

## Israel's Complexity: Climbing Down the Ladders of Inference

In June, I met a recent college graduate named Brooke Davies. Brooke grew up here in Charlotte, graduated from Hebrew High, was a leader in her youth group, and traveled to Israel with her Jewish summer camp. After matriculating to UNC, Chapel Hill, she remained active in the Jewish community. During Brooke's senior year, she was elected President of JStreet U, a nationwide college movement that advocates for and educates about a two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In late June, *Moment Magazine* wrote a feature article about Brooke and her passion for Israel. I shared the article to my Facebook page, congratulating her—it's not every day that a well-spoken, articulate Charlottean young adult is featured in a nationally syndicated Jewish magazine. But my casual post ignited heated debate and spurred insults to both Brooke and me. One person slammed me and Brooke as, "just another self-hating Jew."

This past May, a Conservative synagogue in Detroit cancelled a concert featuring internationally known Israeli musician, Noa. Why? Because the synagogue received credible physical threats from American Jews after it became public that the artist was an advocate for two state solution. Just let that sink in for a second.<sup>1</sup>

These heated, vociferous reactions are not just coming from the right. Mainstream and centrist Israel advocates have been attacked by the radical-left. Ironically, in the *very same month* that I was called a self-hating Jew for my so-called liberal views on Israel, I was also criticized for supporting an "apartheid government" while on our congregational trip to Israel. I was told that I was personally complicit in "human rights-abuses."

On college campuses, student groups are railing against Israeli scholars. Experts in the fields of medicine, literature, music, and social sciences have been prevented from speaking. Why? Not because of the quality of their academic work, but because they happen to be Israeli. People who rightly abhor Muslim bans have no problem banning Israelis.

With everything going on in the world, we desperately want to live in the safety of our own ideological bunkers.<sup>2</sup> We are living in a world of partisan echo-chambers: the absolute left largely only listens to the left; the absolute right largely only listens to the right. And the center—even the right and left leaning center—just gets quieter and quieter, tuning out the chaotic din of the outrageously opinionated noise. The result is that it is the *very people* who don't hold extremist positions, the people who can see scales of grey, who are falling silent and refraining from the debate altogether.

It is a huge mistake for us to be silent from debate and dialogue about Israel. It is in this holy space at Temple Beth El where we must be willing to have big and difficult conversations while respecting legitimate differences of opinion.<sup>3</sup> Our tradition calls this *Machloket L'shem*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/michigan-synagogue-cancels-noa-concert-in-face-of-right-wing-protests/>

<sup>2</sup> Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld describes this as "you don't have to be wrong for me to be right."

*Shemayim*, “disagreements for the sake of Heaven.” Because, in a polarized world where sincere dialogue and debate are no longer treasured, if we don’t actively live the Jewish ethic of respectful disagreement here at Temple Beth El, where will we? *V’eem Lo-Achshav Amatai?* And if not now, when?

Indeed, Judaism is a tradition founded upon the value of disagreement and debate. My rabbinic mentor, Rabbi David Stern, likes to say, “Two Jews, three opinions’ is not just a joke – it’s an ethic.” This principle of debate and dialogue was codified early in our tradition. The rabbinic sages, specifically the schools of Hillel and Shammai, seldom agreed. They differed on nearly every issue, from the sacred to the mundane. They even disagreed differently.

The students in the school of Shammai were taught to present their own opinions and arguments and to listen to scholars who primarily agreed with them. The students in the school of Hillel, however, began with the arguments of Shammai. Then, after learning the arguments of others, they advocated for their own opinion, which was often deeply influenced by the ideas that they heard from others. Perhaps that’s why the school of Hillel won nearly every debate. Hillel demonstrates the Jewish tenet that there is always a diversity of beliefs, that diversity is to be respected and, crucially, learned from. Argumentation is the beginning of a conversation, not it’s end.

