

17. Daniel Gordis, “When Balance Becomes Betrayal”

Sharon Brous, “Lowering the Bar”

Daniel Gordis, “When Balance Becomes Betrayal,” *Times of Israel*, November 18, 2012

Dr. Daniel Gordis (1959–) is Senior Vice President and Koret Distinguished Fellow at Shalem College in Jerusalem. He writes a regular column for the *Jerusalem Post* and the *Bloomberg View*.

On weeks like this, with hundreds of thousands of Israelis sleeping in bomb shelters and many millions more unspeakably frightened, it's become clear that this universalized Judaism has rendered not only platitudinous Jews, but something worse. It bequeaths us a new Jew utterly incapable of feeling loyalty. The need for balance is so pervasive that even an expression of gut-level love for Israelis more than for their enemies is impossible. Balance has now bequeathed betrayal. ...

I knew, even before reading Rabbi Brous's missive, that we Israelis are surrounded by enemies. When I finished reading her, though, I understood that matters are much worse than that. Yes, we're surrounded, but increasingly, we are also truly alone, utterly abandoned by those who ought to be unabashedly at our side.

Sharon Brous, “Lowering the Bar,” *Times of Israel*, November 19, 2012

Rabbi Sharon Brous (1973–) is the Founder and Senior Rabbi of IKAR in Los Angeles.

Gordis draws some terrifying new fault lines: he now redefines a traitor not only as someone who challenges Israel on any count (farewell, democracy), but also as anyone who recognizes the human tragedy of war while loving and supporting Israel. ...

It ought not be an act of courage in the American Jewish community to remind us that as Jews we are called to affirm our essential humanity even in

the most trying of times. Indeed, many of us see that as a powerful expression of loyalty to Israel, a state built on the promise of freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets. One could even argue that these are the aspirations that have kept the Jewish people alive through a long and tumultuous history.

COMMENTARY BY YEHUDA KURTZER

In the midst of the outbreak of military hostilities in Gaza and the Israel Defense Forces' Operation Pillar of Cloud (also called Pillar of Defense) in November 2012, a contentious political debate broke out online between two major Jewish religious figures with eerily similar biographies. In a blog post at the *Times of Israel*, Daniel Gordis—a rabbi ordained in the Conservative Movement who had moved from Los Angeles to Israel in 1998 around age forty—sharply criticized Rabbi Sharon Brous—a forty-something rabbi ordained in the Conservative Movement and living in Los Angeles—for what he considered to be her equivocation on the morality of Israel's actions in Gaza, and for insufficient loyalty to and support for Israel in the midst of the conflict. Gordis's essay, "When Balance Becomes Betrayal," cited Brous's letter to her congregation—in which she had urged "empathy and grace" and had expressed support for immediate negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian authority—as indicative of the triumph of an ethics of universalism over those of particularism; and more damningly, of Brous's inability to draw hierarchical distinctions between good and evil.

Both Gordis's essay and the quick, vociferous responses it invited went viral. Responses included the historian David Myers who criticized Gordis's misrepresentation of the history of Zionist concerns for universal values, the philanthropist Adam Bronfman who rebuked Gordis's rejection of moral universalism, Rabbi Ed Feinstein (also a Los Angeles Conservative rabbi) who urged the two rabbis to reconcile, and finally Brous herself. In her stinging rejoinder, Brous accused Gordis of "lowering the bar" on debate on Israel by personalizing his attacks and by taking her comments out of context, and especially by failing to adhere to his own stated desire for a wider tent for debate on Israel. More pointedly, Brous cited the IDF's own code of ethics in warfare to demonstrate that concern and empathy for the deaths of Palestinian civilians is Israel's own aspiration, and therefore cannot be denounced as a naïve American Jewish universalistic moralism.

The debate between the two positions—and the many opinion pieces that attempted to advocate for one side or the other, or to mediate between the two

positions—remained intense throughout the actual conflict, and left enormous bitterness and severed friendships in its wake. Brous received death threats as a result of the publication of the exchange. The Brous-Gordis debate was startling especially because of how well Brous and Gordis knew one another, and traveled in similar circles: ostensibly, liberal rabbis with similar biographies and aligned value-systems should identify with similar politics and a similar political tone. Indeed, Brous and Gordis are not generally political or ideological enemies, and in their other writings demonstrate a broad shared commitment to the same values as relates to Israel and to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That Gordis saw Brous as a stand-in for the larger moral and political failing of American Jews—from whom he was standing apart since moving to Israel—meant that the chasm between the two communities was yawning wider. Moreover, the debate illuminated the “small world” quality of internal Jewish polemics—these are two rabbis who know each other quite well, and travel in the same social and religious circles—and reading the hostility of their debate, now out in public, demonstrates the anxiety of a trembling and vulnerable Jewish communal core.

