

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5779 – Day 2

Israel: Real Constructive Critique Can Only Come from Love

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A Jewish woman wants to take her dog to Israel, so she goes to the travel agent to find out how. He says, "It's easy. You go to the airline, they give you a kennel, you put your dog in it, when you get off at Ben Gurion Airport go to the luggage rack, and there's your dog. So she does—she gets the kennel, flies to Israel, gets off the plane, and goes to the luggage rack. There's only one problem—there's no dog!

She goes to the lost and found, says, "Where's my dog?" They check on a computer and realized that they made a mistake—they tell her the dog in another terminal. So they tell her, you wait here, and we will get your dog for you. They find the kennel, look in, and to their horror they see that the dog is dead.

"Oh, my gosh, they say, we killed this woman's dog. What are we going to do?" Then one of the workers says, "Wait a minute, there's a pet shop across the street from the airport—and I've seen this exact same dog in the window. I'll go over there, get the dog, and she'll never know the difference."

So they go forward with the plan, and bring the kennel to the woman, with the new dog in it. But immediately the woman says: "That's not my dog."

The Israelis' hearts sink and they ask her "What do you mean that's not your dog? How do you know?"

To which she responds, "My dog's dead. I was taking it to Israel to bury it."

There is nothing like a trip to Israel! (Unless, God forbid, you are going there to bury your dog.)

During the year, I get emails and calls from TBI members who have returned from trips to Israel. I always love to hear their stories. It never gets boring. It doesn't matter how many times you go to Israel, it's always exciting, there is always something new, there are always strong feelings of connection.

During the year, I also hear from members about their dissatisfaction with the Israeli Government. Like many nations in the world, Israel has a government which does a lot of good and some things that are not so good. There are some actions, though, that are particularly painful—settlement expansion in the West Bank, distancing itself further from the Reform and Conservative Movements, and catering to the wishes of the Ultra-Orthodox.

So what's a person to do? How do we both love Israel and criticize Israel? And if we want to criticize Israel, how should we do it?

To answer these questions, I want to take circuitous route—a very circuitous route—and discuss one of the great sins the Israelites committed in the Torah – the Sin of the Golden Calf.

When the sin occurs, God's anger rages – and he tells Moses that he wants to destroy the people.

Moses argues on behalf of the Israelites and prevails. God decides not to destroy the people, and then a little later, God forgives the people.

Going back to the point in the story where Moses defends the people, our Sages say, Moses argued with God more than the Torah reveals. Of the many arguments that our Sages say, Moses made before God, I want to share one of them with you. This Midrash—this rabbinic story—is inspired by the name of a city that Moses mentions. The name of the city is Di Zahav. Now, no one knows where Di Zahav is, because this is the only time it's mentioned in the Torah. In addition, the city sounds a lot like the Hebrew words Dye Zahav—which means “enough gold.” Dye—similar to Dayenu—is “enough,” and “Zahav” is “Gold.” Here is the Midrash based on these words:

Moses spoke audaciously towards Heaven . . . The school of R. Yannai learned this from the words *Di-zahav*. What do these words mean? They said in the school of R. Yannai: Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One, blessed be He: “Master of the Universe, the silver and gold [*zahav*] which You showered on Israel until they said, ‘Enough’ [*dai*], --that is what caused the Israelites to make the golden calf . . . R. Hiyya bar Abba said: It is like the case of a man who had a son. He bathed him and anointed him with sweet smelling oils, and gave him plenty to eat and drink, and hung a purse around his neck, and placed him at the door of a house of ill-repute. How could the young man not sin!? [Berachot 32a]

This is a pretty good argument and it's a bit racy. In this argument, Moses is saying to God, “the sin of the Golden Calf wasn't the fault of the Israelites; rather, it was Your fault.” Moses continues, “Why was it Your fault? Because **You** were the one who commanded them to take Gold and Silver out of Egypt, when they were leaving. If they didn't have all that gold when they arrived at Mt. Sinai, they could have never made the calf!”

What's really interesting about this argument is that, the city name—Di Zahav—which inspired this midrash—is mentioned in the first verse, in the Book of Deuteronomy. That's a very odd place for some words to be referring to Moses' defense of the Israelites. The reason it's an odd placement is that, contextually—the beginning of Deuteronomy has nothing to do with Moses and his defense of the people. While on the surface—saying the name Di Zahav at the beginning of Deuteronomy seems out of place, on a deeper level – we can see that the words are strategically placed.

What our Sages are telling us is—“Yes, at the beginning of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses shared this story—about an earlier time, when he defended the people against God—saying to God—it's not their fault, it's your fault.”

Why did Moses share this story at that moment?

The reason is that the Book of Deuteronomy—which is the last book in the Torah—is a series of speeches that Moses gives to the Israelites, just before they enter the land of Canaan. And remember, they are going into Canaan without Moses. Soon, Moses will die in the Land of Moav—just east of the Jordan River.

