

## YES/AND

When my father, Mel Holtz, was working at the Jewish Theological Seminary, there was a professor there named Avraham Holtz. Often, when I told someone that my dad worked at JTS, they assumed that I was Avraham's son. I assume that it was a compliment. I don't actually know anything about Avraham Holtz, except this story which he told of how, back in the 1950's, he went for a year to study in Israel. This was in the early days of the state, when people stood on soup lines and even everyday items were hard to find.

As he tells it, among the first things he did when he moved into his apartment was order a telephone. A week went by, two weeks, a month, and no one came to install a telephone. So he went back downtown to the office of the telephone company, and asked what was going on. "Did you lose my request?" "No, it's right here." "*Nu*, so what's the problem?" "There's a waiting list for telephones." "Okay, so how long will I have to wait?" The clerk scanned the lengthy list. "I'd say you'll probably get your telephone in about a year."

"A year?" Avraham said. "Do you mean to tell me that there is no hope of getting one sooner than that?" *Ain tikvah* – no hope?

The clerk responded: "*Asur l'yehudi lomar eyn tikvah. Tikvah yesh. Efsharut eyn!* A Jew is not allowed to say: 'there is no hope.' Hope there is. A possibility there isn't!"

Even when there is no hope, there is still hope. And, despite what the clerk said, perhaps even when there is no possibility, there is still a possibility. Only about the past are we permitted to say: This can't be changed. About the present and the future, we are required to never give up hope.

I'm trying very hard to keep this story in mind because after this past year, with so many anti-Semitic incidents around the world, after this summer, with the war in Gaza, after the rapid emergence and barbarous acts of the Islamic State, it isn't so easy to have hope. Hope in peace, hope in the triumph of good over evil.

Amazingly, in Israel, the electorate is as unified as it has been in years. The overwhelming majority of Israelis retain hope for a two-state solution, and the same majority also believe that, for the foreseeable future, it will not be possible to achieve. The influence of both the far right and the far left, as measured by seats in the Knesset, has shrunk over the years, and Israelis have moved nearly en masse to what we might call the realism of center.

But if Israelis are more united, here it seems as though American Jews are ever more polarized on the topic of Israel. Witness the recent article in the New York Times saying that American rabbis fear for their jobs if they speak about Israel this High Holy Day season. Many of you sent me that article. I'm not entirely sure if you sent it as encouragement or as warning. But I am pleased to say that, through the years, although not all of you have always agreed with me, there has never been a question here that it is important for the rabbi to speak about Israel.

Frankly, with all that is going on in the world, I don't know how any rabbi can choose not to speak about Israel this year. At one time Israel seemed to be the only thing that American Jews agreed on. If now, rather than being a source of unity, Israel is a source of division, it is – and I mean this quite seriously – it is my sacred obligation as a rabbi to help bridge that divide.

It is a sacred obligation because whether American Jews feel this way or not, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 is the single most significant event to occur in Jewish history in the last 2000 years, since the destruction of the Temple. There have been many significant moments, good and bad, but this tops them all. Even the Holocaust, an unspeakable horror, unique for its scale and depravity, was still a continuation of hundreds, perhaps thousands of massacres and pogroms going all the way back to the Romans. In truth, had there been a Jewish state for the past two thousand years, it's possible that most of those pogroms would not have happened. Had there been a Jewish state in 1935 to accept the Jews fleeing or being expelled from Europe the history of the 20th century would certainly look much different.

We have only to look at what is going on in Europe today to see the difference that Israel's presence makes. I know that you do not need me to recount the long list of anti-Semitic incidents and attacks that have taken place this year, both in the United States and to a far greater degree in Europe. The one that struck me most viscerally was the besieging of a synagogue by a mob in Paris. While watching the video of that attack, I was immediately reminded of Kristallnacht.

Indeed, it would be very tempting to draw certain comparisons to Europe of the 1930's. But it is not the 1930's. There are significant differences. In the 30's when Hitler told everyone what he would do to the Jews, there was only silence. Today, the European governments come out strongly against anti-Semitism whenever it appears. They need to do more, it's true. But as David Harris of the

American Jewish Committee has written, they understand the problem, and they are our allies in this fight.

In the 1930's the US State Department was anti-Semitic and Congress was isolationist. Today, despite what some of you fear, the US is a staunch ally of the State of Israel.

And finally – and most importantly - unlike the 1930's, today there **is** a State of Israel. And that, above everything else, makes all the difference. I am not an alarmist. But the Jews of Europe are afraid. The Jews of France are fleeing in droves. However, unlike the 1930's, they have a place to go. Natan Sharansky recently said, “More and more people are asking whether Jews have a future in France, but no one doubts that French Jews have a future in Israel.”

I think things in Europe are likely to get worse before they get better. I do not feel that another Holocaust is upon us, in large part because I do believe that both Europe and the United States are different than they were. But mostly I am not worried about another Holocaust because, if it turns out that the Jews of Europe need to leave, today they have a place to go.

