tal Becker wrote an article a few years ago where he worried whether in fact he is Jewish. Why? He doesn't care if he wins an argument. In fact he questions the frame of winner and loser in a disagreement. He thinks its strange that the person who learns something they didn't know or hears something they hadn't thought of is called the loser.

Becker gets at the problem of our gladiatorial approach to disagreement. Its an emotional time. We are being inundated with dysfunctional models of communication. We are being told that the person who disagrees with us is the enemy or has a self interest they are pursuing.

Shortly after he left the White House, Steve Bannon was asked how he deals with the fact that as a Catholic his church disagreed with his approach to immigration. Bannon went on to say that the Catholic church wasn't being motivated by beliefs, he said "they need illegal aliens to fill churches...they have an economic interest in unlimited immigration."

This is exactly what Leon Festinger was talking about- if you can't convince them, discredit them.

In the Talmud when the sages Hillel and Shammai disagreed, Hillel would first recite Shammai's position before offering his own...so that he made sure he understood it...so that others heard it articulated clearly as a legitimate perspective. Because why would anyone want to live in a world where no one is to be trusted for having principles?

American Jews and Israeli Jews...

those who believe in the importance of Jewish self defense and those who believe in the importance of how Jews treat other people...

those whose soul is called to be with the stranger and those who see law as delivering a just society....

Each of those members of our family who see the world from differing perspectives must know this: we may not convince each other and that's ok, but we must not discredit each other.

We must learn to sit with each other and even more so, sit with our own discomfort. We must act in the ways that our most deepest held beliefs call us to act without acting out against those who act differently.

The rabbis in the Talmud wonder how this is even possible. They list a number of conflicting opinions on matters of Jewish practice and ask how are we to live out a coherent Jewish life with so many conflicting rulings. The answer the Talmud gives is that we must build a heart of many rooms. We must find a place for each other in our hearts.

If not for ourselves, if not for each other then because somewhere in New York City is a Druze member of the Knesset sitting under a conference table waiting for the coast to clear.