Throughout these speeches to the Israelites, Moses will critique, rebuke, and offer constructive criticism to the Israelites. He's been with them for 40 years and he sees that they need reminders and rebukes to stay out of trouble.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ties all of this together, saying:

“Criticism is easy to deliver but hard to [hear]. It is all too easy for people to close their ears, or even turn the criticism around (For example, the Israelites could say about Moses' rebukes: “He's blaming us, but he should really be blaming himself. After all, he was in charge”). What does it take for criticism to be [heard and absorbed]? *The people have to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the [the person criticizing them] is always ready to defend them.* They have to know that he cares for them, wants the best for them, and is prepared to take personal risks for their sake. Only when people know for certain that you want their good, do they listen to you when you criticize them.” (Covenant & Conversations, Devarim 5778). And that's exactly what Moses was doing.

So what does this mean for Israel? It means, way too many people want to criticize Israel without having any skin in the game. People are criticizing Israel, but they don't like Israel, or they don't care about Israel, or they don't know a thing about Israel. If you are someone who is upset by Israel's actions and you want to criticize Israel, ask yourself first, “Do I love Israel? Am I willing to defend Israel? Am I criticizing Israel in a way that will be for Israel's own good? Or, is my criticism coming from another place?”

If we are so upset with the Israeli government that we don't feel love for Israel, then I believe, before we make the criticism, --we should go back, and reestablish our love for Israel.

How do we do that?

When we think about the totality of Israel, what it is, what it represents, what it has meant to the Jewish people in the past, what it means to the Jewish people today, and how Israel is one of the world leaders in technology, medical, and agricultural innovation — there is a lot to love, a lot to admire, and a lot to be in awe of.

Certainly, an element of frustration, for those of us upset about some of the decisions of the Israeli government, comes from the realization that there is very little we can do to get our voices in the conversation, and even less we can do to affect change. While that is frustrating—and certainly there is a lot of truth to it—that line of thinking is ultimately unproductive.

We can take some actions in response to our frustration.

First, when the Israeli government does something upsetting, we can email or call the Israeli Consulate and let them know how we feel.

We can also find Israeli organizations that we believe in, and that are doing good work in Israel. There is a long list of these organizations, some of them include: JNF, Hadassah, the Masorti Movement (which is the Conservative Movement in Israel), IRAC, which stands for the Israel Religious Action Center, The Hartman Institute, ITIM, and The Abraham Fund.

And for those of us who love Israel deeply, feel very connected to the State, and never criticize the government's policies—we should not give Israel a free pass on everything that it does—especially for those things which we believe hurt Israel, or needlessly damage Israel's relationship with a large part of American Jewry. When we criticize out of love – just like Moses to the Israelites – and go through the proper channels -- then the criticism has a chance to impact Israel in a positive way. As it says in Proverbs, “Do not rebuke a scoffer, for he will hate you; rebuke a wise person, and he will love you,” (9:8).

Today, in much of the progressive world, in the United States, in England, and throughout Europe, there are lots of criticisms levied against Israel. I would categorize many of these criticisms as either unfair or as vicious attacks. How can we evaluate

these criticisms? By using the standard that I just laid out—does the critic know Israel, does the critic care about Israel, does the critic see any good in Israel, or just the bad? The Israel bashing among progressives is enormously problematic. We can all try to be a part of the solution, but I think the people who can be most effective are people who see themselves as left-leaning (politically), and/or see themselves as progressives. It's a tall order. It's not easy. There's no guarantee for success. But it's an important mission.

Now, I want to spend the rest of my time talking about -- loving Israel.

There are innumerable reasons to love Israel.

Its biblical history, the incredible story of Zionism and the building of the modern state, the Jewish values which permeated the founding of the State of Israel—just read through Israel's Declaration of Independence, and you will be very moved. We should love Israel because its people are good and decent. They have fun and they love life.

Very importantly, Israel is a home for all Jews and it is there for any Jew who feels threatened or is persecuted, anywhere in the world.

All people—especially progressives—should love Israel because of its commitment to equality among men and women, and among its straight and LGBTQ citizens. We should love Israel because it is a world leader in solar energy; water desalinization; and technological, medical, and agricultural advancements.

Israeli innovations are not only solving problems in Israel and helping the Israeli economy thrive, but they are also having a big impact far beyond Israel. This past year, Middle East expert, Avi Jorisch, wrote a book called, *Thou Shalt Innovate: How Israeli Ingenuity Repairs the World*. The book, which features 15 Israeli innovators, whose ideas and discoveries are being used around the globe, opens with the assertion that, "Israel [is] much more than the 'start-up nation.' It [is] playing a disproportionate role in helping solve some of the world's biggest challenges. . . Israeli innovation is making life better for billions of people around the world, and Israeli ingenuity is helping to feed the hungry, cure the sick, and provide shelter for the homeless. . . Those who stand for liberty, peace, and social justice should stand with [Israel and its innovators] in an effort to repair the world," (pp. xii, xvi-xvii).