This is why so many staunch supporters of Israel find it so painful to see what feels like lukewarm support given to Israel by so many American Jews, and especially by our youngsters and by those on the political left. They ask, “How is it that the need, the obligation, the self-interest of wholeheartedly supporting the existence of the State of Israel is perfectly clear to us and it is not to so many others?”

And at the very same time, there are others who say, “It is not enough to simply have a place to go. It has to be a place that lives up to the ideals we expect of a Jewish society.” This is why so many of them find it painful to see what feels like jingoistic, unquestioning support for anything Israel does by so many American Jews, and especially by the older generations and by those on the political right. They ask, “How is it that the need, the obligation, the self-interest of wholeheartedly insisting that the State of Israel treat all human beings morally is perfectly clear to us and it is not to so many others?”

This is the divide that I believe rabbis must try to bridge. I believe that we all care deeply about Israel. So how did we end up so far apart? In large part it is because we are not speaking the same language. Many American Jews are not worried about the continued existence of the State of Israel because they have never known a time when there was no State of Israel. We cannot imagine –

despite the movies and the history – we simply cannot truly imagine what the Jewish world without Israel felt like. And we cannot see how differently all the Jews of today’s world carry themselves simply because the State of Israel exists. We cannot truly imagine the fear and the hopelessness and the helplessness felt by the Jews of Europe 75 years ago when they did not have a place to go. And because we take the fact of the State of Israel for granted, we assume that it will always be there, and so we move from fighting for her existence to arguing among ourselves about what kind of State it should be. Israelis themselves, in the midst of fighting for their lives, have always argued about what kind of State it should be. American Jews, looking on from afar, have had a much less nuanced view.

From one perspective, the new attitude of American Jews is actually amazing progress. It is a positive thing that our young people are so sure of Israel’s place in the world that they can turn their attention to ensuring that she lives up to the high standards we expect. And even more wonderful is that we have so many young people who care enough about Israel that they are willing to stand up and speak out against injustices in Israeli society. They are **not** indifferent; they have **not** lost interest and walked away. Rather, feeling assured of Israel’s existence – having never known a world without her – they have moved on to the next level, the level of the prophets of old. Israel is here; Israel is a fact; now let us concentrate on forging her into the just society our tradition demands.

I am glad that we have raised a generation that feels this way. It is wonderful, and it is optimistic, and it should not be quashed. My fear is that it is premature. Not that we should wait to fix the ills of Israeli society – or any society. Rather, my fear is that the surety that so many Jews have of the inevitability of Israel is overstated, and sometimes even naïve.

Israel has accepted that there will be two states, one Jewish and one Palestinian. Her enemies have not. When left leaning Jews demonstrate and call for an end to the occupation, they mean the occupation of the West Bank. And I largely agree with them. However, when most Arabs, and especially when Hamas uses the same language, calling in their charter for an end to the occupation, they mean the West Bank **and** all the rest of the land up to the Mediterranean. This is not just a bargaining position. It is their deeply, religiously held belief. Why are there Jews who don’t believe them? When right-wing Jewish settlers call, on religious grounds, for holding on to all of the West Bank, we believe they mean it and we condemn them for it. Why then are so many unwilling to believe that Hamas

means what they say? Iran has declared its intention to wipe Israel off the map, and still pursues the weapons to accomplish it. Why are so many unwilling to believe they mean what they say? It was Elie Wiesel who famously wrote in his first book, *Night*, “Believe them when they say they are coming to kill you.”

I love the fact that left-leaning American Jews are so idealistic. I would not try to take it away. I would like them to temper their idealism with a dose of realism.

And what of the other side? What of those on the right? There are those, especially among our older generations, for whom Israel can never be safe enough. Many of them **do** remember what it was like before Israel. And they remember the change that her founding made. The thousands of refugees from the Holocaust who had survived concentration camps only to languish in displaced persons camps for three years finally had a place to call home. They remember the continuous threat from Arab armies, and the fear that Israel would be destroyed even as she was just being born. And they remember the images of little Israel defeating the Arab Goliath in '48 and '56 and especially in '67, giving us pride and helping us overcome the anti-Semitism we felt here in America. For this generation, and for those on the right, Israel can never be too strong, never be too secure. And I do not know what Israel would have done without them. They are the ones who collected money and supplies and smuggled them into the fledgling state when few others would help. They are the ones who year after year raised money for ambulances and bought Israel bonds and convinced the American people that Israel is an ally worth standing behind. I do not know what would have happened if they had not been so viscerally aware that Israel's very existence hung in the balance. My concern is that though the balance of power has shifted dramatically in Israel's favor over the past 65 years, their fear has not diminished. And so they are afraid to see Israel take any chances in order to make peace, even chances that Israelis themselves are willing to take.

