

*Dear Noa – Liberal Zionism – Yom Kippur Morning  
September 16, 2021 – 10 Tishrei 5782  
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester  
Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith*

Dear Noa,

First and foremost, wishing you, your family, and your classmates a *שנה טובה ומתוקה*, a good and sweet new year. I cannot believe that you are already a second-year rabbinic student! Do you have a High Holy Day pulpit this year? If so, I hope that it's been wonderful.

Noa, as you might imagine, I'm writing to follow up on the conversation that we had this spring during the conflict between Israel and Hamas. You had just signed a letter together with nearly 100 rabbinic students, empathizing with the Palestinians and protesting Israel's policies and actions in the West Bank and Gaza. If you recall, I got in touch because I did not understand the letter or its timing. The letter addressed troubling Israeli actions in the occupied territories and how those actions do not live up to the founding ideals of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Look, I agree that many Israeli actions in the territories are problematic. Nevertheless, as I said when we spoke, the letter pained me. I felt that the timing of the letter – while Hamas rockets fell in Israel – displayed a lack of sensitivity to the plight of Israelis. It did not seem to recognize the pain felt by Israelis. I remember my friend Liat posted a picture of her family in their bomb shelter in Tel Aviv. What impact will that have on her little girls? What trauma is faced by Israelis who must take cover within seconds to protect themselves and their loved ones? The failure of the rabbinic student letter to acknowledge that pain seemed to erase half of the Jewish people, seemed to prioritize Palestinians over Israelis which, in a time of war, felt, well, obscene.

In any event, Noa, I'm writing now because I've had some space and time to consider the letter. No, not just the letter, but to consider you and your generation. And here's the thing, while I do not agree with all of the letter's sentiments or its timing, I recognize the authentic feelings and meaningful positions that it does represent. The latest Pew study showed us that the vast majority of Jews, particularly in your generation, have deeply held liberal or progressive values rooted in their Jewish identity. I know that those values do not stop at America's shores, your generation applies them equally in New York, Kabul, Beijing, Paris, Tel Aviv, and Hebron.

I suppose that that should be obvious. Why wouldn't our values apply equally everywhere? Why wouldn't our insistence on addressing power inequalities transfer seamlessly from Ferguson to Jericho? Well, Noa, I've come to realize that many Jews in my generation and older have a different frame of reference for the Israeli conflict with Arabs, generally, and Palestinians, in particular. For many of us that different frame of reference entails a different values calculation. And that frame of reference is Arab rejectionism. They rejected the Balfour Declaration in 1917. They rejected the UN's partition plan in 1947. They attacked Israel in 1967 then pledge no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel. Palestinians rejected peace overtures after the treaty with Egypt. The Oslo accords suggested a new possibility but at the culmination of that process at Camp David, Yasir Arafat said no to peace. He said no by launching the second intifada with its unspeakable suicide bombings. Ehud Barak made another rejected offer after Camp David that conceded even more land. Then Sharon pulled out of Gaza

and was rewarded not with a Palestinian seaside Switzerland, but with Hamasistan. And finally, Olmert tried again with an offer in 2008. And again, the Palestinians said no.

Noa, that is my frame of reference. I see Israel subject Palestinians in the territories to various indignities, I read about human rights violations, and my first reaction is: “Why didn’t Arafat accept the deal at Camp David?!” I know that Israel does things that contradict its stated values, but it has felt like the moral responsibility lies with the Palestinian leadership for failing to step up and lead, for always saying no. But our conversation and a class I took this summer helped me recognize something important: Arab rejectionism does not free Israel from moral responsibility for its actions. We have the twin obligations from the Bible: “Justice, justice shall you pursue,”<sup>1</sup> and “Seek peace and pursue it.”<sup>2</sup> Despite Arab rejectionism, Israel ought to do everything possible to seek justice and peace. That does not mean doing things that will threaten the lives of Israelis, but it does mean doing everything possible to decrease the moral footprint of the occupation. And, it is clear that Israel’s footprint has only increased since 2009. There are lots of metrics to point to but the simplest is probably the settler population in the West Bank which was about 300,000 in 2009 and is now about 450,000. Surely Israel can use its power to both protect Israelis and to pursue peace. I wish your letter had said more about protecting Israelis. And I know that Israel can do more to pursue peace and justice for average Palestinians even without peace partners in the Palestinian leadership.