I would like to share with you, briefly, the stories of two innovators, featured in Jorisch's book. These stories are not the popular stories of Israeli innovation—in that they are not about an amazing technological breakthrough—but they are similar to other stories

of Israeli innovation, in that they are having an enormous impact for good throughout the world.

The first innovator I want to tell you about is Shlomo Navarro. Navarro, who was born in Izmir, Turkey, decided to immigrate to Israel in 1963. There were only three problems with his plan: he didn't have a passport, he didn't have enough money for the trip, and he didn't have the blessing of his parents. Nevertheless, he plowed ahead with his plan. Four of his friends bought tickets on a boat travelling from Istanbul to Haifa, so Navarro sneaked on board and was a stowaway. When the Israeli customs officer boarded the ship in Haifa, Navarro did not know whether or not he would be sent back to Turkey. He wasn't—instead the customs officer, welcomed Navarro to the Jewish state. 6 years later, Navarro was injured in a military battle. Over the next 8 months while he was recovering, Navarro studied two subjects he found fascinating: temperature manipulation and hermetic storage.

After receiving a doctorate in agricultural entomology from Hebrew University, Navarro began his experiments with a simple question: Is it possible to store large amounts of grain for long periods of time, with almost no losses? Navarro eventually developed a product that could do just that—it's called the Grain Cocoon, and it's a large, hermetically sealed bag for rice, grain, spices, and legumes. The bag can hold anywhere from 5 tons to 300 tons of grain. When farmers seal it off, the bag traps bugs and deprives them of oxygen, suffocating them to death. On average, Navarro says, the cocoon can save more than 99 percent of a farmer's crops.

Across the globe, 805 million people are chronically undernourished. Many farmers in the developing world still use burlap sacks to store their goods. Insects easily infiltrate these bags, often destroying more than half of a farmer's harvest.

Since Navarro's for-profit company, GrainPro, officially introduced the cocoon in the early 1990s, a hundred countries around the world have adopted it. The Grain Cocoon has lifted millions of people out of poverty.

The next innovator I want to tell you about is Bernard Bar-Natan. Bernard grew up in Brooklyn in the 1960s—maybe someone sitting here this morning went to school with him. He said that his childhood was that of an ordinary Jewish kid of his generation. As he grew up, he felt the pull of his ancestral homeland, and in 1979, shortly after graduating college, he decided to make Aliyah. After a few years in Israel, he was called to serve in the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces). He wasn't sure what he was going to do in the army, so when an opportunity came along to join the Medics—he accepted.

During his training as a medic, which was in 1984, Bar-Natan was taken aback when he discovered that the bandages they were using were the one that the IDF had issued in 1942. They had not been modified since the World War II era. Bar-Natan thought, “the gun they gave me is not from 1942, so why is the bandage the same?”

It needed to be improved, but so did other things. As Bar-Natan’s instructors taught him about the importance of sterility and hygiene, the American was shocked to hear them advise him to take a stone from the field and tie it on top of a wound to apply pressure. “This is absurd. Where do I sterilize it?” he thought. And the seeds of an idea were planted.

Over the next many years, he worked on an off, trying to develop a better bandage. Finally, he worked out the idea and had a prototype—he was ready to try and produce his new Emergency Bandage. To produce the bandages, Bar-Natan was connected to a Bedouin named Ahmed Heib. Bar-Natan had the idea and Heib had the garment factory, which could make them.

At first, the company was very small. But after Bar-Natan began giving his bandages away for free to representatives from militaries around the world, sales started to pick up. Not only was the Emergency Bandage far better than other bandages on the market, but it also cost \$2 cheaper.

After Bar-Natan gave his bandages to the 75th Rangers regiment and the 101st Airborne as they were deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan, word spread, and the Navy Seals, the CIA, and the FBI began purchasing the bandage as well.

Ultimately, Bar-Natan’s theory proved correct, and more civilian institutions wound up purchasing his product. Which is how the Pima County emergency medical unit got them. The reason that is significant is that Tucson is in Pima County and the medics used the bandages to save the lives of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, and a group of her constituents, on that horrific and tragic morning of January 8, 2011.

Bar-Natan said, “I’ve thought often of that Talmudic saying, about ‘whoever saves a life, saves an entire world.’ My day will come. And if you believe in a heavenly court, I hope that, when I get there, they’ll say, ‘Oh, you’re the guy who invented the bandage? You can come in.’”

May these stories inspire us and help us feel a deep appreciation for Israel and the Israeli spirit. We cannot support Israel blindly, nor should we criticize Israel unfairly—

and we certainly cannot disconnect from Israel. There's too much history, too much goodness, and too much at stake to not stay connected and be supportive.

God willing, with our love and support, may Israel continue to flourish. May our deepest wishes and blessings for Israel come to fruition—so that – some way, somehow – there will be peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and peace throughout the entire Middle East.

And let us say: Amen.