They listen to the words of Hamas and of Iran and of ISIL and they believe them wholeheartedly and they think of 1948 and they are afraid. But at the same time they are unable to believe the voices of the moderate Palestinians, the ones who call for compromise and for mutual recognition and respect. It is true that those voices are often hard to hear, drowned out as they are by the radicals. But they are there. And there are actions as well, ordinary Palestinians who work with and study with ordinary Israelis, trying to build a level of trust. I understand the

reasons that right-leaning American Jews mistrust any Arab intentions. I would like them to temper that mistrust with a dose of moderation.

I think that those on the right are too afraid about the possibility of Israel's destruction and those on the left are too complacent about the inevitability of her existence. I think that those on the right are too hard on Arab moderates for not being more vocal in a society in which it is dangerous to be a moderate, in which moderation is equated with collaboration, and often leads to death. And I think those on the left are too hard on the Israeli Defense Forces, which tries so hard to protect civilians, and too hard on Israeli civil society which, for all its flaws, is still a democracy with a better record than most of tolerance and human rights for, among others, Arabs, women, and homosexuals.

I think those on the right are too quick to excuse the deaths of any Palestinian in Gaza this summer as an unfortunate but acceptable outcome of the war which I believe was clearly started by Hamas. I think those on the left are not quick enough to condemn Hamas atrocities both against Israel and even more against its own people.

So ultimately, how do we bridge this divide? How do we Jews learn to listen to each other, perhaps to learn from each other, when our positions are so far apart? It seems hopeless. But remember, it is forbidden for a Jew to say there is no hope.

I do not actually think that each side will give a little, and then a little more, and then we will all meet in the middle and sing Kumbaya. In fact, I don't think that would even be a good idea, because it is the constant dialogue between opposing points of view that usually produces the best outcome.

In August I spoke with a friend who told me that he was having a hard time being completely supportive of Israel during the Gaza war. When I asked why, he told me, as I already knew, that he loved Israel, but he was unhappy with Israeli discrimination against the non-Orthodox. And he knew that Israel grants rights to its Arab minority, but he felt that Israeli Arabs were not really given equal opportunities. This and other things were making him disillusioned, and this in turn made it hard to be as enthusiastic about Israel as he used to be.

I spent a lot of time thinking about that conversation. I understand, even share that sense of disillusion. Israel is not yet the country we want it to be. At the same time, I could not understand what that had to do with Israel defending herself against rocket barrages and terror infiltration tunnels from Gaza.

And one day, suddenly, I thought I understood. Jewish tradition, and especially biblical interpretation, is filled with differing understandings of the same text. Sometimes the *midrashim*, the stories that two rabbis tell about the same biblical story are utterly contradictory with one another. So what happens? The tradition doesn't say, "Yes this one is true, but that one isn't." Instead it says, "Yes this one is true, AND that one can also be true." And though it seems simplistic, this is what I think we need to do in our discussions about Israel.

My friend, like so many of us on the right and on the left, sees the valuable Jewish debate on Israel as a dialectic – "Yes, but." In that usage, the "yes" is only a polite nod to your partner; the "but" lets them know that you don't really mean yes. "Yes, I really like her, but ..." "Yes I really love your work, but ..." "Yes, but." This is something that therapists and corporate consultants have been hammering away at in recent years. "Yes, but" is the language of negation. It means that only one thing can be true.

In order to bridge the divide between right and left on Israel, in order to rescue discussion of Israel from being the third rail of Jewish life, which you touch only at your peril, we need to move from "yes but" to "yes and." We need to move from a place where only one part of the equation is true to where both are true. We need to move from the right saying "Yes we should do something about the suffering of Palestinian children, **but** Israel's security cannot be compromised" to "Yes we should do something about the suffering of Palestinian children **and** Israel's security cannot be compromised." Some of you will say it is semantics, but I hear a difference. The first suggests that only one of those things can be true. The second offers the possibility that both can be true at the same time.

And so, likewise, the left needs to go from, "Yes, Israel's existence is important to me, **but** Israel doesn't do enough for the rights of women or Arabs or liberal Jews" to "Yes, Israel's existence is important to me, **and** Israel doesn't do enough for the rights of women or Arabs or liberal Jews

Israel has the clear obligation to defend its citizens. **AND** we must hold her to high standards of behavior.

It is our moral obligation to speak out against policies of the Israeli government with which we disagree **AND** it is a moral obligation to defend Israel unflinchingly, unfailingly, unequivocally when others call for her destruction.

If we can do this, if we can hold in our minds the idea that this **and** that can be true, that your position on security is no less valid than his position on the current state of Israeli society, and vice versa, we will bridge the divide.

It is not quite a promise, but it is a hope. Hatikvah – the hope of two thousand years, to be a free and secure people in our land. Hatikvah – the hope of two thousand years to live up to the ideals of the Torah. To be an independent nation **AND** to be a light unto the nations. This is a hope we all share. With that hope in mind, I ask you all to rise and join in singing Hatikvah.