

Learning to Talk to Each Other: Can We Save our Relationship with Israel?
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This was a rough week for Israel and American Jews. Between the arrest of Anat Hoffman at the Western Wall, and the conversion bill that would take away non-Orthodox rabbis' ability to perform conversions, you might say we're having a little family spat.

Life in Israel was never meant to be easy. That's why at the end of the Torah, Moses gives us an entire book's worth of advice for our new life. In this week's portion, he reminds us of an incident in which 2 tribes – Reuven and Gad – decided to settle on the East bank of the Jordan river, which is technically outside of the land of Israel. That was controversial because it meant that they wouldn't take part in the conquest of the land, which was their responsibility as Israelites. So they reached a compromise, as Moses reports in this portion:

I charged them, saying “You must go as warriors, at the head of your Israelite kin... until they have then possession of the land. Then you may return to your homes.” (Deuteronomy 3:18-20)

In other words, the tribes of Reuven and Gad will still take part in building up the land of Israel. As Israelites, they have a responsibility to those living in the land; they just don't live there.

Sounds familiar. We also see ourselves as having a deep connection to Israel. And it's probably because of that connection that the conversion bill makes us so angry. We believe that the Jewish state should be a home for all Jews, regardless of whether they choose to make it their home. That's what being the Jewish state means.

Or does it? It's worth pointing out that technically, Israel doesn't owe us anything. They are their own country that elects their own government. We're not citizens, and we don't serve in the Army, so arguably we don't get a say.

But, as Carlo Strenger wrote in Haaretz this week,

... this argument ... is phenomenally shortsighted. Israel was meant to be the homeland of the Jewish people. The bond between Israel and world Jewry is ... one of shared values.¹

That might be what's so scary about this conversion bill. It is becoming increasingly clear that we may not share as many values as we think we do. And all of this row about the

¹ <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/strenger-than-fiction/strenger-than-fiction-is-israel-alienating-the-jews-of-the-world-1.301515>.

conversion bill is actually symptomatic of a larger problem: American and Israeli Jews simply aren't connected to each other in the way that they used to be.²

Study after study has shown that young people in America do not feel as attached to Israel as older people. This despite the Birthright program that has sent thousands of young adults to visit.

The fact is, that Americans and Israelis today live in very different worlds. Part of the reason is religious: American Judaism is diverse and pluralistic, while Israel has held fast to the idea that Orthodoxy is the only true Judaism – and has actually moved further to the right. The Ultra-Orthodox community is growing quickly, and growing in power.

When I returned to Israel last year after an absence of about 7 years, it was striking to see how Ultra-Orthodox the city of Jerusalem had become. As the Haredi population balloons in numbers and power, other Jews have essentially given over their holy sites and their religious lives. That is the origin of the trouble we're seeing right now with Women of the Wall and the Conversion Bill.

But beyond religion, it is also true that many of the connections that we have built with Israel are based largely on realities that no longer exist. Peter Beinart writes that older American Zionists – particularly Boomers:

...were shaped by the terrifying days leading up to the Six-Day War... and by the bitter aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, when much of the world seemed to turn against the Jewish state....³

There was a time when Israel needed us for nation building, much like Moses needed the Reubenites and the Gadites, and we built our Jewish identity around supporting and defending Israel. But today that need doesn't look the same. Young Jews today – and I include myself – don't remember 1973 or 1967. The image of a vulnerable Jewish state has been replaced – for better and for worse – by an Israel that is a regional power, that operates from a position of strength. Add to that the Palestinian conflict that gives us mixed feelings, and the West Bank settlements which are so foreign to us, and you have 2 Jewish communities that can't really even talk to each other about religion, or politics, or setting common goals for the Jewish future.

So we find ourselves in a place where we need to learn how to talk to each other again. And both sides have work to do.

Israel needs to do some real soul searching about its own Jewish identity. Traditionally, Israeli culture sees itself as the culmination of Jewish history, and in a sense a negation of everything that came before. That's why Israelis are so surprised that we don't come live there. Why is there a need for a Diaspora community now that there is a Jewish state? But

² Beinart, Peter. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment."
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment>.

³ Ibid.

that view is destructive. It has led to a wholesale rejection of all forms of Judaism except the form in power in Israel today, which is increasingly reactionary and misogynistic. Israel must come to embrace liberal Judaism, and to do so it must come to embrace Diaspora Judaism. We are more than a strategic asset to the Jewish state – we are a religious and cultural asset as well.

But we also have work to do. We don't like to admit it, but much of our connection to the Jewish state is built around the ways that it can benefit us: Israel as a place that will "be there when we need it;" Israel as a Jewish identity builder for young people; Israel as a fountain of spirituality for those who go to visit. That's what we mean when we talk about our Jewish homeland.

But Israel is not just a Jewish homeland – it is a living, breathing country with a culture and a political system and a whole lot of problems but even more potential solutions. Until we get to know *that* Israel; until we become regular readers of *Haaretz* and the Jerusalem Post; until we begin to approve of the idea of sending our children to study, and even live there; until we are knowledgeable enough to speak out on a regular basis both in support and in loving critique; until then, our opposition to the Conversion Bill – as right as we are – will be largely self-serving. If we are to expect Israel to be a state for all of the Jews, then all of the Jews must work to make ourselves part of the state of Israel.

As Peter Beinart writes, we must "sav[e] liberal Zionism in the United States – so that American Jews can help save liberal Zionism in Israel." We need to build a form of American Zionism that relates to the Israel of today. It will be a Zionism built not just on support and defense, not just on Israel's role in our lives, but on a loving, nuanced relationship with a very complex Jewish society. It will not be easy, but it can be done.

As our ancestors peered over the Jordan River, they knew that they stood at a crossroads of history. Today we stand at a crossroads in our relationship to the Jewish state, and Israel stands at a crossroads as it strives to determine just what it means to be a Jewish state. Now is the time to reexamine our expectations of Israel, and our responsibilities to Israel. Now is the time for Israeli and American Jews each to recognize the immense contribution that the other has made to Jewish life.

May we commit ourselves to Jewish life on both sides of the water.
And may we find a way, once again, to talk to each other, so that we can build a Jewish future together.