

Editorial – Four Questions We Need To Ask About Israel

by Rabbi Judith Schindler

Throughout this week, Jews around the world are celebrating Passover, a festival from the book of Exodus that marks our historic freedom from Egyptian slavery. Each year, we begin this holiday by sitting around our festival tables telling the stories of our people's servitude in the past as we reflect on social justice issues of today. This year, there were many issues my community addressed: from how this recession has forced us to appreciate the essentials; to the responsibilities we have for providing housing for our city's homeless; to asking tough questions surrounding our homeland of Israel.

On Passover we teach our children by encouraging them to ask questions. While the Haggadah (our guidebook for the celebratory meal) provides us with four traditional questions, this year, I propose four new soul searching questions on the topic of Israel.

While Israel could expand settlements in East Jerusalem, does that mean we should? Are the current expansions of Ramat Shlomo disrupting relations with our Palestinian neighbors and impinging on their daily lives or are these construction projects merely providing for natural growth of an existing Jewish neighborhood?

Ramat Shlomo is a Jewish neighborhood north of Jerusalem with 16,000 Jewish residents. Three weeks ago, with Vice President Biden in Israel to promote peace talks, Israel's Interior Ministry approved the building of 1,600 new housing units. Do I wish that this announcement was not made when Biden was there? Yes. Do I wish the unveiling of construction plans could have waited until peace talks had progressed further? Yes. Even so, just as I would support the right of our Palestinian neighbors to build as their families expand, I hope the world would understand the need for construction to accommodate the growing Israeli families who already live there. I imagine that one day, when the peace for which I pray is achieved and a two state solution is attained, for security reasons, Ramat Shlomo will remain in Israeli hands and land will be traded so that the Palestinians can have a peaceful land of their own. If this building project were in the heart of the West Bank and disrupting the daily lives of Palestinians, I would express my dismay, but it is not. While not beyond our ability to question, Israel's actions in recent weeks do not warrant the world-wide condemnation it has received. This leads me to the second question I have asked this Passover.

Why is Israel judged more harshly than any other nation and continually singled out for criticism?

While Israel was lambasted in the media for its construction project, barely a word was said world-wide when that same week, the Palestinians dedicated a courtyard in el-Bireh in memory of a terrorist who led a 1978 massacre in which 37 Israeli civilians and 1 American photographer were killed and 71 were wounded. Moving toward peace requires two partners for peace. Israel needs to be held to high standards...but so do its Palestinian neighbors. Building courtyards honoring terrorists is not promoting peace.

The third Passover question I pose this is year is **why do so many people who value Israel and cherish its existence fail to recognize its extreme vulnerability?**

Israel has many enemies who seek to destroy it. While we lovingly criticize Israel, let us not take its existence for granted. For if we do, we might one day wake up and find that this vital democracy in the Middle East will no longer have the strength to serve as our ally or the place we can comfortably visit.

Finally, I ask, **why do those who care about Israel not take the time to educate themselves, so that they can educate others?**

Though the world has been described as “flat” or “shrinking” and we are globally connected with the simple click of a mouse, there is a complexity to each international crisis that fills the pages of our papers. We cannot know the historic details of each conflict and all too often rely on journalists to give us a quick summary of the issues at hand. Still, if we care about Israel enough to publicly support it or criticize it, then let us take the time to delve beyond the headlines; to look at a map, to read varying perspectives and to educate ourselves so that we can educate others.

We end our Passover meals with hope as we say the words, “Next year in Jerusalem.” May we all know a next year in Jerusalem where people of all faiths can live together...in peace.