Nowhere is this truer today than in the issues surrounding Israel. Unfortunately, the language surrounding Israel inside of the American Jewish community has shown us that we are not immune to the partisan world in which dissenting views are labeled as deceptive or disloyal as opposed to what they are: differences of opinion. This is not only bad for Israel; it’s tearing apart the American Jewish community and severely impacting those who are interested in supporting Israel but have legitimate differences of opinion.

I can take the critiques – I’ve lived in Israel, I speak Hebrew, and I’ve learned to make public statements. But for so many of us – writing or speaking publically about Israel feels charged and unsafe. And it is *really* hard for our college students, who are finding their Hillels marginalized from other student groups on campus. Just this week, I heard stories of students who feel like they can’t fight for racial justice, or be part of interfaith dialogues because pro-BDS groups assume that their love for Israel puts them in conflict with other causes.

But what makes it even more difficult is that just as these college students are being shunned by the non-Jewish groups, they then turn towards the Jewish community to hear voices that yell absolutist black and white dichotomies that question loyalty to Israel or devotion to humanity. We are in serious risk of losing the next generation of pro-Israel advocates. When ad hominem attacks are used to stigmatize and marginalize our fellow Jews, we don’t just dismiss the Brooke Davies of the world – who are deeply committed to Israel, we turn off the bystanders and undecideds who love Israel and are challenged because the faith they love is a Judaism of Justice that prompts them to ask difficult moral questions. If there is one thing that Jews have learned over the centuries, it’s that nothing good comes from blind loyalty oaths.<sup>4</sup>

This past July, I travelled to Israel on a rabbinic mission sponsored by AIPAC’s Educational Foundation. When I announced, I was going on an AIPAC trip, I heard disparaging comments from every conceivable side: I heard, “You’re going to be fed a radically right-wing AIPAC line!” I

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<sup>4</sup> Consider the case of Dr. David Myers. The implications are terrible. We will have difficulty recruiting young people to a serve the Jewish people when this is the minefield in which they will enter.

wasn't. When I explained to some people that I was going to meet with Palestinian leadership in Ramallah and the West Bank, I was told that I was an anti-Zionist. I'm not. I purposefully chose to go on the trip with AIPAC because this *specific trip* was designed to allow rabbis to be students instead of leaders – and to explore complexity and nuance in new and different ways.

In meeting after meeting with Israeli or Palestinian officials, scholars and generals, progressive peace activists and right-wing hawks, I was stunned that each could articulate the other side's points of view while staking their own claim. I don't want to be Pollyannaish—they painted a picture that looks bleak. Extremist movements and trench digging on both sides are making peace between Israelis and the Palestinians untenable. But what floored me was the nuanced and complex dialogue happening in Israel that is simply being shunned here in the United States.

Last summer our staff participated in two days of retreats led by our Temple board member, Cyndee Patterson. Cyndee taught us something simple, profound and beautiful: she said that each of us use something called the ladder of inference. We make inferences in seconds, nearly instantaneously. But the problem with the ladder of inference is that it leads us to assume that we know the solutions to other people's problems. The further away we are from other people's problems, the easier it is for us to climb up the ladder of inference.

Coming down the ladder of inference requires us to be curious about the position of someone whose perspective is different than our own. The capacity for curiosity and humility in the face of difference is the hardest and most rewarding part of good marriages, healthy organizations, and strong societies. And it's needed now, more than ever.

When I tell people that I support the State of Israel, I hear the ladders of inference being climbed, almost immediately. Why can't Israelis and Palestinians just make peace? If only the Palestinians did this. If only Israel did that. But like an onion, the inferences are missing the nuance that comes with uncovering each layer. Here's an example: While I was in Jerusalem in July, three Arab Israeli citizens used smuggled guns to kill two Israeli police officers near the Dome of the Rock. The police happened to be Druze—also Arab citizens of Israel. This was the first time that Arab citizens of Israel had committed an act of terror on Arab citizens of Israel. In the days that followed, there were protests, violence, and the murder of a Jewish family by a Palestinian terrorist.