Noa, one more thing about the letter that bothered me. Upon reflection, I got so angry about the letter because it felt like a betrayal. It felt like my future colleagues were joining forces with, well, anti-Semites. I realize now that that is ridiculous. It is absurd to suggest that nearly one hundred people who have committed their lives to serving the Jewish people are allies of anti-Semites. But it felt that way. I’ve come to realize that it felt that way because there is no longer room in American Jewish discourse for any substantive critique of Israel. This is a problem because most of the Jewish community in America is made up of people who are committed to Israel but are troubled by aspects of Israel: lack of recognition of Reform Judaism, unequal funding for Palestinian citizens of Israel, vast wealth disparities, and, as we’ve been discussing, Israel’s treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. For many years there was room in the American Jewish communal dialogue to discuss these problems. For example, one could be a strong, proud supporter of Israel and still insist on the end of support for the settlements. Indeed, “for most of the past fifty years, most regional Jewish Federations... made clear that their Israel fundraising did not support activities that were beyond the Green Line.”<sup>3</sup> That sounds awfully similar to Ben & Jerry’s announcement this summer that they would no longer sell their ice cream in the settlements. Why was Federation ok for excluding the settlements but Ben & Jerry’s was panned as anti-Semitic? That doesn’t add up. What changed? What pushed critique of settlements out of bounds?

Over the last few years, we have done a good job putting a spotlight on the double standard Israel faces. That double standard has always been there, but it has become more egregious in recent years. At the UN, the scrutiny of Israel is insane, completely disproportionate to Israel’s size, population, GDP, scrutiny completely disproportionate to any metric. Media organizations

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20

<sup>2</sup> Psalms 34:15

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nealgold.net/blog/7/20/2021/brain-freeze-on-israel>

routinely ignore human rights abuses by truly despotic regimes but if Israel evicts one Palestinian family from a home, it makes the front page of newspapers around the world. What explanation can there be for this? Why Israel? What's different about Israel? One thing: Israel is a Jewish state. It feels like, it looks like, the world does not like Jews with power and so the Jewish state gets more attention than anyone else. And that level of scrutiny for being Jewish, that double standard, is simply anti-Semitic. And, Noa, that's what your letter felt like. How could you focus on Israel's actions in the West Bank rather than Hamas's rocket attacks? The pattern it seemed to fit was the double standard, extra scrutiny pattern of Israel's opponents. And that felt like a betrayal.

Now I see that it is not. As you have come of age you never witnessed the Israel of Oslo, the Israel willing to make concessions for peace with the Palestinians. You've only seen the Israel who uses its power to entrench the occupation. There is still a part of me that wants to scream, "What about Arab rejectionism?! What about the double standard?!" But I've come to understand that you and your generation are coming from a different perspective that focuses on the morality of Israel's actions irrespective of what Palestinian leadership or other countries are doing. The letter voiced your concerns as lovers of the Jewish people, as rabbinic students committed to Israel who nevertheless expect more from Israel. The letter did not express a double standard, it expressed a heartfelt higher standard. If your generation holds Israel to a higher standard than other countries, it is because of your love for Israel, your aspirations for Israel, your hope that Israel will use its power to shrink the occupation and be the beacon of freedom, democracy, and human rights laid out in Israel's Declaration of Independence.

Noa, we are not going to agree on everything about Israel. By "we" I mean both you and I and my generation and your generation. But that disagreement does not mean that we need to walk away from one another. In fact, that disagreement, I hope, will strengthen our Zionist commitments by challenging them. I want to challenge you to be fair and empathetic to Israel, an Israel that needs serious security in a really tough neighborhood. And I want you to challenge me to keep our Jewish values, the values of the ancient prophets of Israel, front and center not only on the domestic front, but also in my Israel advocacy, in my Zionism. And I hope that, together, we can bring along the rest of the Jewish communal establishment. Because, frankly, even if the establishment feels that they are right and you are wrong, they will not be here forever. It is your generation that will soon be in the seats of power in the Jewish community. It is your generation who will speak for American Jewry. And so, we need to find a way to redefine an American Zionism that embraces the values and perspectives of your generation even as it continues to include those of us who currently make up the establishment.

