

Right or Left, We Are All Yisrael: Talking About Israel

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One needn't be seminary trained, or a particularly astute biblical exegete, to discern the core message of this week's parasha. The Torah takes a pretty heavy-handed approach to driving home its message, repeating it no less than 7 times: in Chapter 4, verses 1, 26, and 40; in Chapter 5, verses 16 and 30; and again in Chapter 6, verses 3 and 18. The Israelites are poised to finally enter the Promised Land after decades of wandering, and what is the resounding message from God that Moses shares with them, over and over?

בְּכָל-הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶתְכֶם תֵּלְכוּ לְמַעַן תַּחְיִיו וְטוֹב לָכֶם וְהֶאֱרַכְתֶּם יָמִים בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תִּירְשׁוּ:

“Follow only the path that Adonai your God has commanded you, so that you may thrive and that it may go well with you, *and that you may long endure in the land you are to possess.*”

God *cares* about how we're going to behave in the Promised Land. When we enter the Holy Land to live there, our behaviour has to be of the calibre that God would approve. We must avoid behaviours of which God would not approve. This is the parasha's clear message, at its most basic.

What's *unclear*, however, is what *sorts* of behaviours God might approve of in the Promised Land, and what sorts God wouldn't. It's not that desirable and undesirable behaviours aren't *stated* with clarity in the Torah; it's just that those behaviours stated are contradictory to each other. This parasha ends, for instance, with a violent commandment to uproot and banish the peoples – the 7 ethnicities – that are living there when we enter the land; it says we are to smash and burn all their holy sites—every last one (Deut. 7:1-6). This behaviour would seem to contradict behaviours commanded in previous parshiot, like treating “the stranger that lives amongst you as your citizen,” and loving him as yourself (Lev. 19:34). So what's an Israelite to do? What's the right way to behave towards ‘the other’ in the Promised Land?

For decades, modern Israeli Jews have wrestled with this question, mainly because our ‘enemy’ *lives amongst us* in the Promised Land. Should we incapacitate and demean him, or offer him equality? Should we respond with aggression, or be loving? Which course of action is the most likely to bring peace between peoples, that we may indeed long endure in the land we possess? Some take a hard line; others an embracing one. And as the debate rages on, Jews outside the Holy Land, in the Diaspora, sadly, grow more and more divided. We all agree that God cares about how we behave in the Promised Land; but we can't agree on what behaviours God would actually approve. And the labels are starting to fly.

Those who express feeling deeply troubled by the actions of the Israeli government—those who see settlement expansion and the new Nation-State law as destroying the possibility of a two-state solution that would keep Israel both Jewish and democratic—are labelled as “self-hating Jews” who put the existence of the State on the line. Those who support the hard-line approach of the current Israeli government are labelled as supporters of an apartheid state that abuses its military power. There's intense polarisation growing in the Diaspora, as neither side—neither right nor left—can reconcile the views of the *other* side with the Jewish values they themselves were raised on. One says, ‘The Jewish values *I* was raised on teach that all people's lives have equal worth, so how can you treat anyone as lesser?’ The other says, ‘The Jewish values *I* was raised on teach Jewish survival

at all costs, so how can you ever critique the IDF?’ Given the divergent messages we’ve seen in the Torah, our irreconcilable differences are hardly surprising. But they are problematic.

They are particularly problematic for Progressive Jewish communities. Not simply because formally our movement has supported a two-state solution that seems to move further from reach with each passing day. But also for reasons that have less to do with our desired outcome, and more to do with our internal cohesiveness—something that’s important to us as a minority movement in Australia. Perhaps more than in other movements, there are people within ours on *both the right and the left*, and both base their case on Jewish values. Perhaps more than in other movements, there are people in ours who feel strongly that the Israeli government is headed down the wrong path—straying from the founding ideals in the Declaration of Independence and the pluralistic ethos that would allow for a thriving non-Orthodox Jewry and the dignity of non-Jews in the state. We mustn’t get caught up in the wider Jewish trend of labelling those who disagree with current policy as ‘self-hating Jews’ or ‘anti-Israel leftists.’ If we do, we make them “other,” when in fact their views are based on many of the same values *all* Progressive Jews share, even if some of their conclusions differ from those of the political right.

Non-orthodoxies of all religions steer away from fundamentalist understandings and positions. We appreciate nuance and see diversity along a spectrum of thought and belief as our strength—opening each other’s minds and hearts, and stretching each other’s souls, in the attempt to arrive at something that feels like truth. Not everyone who opposes the new Nation-State law is anti-Israel. Not everyone who takes a hard-line approach wants a theocracy. Political positions don’t reveal truth, relationship does, because relationship enables conversations that reveal nuance. When we fail to engage in them, our arguments grow more extreme and our religious communities more polarised. How do we avoid such division? *U’shmartem*, says our parasha:

לֹא תִסְרוּ יָמִין וּשְׂמאל:

“Take care not to turn to the right or the left.” In Progressive communities, truth is found in the conversation between them.

We all agree on *ahavat yisrael*—the Jewish value of loving Israel—the land and the people. Since biblical times, the Jewish *people* have been disagreeing on how to behave in the Jewish *land*. We mustn’t suddenly resort to labelling and otherizing each other. When we do, we risk trampling on one of our cherished Progressive values that distinguishes us from other movements and faiths: our right to disagree with one another and still remain in relationship. This is, after all, what it means to *be* Israel—*Yisra-El*, one who wrestles with God, but remains in covenant. Surely, we can wrestle with how God wants us to behave in the Promised Land, and remain in relationship with one another, and with that holy land. *Yisrael* is who we are, and we are all *Yisrael*.

Shabbat shalom.

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