In conversations, I had with an Israeli Arab politician,<sup>5</sup> I asked how her community was explaining what happened. She reminded me of the layered onion. On the surface layer, it looked like an act of violence aimed at Israel by three fundamentalists. Peel the layer back, and we find another layer: the three men were funded by the Muslim Brotherhood in Qatar. Peel back further, and we see that Qatar is funding similar terrorism in Saudi Arabia and other Arab states through the Muslim Brotherhood and their ties to Iran. Peel back, just one more layer, and we find that this is all related to the recent power struggle over Middle Eastern energy and airspace, between Russia, siding with Iran, and the United States siding with Saudi Arabia.

In these situations, we desperately want to ascribe a "good guy" and "bad guy." It is seductive to reduce complexity to easy explanations and to walk up ladders of inference. But nothing is easy in the Middle East. When we demand "peace now" to Palestinians and Israelis, the

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<sup>5</sup> Ghaida Rinawi-Zoabi, general director of Injaz: Center for Professional Arab Local Governance.

path to get there often brings more international meddling, more extremists jockeying for control, less peace and more death.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge for us is to help ourselves and the coming generations hold these nuances: to be steeped in love and affection for Israel and its history, to be able to argue the case for Jewish self-determination, to want that the Palestinians have a viable state that cares for her own people, and to discern the difference between acceptable criticism of Israel and delegitimization or outright antisemitism.

We are going to explore these nuances here in Charlotte and at Temple Beth El.

Over the last year, our Israel committee completed an Israel audit of the congregation. They explored all the ways that we currently engage with Israel and are recommending to our board further steps we can take to create a love of Israel through her art, culture, literature, film, food, and learning opportunities. But it's not just about attending Israel programming: we need to read Israeli papers and authors, change our language and expand our own understanding. When the issues appear to be black and white, we have to remind ourselves that it's never that easy and seek out the nuance and complexity.

**Be like Hillel: learn from competing ideas within Israel.**

On October 15<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm, the Federation's Jewish Community Relations Council will host a lecture featuring two award-winning Israeli journalists who will help us explore the challenges facing the character and soul of Israel.

Then, on October 30<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm we will welcome Grant Rumley, a highly regarded expert in Palestinian politics. Mr. Rumley wrote the biography of Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president. I will share pictures and reflections from my recent trip to Israel and the West Bank as we discuss the prospects for peace. **Be like Hillel: come learn about the political realities and dynamics facing both the Palestinians and Israelis.**

Travel with us. In March, I will lead a congregational delegation to AIPAC's Policy Conference. Contrary to many people's ladders of inference, AIPAC's Policy Conference is one of the few places where people on the political left and the political right gather together for serious exchanges about Israel and future of a Palestinian state. In coming years, we may have congregational delegations to JStreet and AJC.

**Be like Hillel: help us erect a wide-tent to encourage everyone in our congregation to establish relationships with organizations that support Israel.**

Please consider going to Israel with Rabbi Klass. We want as many people in our congregation to travel to Israel so that we can help ourselves come down our own ladders of inference by connecting with the people who make Israel the living miracle that it is. The trip is filling up, fast.

In the story of creation, when the world was unformed and dark, *ruach Elohim*, God's breath, swept over the earth. That breath of God is greater than any of us: it gave light and form to our world.<sup>7</sup> It is to the *ruach Elohim*, the breath of God, where we turn to restore our own

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<sup>6</sup>Rabbi Ken Chasen "The Reductive Seduction" Leo Baeck Temple Rosh Hashanah 5778

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:2-3

souls at this season. From that breath, may we find our voices again – needed now more than ever. *Ruach Elohim*, amidst the extremist voices, let your whisper of hope, help us dignify the complexity of issues and the diversity ideas in our midst. Help us understand that nuance isn't an enemy; but makes for better thinking. May *your* whisper give us courage and strength to listen and learn from the wisdom of those who disagree with us, so that we can strengthen our own community and so Israel can be strengthened by way of our efforts. *Roach Elohim* – in the darkness of our age, spread blessing and light on the land of Israel, on all her people, over all of us – so we can be blessed with the hope of *shalom*, the hope peace.

Amen