During a lecture this summer, Rabbi Donniel Hartman made a few suggestions about what that kind of Zionism would look like.<sup>4</sup> I'm not sure that all of these points are exactly right. But, Noa, I think they might be a good start.

First, no matter where we stand, left, right or center, we all need to agree on the basic Zionist premise: "the right and need of the Jewish people to a Jewish state in the land of Israel." And, along with that, the recognition that Israel needs to defend itself with a strong military.

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Donniel Hartman, Lecture: "Power, Morality, and Proportionality." Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Summer 2021

Second, we need to double down on the commitments and aspirations voiced in Israel's Declaration of Independence. Noa, I know you've studied this, but I'm going to write them here anyway: "THE STATE OF ISRAEL ... will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture..." As American lovers of Israel, we can help to remind Israel of its founding principles.

Third, we need to recommit to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Two-states for two peoples as soon as we have responsible partners on the Palestinian side. And, until then, we need to follow the advice in Micah Goodman's book *Catch-67* to decrease the moral footprint of the occupation.<sup>5</sup> While keeping Israelis safe, we need to find every way possible to safeguard the human rights of Palestinians living in the territories, to ensure that they can thrive as individuals and as a society, and to lay the groundwork for a Palestinian state. Unless Israel does this, the *de facto* permanent occupation of the territories will become *de jure* which will end Israel as a democracy.

Fourth, and this is where you have really taught me something, Noa, fourth is that as American Zionists we cannot only focus on defense of Israel, but also voicing moral expectations of Israel. That is not the same as telling Israel what to do. We cannot – should not – do that. This is about reminding Israelis of our shared Jewish values and the need to apply them to the project of Jewish sovereignty. This also means really distinguishing between valid critique of Israel and anti-Semitic attacks against Israel. Critique is not coercion, valid critique is about engagement with the Jewish people and what it means to be Jewish. If we cannot figure this one out, then there is no vibrant future for American Zionism.

Finally, we need to wrestle with what it means to have power. Israel is not David. Israel is Goliath. In so many ways, how Israel wields that power defines its moral standing. We cannot be afraid of power – we sought it for 2,000 years and, frankly, we need it for our survival. Let's advocate for an Israel that sets the standard for wielding power. Let's work for an Israel that uses power judiciously, defending itself against the very real threats from its neighbors and from within while advancing peace and human rights and justice.

Actually, I would add one more important piece to this vision of Zionism. American Zionism should foster pride in the many blessings that Israel gives to us and the world: the four new peace treaties of the Abraham Accords, unreal science and technology, water conservation that we'll all need with global warming, the most diverse governing coalition in its history, new initiatives to build up Palestinian communities in Israel, and some really great hummus! I'm bringing a mission from my congregation to Israel next summer and I know those families will forge a lifelong commitment to Israel and its people. I'm also running a monthly class this year to explore different understandings of Zionism – left, center, and right – to ensure that my congregants can craft a Zionism that works for them. Both the trip and the class will look at the challenges, but also the blessings. We need to keep the wonderful parts of Israel front and center

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<sup>5</sup> Goodman, Micah. *CATCH-67: The Left, the Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War*. YALE UNIV Press, 2019.

in our own minds as we advocate for a better, more just Israel. Keeping those blessings front and center will remind us of what we're really advocating for.

Noa, I know that I was not so patient or understanding when we spoke this spring. So, thank you for your patience with me, with my whole generation. I believe that we can figure out ways to work together for the sake of the Jewish people, Israel, all people. I don't think I have all the answers. I don't think you do either. But I also know that Jews with different views of Israel cannot give up on one another, cannot lose patience with one another. There are not enough Jews out there for us to retreat into our separate camps and reject one another. This won't always be easy, and we don't have a choice. And, more than that, we will be better for it. God willing, Israel will be better for it.

Noa, again, wishing you a happy new year. I hope it's a wonderful year of learning at Hebrew Union College. Please give me a call when you're in town. I'd love to get a cup of coffee and continue the conversation.

L'Shalom,  
Howard