

# What Are You Afraid Of?

Shana Tova. It's so wonderful to see each and every one of you. It has been a wonderful start to the new year, and I'm looking forward to getting to know each of you over the course of 5783. Together we will strengthen our wonderful spiritual home, Mosaic Law Congregation.

Out of all of the places I love, Israel is near the top of the list. Ever since attending the Alexander Muss High School in Israel, a transformational experience, I have reveled in our Jewish homeland. I grew up in a strong Zionist family. My grandfather was in Lehi, the Stern Gang. He witnessed the sinking of the *Altalena* and was wounded in the head by a Jordanian during the Israeli War for Independence. My uncle founded Beitar Milwaukee, bringing Menachem Begin in to speak twice. My father was President of the Milwaukee chapter of ZOA, the Zionist Organization of America. As a child I was introduced to the book *Myths and Facts* by Mitchell Baird and shown the video *Jihad for Kids*. Joan Peters' *From Time Immemorial* was the Israel textbook in my household.

While I certainly have Israel *yihus*, I developed my own, personal connection to defending Israel. In high school Forensics (Speech and Debate) I went to National and the Wisconsin State Tournament in Student Congress where I debated against a bill to convince Israel of major war crimes as the sole dissenting vote. I remember the opening line being ‘The United Nations has convicted Israel of 150 war crimes; the next highest country was Iraq with 5’ to which I responded, ‘Well, 1 of the 5 of Iraq must have been Sadaam Hussein gassing 30 million Kurds, whereas 1 of the 150 of Israel must have been stopping a Palestinian at a West Bank checkpoint.’ While attending the University of Wisconsin I was part of MadPAC, a subsidiary of AIPAC, and I gave out a weekly newspaper in support of Israel. I argued before the Madison City Council that Rafah should not become a sister city of Madison, a resolution that only failed by one vote, 4-5. For the second year in a row, I will be attending the Israel American Coalition conference, forging strong ties between Americans and Israelis.

With that being said, my Israel story is far more nuanced than this list of pro-Israel accolades. Last summer, I was in Israel with the Miami Jewish Federation, my 7<sup>th</sup> trip to Israel, to show solidarity with Israelis after the rocket attacks which occurred in May 2021. The day that stood out most to me was when we visited Lod. We stopped at four sites, including the synagogue of the *Garinei Torah*, many of whom came from Judea and Samaria (vernacularly known as the West Bank) to bring Torah to Lod; and an Arab school for troubled teens where the teens had been involved in the riots including burning an Israeli flag. At the end of the day, our heads were spinning. We realized that who started what did not matter as much as the power of each of the narratives that we heard. The leader of the Muslim school was in my opinion the most compelling speaker; she took responsibility for her students' behavior while concurrently stating she was proudly an Israeli Arab and just as she owes things to Israel, so too does Israel owe them to her.

This year on December 9-10, I will be bringing in a rabbi from the settlement of Alon Shvut in Judea and founder of the organization *Roots*

(Shorashim) to engage in dialogue with one of his Palestinian friends about their friendship and personal stories. It will not be the first time we have such a program. In 2019 we brought in *Hand in Hand: Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel*, who in their own words “offers a hopeful path for bridging the divide between the two communities in conflict.” I know that some congregants are concerned about having a Palestinian speak on campus as well as how this will be the first Shabbat Israel program during my tenure (I will be speaking at CUFI’s Night to Honor Israel at The Center on Sunday December 3). I respect those concerns but decided to invite the speakers because the following question nagged at me: What are we afraid of? Are our views of hearing a real-life narrative foreign to our own so fragile that we should avoid it? In this polarized world perhaps that is the case-yet as one raised to be an independent thinker who is outside the box, I would hope it is not so. If you are interested in hosting a Focus Group/Parlor Meeting before the weekend, please contact Program Director Taliah Berger or myself.

There are of course requirements before implementing such a program. One needs to vet and verify as best as possible that narrative is not divorced from fact, which I have done and encourage you to do during the Question and Answer session. This is of course easier said than done. I remember in college hearing David Horowitz, former editor of *The Jerusalem Report* and *The Jerusalem Post* and founder of *The Times of Israel*, being asked of Palestinian leaders supportive of Israel. The three names he gave were Abu Mazan, who is the current head of the Palestinian Authority and a Holocaust denier; Marwan Barghouti, who is currently in jail for plotting terrorist actions against Israel; and Sari Nusseibah, a Professor of Philosophy and former President of Al-Quds University. One out of three is not a great track record. With that being said, at what point can we put away suspicion and our guarded nature to hear perspectives different than our own?