The debate also helps us understand the ways in which the personal, theoretical, and political often overlap in intra-Jewish conflict, especially as it relates to Israel. Israel invites not just hostility and anxiety in internecine debate, but also a deep personalization of political views and expressions. This can be seen in the context of Israel education, where the affective language of “love” and “hate” are widespread, if unlikely, indicators of success and failure in the business of teaching a complicated topic. Gordis takes pains in his essay to refer to Brous as a former babysitter to his children, which serves both to connect him to her and to demean her standing, as he uses his children’s military service as the central axis of what is supposed to motivate her (apparently lost) love for him and by extension for the State of Israel. Brous, in turn, tosses Gordis aside as her “former” teacher and friend, suggesting she has gone beyond what he was able to teach her and now knows more than he. These relationships matter enormously in the business of public polemic.

Gordis’s reference to his children is also substantively meaningful in helping us to understand his relationship to Jewish peoplehood. For Gordis, Jewish peoplehood constitutes essentially an extension of the idea of family. The obligations incumbent on other Jews, therefore, are comparable to the commitments we should have to family: we don’t have to agree, but when we are under attack, we expect family to come to our aid and defense. Brous does not contest this argument, and in fact in her response she acquits herself of the accusation of

disloyalty by arguing that in her approach she is, in fact, “standing with” Israel in the ways that Gordis demands. In contrast to Gordis, she offers an understanding of Jewish peoplehood that extends, or possibly rejects, the family metaphor, by arguing that loyalty to Israel entails a recommitment to Israel’s own vision of the prophetic promise of “freedom, justice, and peace.” Peoplehood does not merely entail support of one’s people, but of the people’s aspirations. And sometimes those two come into conflict.

But beyond the personal vitriol, the debate offers witness to one of the central themes of organized Jewish life since the Second Intifada, and that is the deteriorated, hostile, and deeply intransigent nature of intra-Jewish debate about Israel and the conflict with the Palestinians. A further casualty of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been the nature of Jewish communal life in its debates *about* the conflict.

Implicit in this exchange, then, are two referenda on Jewish peoplehood. Does peoplehood mean that we must temper our criticisms of one another—especially the people we know and/or especially in public? And does peoplehood demand merely that we support each other in moments of conflict, or are we responsible to counsel (or criticize) each other in those moments as well? These questions define and shape an uneasy Jewish public conversation about Israel in America, and continue to hobble the relationships between Israeli Jews and American Jews who seem increasingly uncertain about the nature of their obligations to one another. Brous and Gordis—who should understand one another more than most—are evidence of an increasingly unbridgeable moral and temperamental chasm.

But perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Brous-Gordis debate was invisible to its own readers, even as their shares and reposts defined the story. The *Times of Israel* site where Gordis’s original post appeared had been launched just six months earlier. It represented a bold attempt by its editors and publishers to enter into and take over the English-language market for news, information, and especially opinion about Israel. Its most appealing feature to many people was also its qualitative liability, the wide-open platform it offered anyone to become a blogger and an opinion writer, which meant that it was cultivating a readership by attracting the loyalty of those who saw themselves as its base of writers. The *Times of Israel* built a successful platform quite quickly, which meant that accomplished opinion authors like Gordis moved over to its site to increase their readership. And the Brous-Gordis debate was very good for the *Times of Israel* at this nascent moment in its history. The debate continued to attract more opinion pieces not just on the merits of the two positions, but

because of the invisible hand of a site that benefited enormously from the contentiousness of the exchange.

With this background, the Brous-Gordis debate emerges as a moment not just in growing Jewish divides about Israel, but in the transformation of the venues and the nature of how Jews write and how they publicly disagree. The moving of Jewish public debate online intertwines Jewish ideas with the commodification of “web traffic,” which incentivizes incendiary rhetoric and a combative approach, and the platforms reward primarily those ideas and their expressions which animate the reader and inspire loyalty or loathing. An effective blog post has to engage the reader immediately to differentiate itself in the clutter, it is unrewarded for subtlety and nuance, and it is aided by the popularity of its author and the popularity of the object under attack. It is likely that—substance aside—the Brous-Gordis debate will serve as an enduring template of tone and style for the future of Jewish political debate as it will live online, for better or worse.