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Israel Wrestling

I have long straddled two worlds with regard to diaspora engagement with Zionism and the state of Israel. As the founder/president of PANIM, an organization that has trained tens of thousands of American Jewish teens to pursue social and political activism on behalf of the Jewish people and the world at large, I built a strong relationship with AIPAC so as to expose our students to the preeminent pro-Israel lobby in the United States.

However, as an educational organization, PANIM was always deeply committed to looking at every issue from a multiplicity of perspectives in the spirit of free inquiry and a rigorous pursuit of the Jewish value of *emet*, truth. As such, PANIM students were also exposed to a wide range of organizations that have challenged Israel on specific policy positions, be it in relationship to the peace process, treatment of its non-Jewish citizens or its lack of full recognition of non-Orthodox branches of Judaism.

Personally, in addition to being a strong advocate and donor to my local Jewish federation and a host of other mainstream Jewish organizations, I have been an enthusiastic supporter of groups like the New Israel Fund, the Israel Religious Action Center and Rabbis for Human Rights. The mainstream organizations support a range of programs and services domestically and across the globe that make the idea of a socially responsible "Jewish people" a reality. I love being part of a Jewish people whose relationships criss-cross the globe and have deep roots in Jewish history. My personal identity is deeply tied to Israel and to the concept of Jewish peoplehood. For me, it is not just a slogan. The organized Jewish community gives substance to that concept.

The latter group of organizations is committed to the kind of Israel that I understand to be the Zionist ideal -- a state that is both Jewish and democratic. A Jewish state that embodies the noblest aspirations of prophetic Judaism, as articulated in Israel's Declaration of Independence, is the fulfillment of the century-old aspirations of spiritual Zionism. The principles of spiritual Zionism are the same principles that are at the core of Torah: *ahavat ger*, loving the stranger in our midst because we were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:20); *tzelem elohim*, treating every person as if he or she was a child

of God (Genesis 1:27); and the belief that only through justice will Zion achieve any form of ultimate redemption (Tzion b'mishpat tipadeh, Isaiah 1:27)

It has not always been easy to straddle these two worlds, and it is getting harder. My friends on the progressive left cannot fathom why I have had a close working relationship with AIPAC. And I have taken my share of lumps from "defenders of Israel" who have accused me of traitorous behavior for my activism with organizations that have challenged one or another policy of the state of Israel when I feel that it violates core principles of Jewish ethics and morality. When the state of Israel feels besieged -- be it from anti-Zionist propaganda, Islamic-inspired terrorism, or from a possible unilateral peace initiative from the United States (not in any way equal threats but all precipitating frenetic defense efforts from pro-Israel quarters) -- the rhetoric heats up, accusations about "Jewish loyalty" are made, and polarization between camps in the Jewish community deepens.

Reasonable people will disagree over whether diaspora Jewish activity can have an impact on the course that Israeli society takes. On every trip to Israel (about once a year) I become ever more humbled by how much I don't know. Politics and society in Israel are complex, and I do believe that more times than not, Israel has taken the moral high ground in circumstances that make such approaches of no small risk. Nevertheless, I persist in my activism because I believe that my mandate as a rabbi is to speak the truth as I see it with as much courage as I can muster.

But the area about which I can speak with far more confidence has to do with the future of the American Jewish community. I spend a lot of time with high school, college and young adult Jews. A great number of them are highly idealistic and care about making a difference in the world. Some aspire to play leadership roles in the Jewish community, including as rabbis. Over the past decade, I note that fewer and fewer identify as Zionists, the state of Israel plays a much less significant role in their identity formation than was the case for me and my generation, and an astounding number hold the organized Jewish community in contempt. I believe that the way our community has chosen to "defend Israel" has profoundly alienated the next generation of American Jews. There is substantial survey data that backs up my personal observations.

A recently launched Israel education initiative coming out of the Jewish Agency is called *Makom* and its tag line is: "hugging and wrestling with Israel." It comes not a moment too soon. For we are a people whose patriarch -- Jacob -- earned the right to that mantle when he wrestled with a heavenly being. He was thus re-named *Yisrael/Israel*, the one who wrestled with God. We, his descendants, must also be allowed to engage in the kind of wrestling that is the meaning of our people's name.

A generation of Jews who see themselves as global citizens will not identify with a community that offers them anything less.

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