I started by giving you some of my Israel *bona fides*. I have been to more AIPAC events and conferences than I can count and have heard speakers from the gamut of Danny Pipes, Michael Oren, Alan

Dershowitz and Danny Gordis defend Israel. I have visited family friends and teachers in Efrat, Karnei Shmoron, Shilo and Maale Adumim, each of which is a beautiful place in Judea or Samaria. At the same time, I have also participated on *Encounter*, where I spent an evening at a Palestinian family's home in Bethlehem. I spent a day with *Breaking the Silence*, going to Hebron and hearing the narrative of Israeli soldiers who will not serve in the West Bank or Gaza Strip. I was placed by the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs with the Muslim organization IMAN (Innercity Muslim Action Network) on the South Side of Chicago—a Jew working with Muslims to help Christians in inner-city Chicago with criminal justice reform. Did these experiences change my perspective? Certainly. What they also did, however, is made me more willing to engage with others who are different from me.

Clearly there are boundaries and lines that must be drawn. I would never invite Ilhan Omar to speak to Mosaic Law, nor would I invite a local Imam to give the sermon on the First Day of Rosh Hashanah, as did my predecessor at Bet Shira Congregation in Miami. With that being

said, I believe in the power of personal narrative and its ability to have a transformational effect. I also believe in the importance of stepping outside one's comfort zone. I have watched Tucker Carlson, just as I have watched Rachel Maddow, because I believe in the importance of hearing what others have to say-even if I disagree with almost all of it.

I recently spoke with a newly appointed regional director at *StandWithUs*, whose materials you can find in our KOH Library and whose curriculum I intend to use in teaching the 7<sup>th</sup> Graders at Mosaic Law's MERCAZ Religious School. We had a powerful conversation at which we finally got to the core of our differences. He said he did not grow up with my strong pro-Israel background and was pro-Palestinian entering college. He later became a strong supporter of Israel and has an insecurity in losing his support for Israel. I never thought of that before-that because I was blessed with such a strong pro-Israel background that I am able to handle other perspectives without losing my secure faith in Israel-whereas someone else who did not have that background or who was hearing a more critical or nuanced approach for the first time might

react completely differently. Nevertheless, I ask the following question: does people's lack of background regarding the facts of Israel mean we should only have strong right-wing speakers on Israel or can our beliefs be strong enough to hear from people with diverse perspectives?

Education needs to be a primary focus, and student in the Mosaic Law educational programs must have a strong factual basis in Israeli history.

For adults who have not had a strong Israel foundation, I recommend Jonathan Lightman's Melton class *Beyond Borders: History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. At the same time, I want us to be open to hearing different perspectives from what may be our own without jumping to conclusions. I would hate for someone to pigeonhole me, saying "Rabbi Herman is..." without understanding that like others here I have a varied background and I support a variety of speakers from diverse perspectives, while concurrently having boundaries such as those mentioned earlier.

As I look at Israel, I see a country beleaguered by rocket attacks by those who seek its destruction, where Israel has bent over backwards to

support peace, whether with the Peel Commission of 1936, the UN Resolution of 1947, the Oslo Commission of 1992 or the Camp David Summit of 2000. I also see a country where a minority of its citizens who have had to endure pain from a Nation State Law, from checkpoints, a wall and some Knesset members who publicly have sought their deportation. The latter does not take away from my concern for the former as well as my marveling in Israel's numerous technological and medical advancements despite threats to its survival, which I speak about each Shabbat at my Israel Update before the Prayer for Israel. I see a country that I love and will always firmly back while at the same time wanting to hear the real-life narratives of those who live there, regardless of whether they are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Druze or Bedouin. Each of them has a story to tell, and to those afraid to hear certain stories I ask-Why? Is one's faith in their beliefs so fragile that it will be shaken by hearing a different narrative? Or is it strong enough that we have the courage of our convictions to do what I taught in the *Mahloket Matters* course: engage in a 49-49 conversation not to change our opinion or that of the other but rather to recognize that each of us has

some access to the truth. As Rabbi Joseph Telushkin said, we must work to diffuse this “increasingly uncivil atmosphere that characterizes American life.”<sup>1</sup> In our increasingly polarized world, I hope we are able to have difficult but important conversations with those with diverse perspectives on Israel-especially with those who live there-and have faith that who we are and what we believe in will not disappear if and when we do so. Shana Tova-may this be a resolution for each and every one of us in the year 5783.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, Zionist Rabbinic Coalition High Holy Day Seminar, August 25, 2022.