

**“I Have Become Two Camps”:
Why We Need to Listen to Each Other about Israel**
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As recently as last week, Israel’s situation seemed to be more precarious than ever.

Not militarily, but politically. Reputationally. Morally.

The war in Gaza had become a humanitarian disaster.

The vision of annexing the West Bank into a “greater Israel,” once the fantasy of extremists, was now being spoken of as a real possibility.

And even as Hamas refused to release the remaining hostages, more than a dozen Western countries rewarded the terrorist group by unconditionally recognizing a Palestinian state.

It felt like we were at a tipping point.

As the pro-Israel podcaster Dan Senor put it, it was looking as though, in retrospect, October 7 might be remembered as the Palestinians’ Independence Day.

But then, on Monday, things tipped unexpectedly and dramatically—in the other direction.

Before the day was out, the whole world—from the Arab League and other Muslim countries to the Europeans who had just endorsed Palestinian statehood—rallied around President Trump’s peace plan to bring the hostages home, end the war, and rebuild Gaza for the benefit of the Gazan people.

Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to the deal immediately, and the world called on Hamas to accept it, too.

We’ve seen plans like this fall apart before, of course, so it would be unwise to celebrate too soon. But the only people opposing it seem to be Israel’s far-right politicians, who would have to abandon their hopes of annexing Palestinian areas and deporting the residents.

Now it’s up to Hamas, and all we can do is pray.

In the meantime, the situation remains dire. And I worry that if the peace plan doesn’t go through, it will get even worse—not only for Israel, but for us, too.

We may not feel it in Great Neck, where Israeli flags line Middle Neck Road. But we live in a bubble.

Across the country, the fabric of the American Jewish community is fraying under the strain of this war.

In Genesis, when Jacob prepares to face his estranged brother for the first time in years, he prays:

“O God of my father Abraham and my father Isaac, who said to me, ‘Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you...’

“Katonti mikol hachasadim u’mikol haemet—I am small and unworthy of all the kindness You have shown me. With my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.

“Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother.” (Gen. 32:10–12)

How prophetic!

Because with Israel embroiled in this horrific war, the American Jewish community has fractured into two camps.

One is ardently pro-Israel, even if many in that camp are critical of Netanyahu's policies.

The other is deeply disillusioned—not only with the current government, but with the whole Zionist idea of Jewish sovereignty in our ancient homeland.

Unless and until these two camps are willing to listen to each other, the divide will only deepen.

I am a Zionist. I believe Israel not only has the unconditional *right* to exist, but that it must *continue* to exist as a Jewish state—for the safety and wellbeing of Jews everywhere.

To me, the defense and preservation of Israel is a moral imperative.

But I also know there are Jews who disagree with me. And in listening to some of them, I've come to realize that they're motivated by sincere Jewish concerns.

And I believe, as some of our own pro-Israel congregants have said to me, that it's important to understand their perspective and take it seriously—just as I hope they will try to understand mine.

My goal tonight is to capture the essence of each view in good faith, as I understand it, in the hope that I might spark curiosity and inspire respectful conversation across the divide.

Let me start with my own camp.

Zionism begins with the Torah, where God promises the Land to Abraham's descendants.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that, even in our long exile:

“The Jewish people has never ceased to assert its right, its title, to the Land of Israel. The continuous, uninterrupted insistence, an intimate ingredient of Jewish consciousness, is at the core of Jewish history, a vital element of Jewish faith...

“It was uttered in our homes, in our sanctuaries, in our books, in our prayers. Indeed, our very existence as a people was a proclamation of our link to the land, of our certainty of return.”¹

Religious Zionists saw God’s hand in the U.N. vote of 1947 backing the Partition Plan, and in Israel’s founding, which they called “*reishit tzmichat g’ulateinu*—the beginning of our redemption.”

Theodor Herzl, who was not religious, insisted that the Jewish people needed a secular state for protection, because antisemitism would always plague us as long as we live under the rule of others.

All Zionists, secular and religious, affirm that the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in our own land, just like any other nation.

Many of us support self-determination for the Palestinians, too. And we think it’s tragic that the only thing preventing it is the unyielding intent of terrorists like Hamas to annihilate Israel rather than co-exist peacefully with it.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, 55

The Zionist dream became reality through heroes like David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, and Yitzchak Rabin—and through countless ordinary Jews: Holocaust survivors, Middle Eastern refugees, and immigrants from Ethiopia, the Former Soviet Union, and elsewhere.

Together, they built a state that has become the center of Jewish life and the defender of Jews everywhere.

So, to those in the other camp, I plead with you: do not reduce Zionism to Netanyahu, Smotrich, and Ben G'vir. Do not reduce it to settlements and occupation.

Because Zionism is much larger than any single moment or any single leader.

Your fellow Jews who advocate for Israel do so because they see it as the fulfillment of an ancient hope—rooted in holiness, and essential to Jewish survival.

Many of them know from experience what it's like to be bullied and excluded simply for being Jewish.

Imagine, God forbid, a world without Israel. Do we think Jews would be secure in Europe, in the Middle East, or even in America?

Don't assume our safety here is unrelated to the existence of a strong Jewish state that has our back.

We're here today because we stand on the shoulders of giants. And we owe it to them to ensure that Zionism in our time honors the highest and best of Jewish tradition.

Now let me turn to the other camp—those who see Zionism either as a worthy idea gone wrong, or even as a mistake from the start.

The people in this camp recoil from passages in the Torah that say things like: “When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land... You shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I, [God,] have assigned the land to *you* to possess.” (Num. 33:51-53)

And they're offended that we sanctify such obviously immoral texts in our synagogues.

Jewish anti-Zionism is not new, nor is it limited to progressives, as some might think.

Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Hasidic rebbe, was a fierce opponent of Zionism.

Based on the Talmud, he argued that Jews are not meant to be warriors, and that the demands of modern statehood would corrupt the Jewish soul and lead us to ruin.

Many liberal Jews share his concern that political and military power has compromised Jewish ethics.

They fear that, given the demographics of the region, Zionism forces Israel to exclude and dominate the Palestinians in order to preserve a Jewish majority.

They bristle when we glorify Israel as a thriving democracy, pointing out that the millions of people in Gaza and the West Bank live under Israeli control but are denied Israeli citizenship and voting rights.

So, to those in the pro-Israel camp, I beg you: do not hold these fellow Jews in contempt. Their critiques are hard to hear, but we shouldn't pretend them away.

Many of them are thoughtful young adults raised in our congregations and summer camps, where they were taught that Judaism is about standing up for the vulnerable and fighting for equality.

To them, Israel does not look like the "light to the nations" they were taught about in religious school.

I believe they're trying to be true to the values we ourselves instilled in them.

If we dismiss or silence them, we risk losing them from Jewish life altogether.

I think the only way to bridge this divide is with humility.

Humility to listen with an open mind, and to try to understand even when we disagree.

Humility to face facts that challenge our own narrative, and to wrestle with them honestly.

Like Jacob, we should turn humbly to God and plead:
“*Katonti*—We are a small people. We crossed the Jordan alone and built a state that has become mighty. And now we are split into two camps.

“*Hatzileini na!* Rescue us, please, from the hands of our brothers—for we are in peril.”

May we learn to argue passionately but with compassion; to listen with open minds and willing hearts; and to remember that even though we might be two camps right now, we are still one family.