A Tale of Two Emails

One morning in college, I rolled out of bed into my desk chair, woke up my computer, and found two rival emails in my inbox. Probably not unlike many American Jewish undergrads, I subscribed to two email lists: the Progressive Events List; and the Hillel/ Center for Jewish Life List.

The Progressive Events list invited me to an Israel Divestment Rally on the quad, which would feature undergrad and graduate student speakers, posters, and Palestinian solidarity. The Hillel email invited me to an Anti-Divestment Pro-Israel counter-rally, to be held on the quad, across the sidewalk from the Divestment rally, for Jewish students to show our support for Israel.

Especially given the competing invitations, I rode my bike across campus later that day to see the situation for myself. As I pulled up, I was standing on the sidewalk off to the side, between the two rallies.

The Divestment advocates held signs with phrases like END THE OCCUPATION and the more offensive OCCUPATION=APARTHEID. Their speakers made passionate appeals for peace and justice for the Palestinians. They made questionable claims about the Israeli military intentionally targeting Palestinian schools and hospitals. Across the sidewalk, the Pro-Israel counter-protesters alternated between shouting Pro-Israel slogans and singing (well, shouting) HaTikvah.

Where I was standing physically mirrored where I stood politically: on the outside. I, too, would like to see an end to terrorism so that Israelis could live in peace and security. I, too, would like justice for the Palestinians, though I'm not sure what that should look like. I had nowhere to stand to express this view, or to share my doubts, or to question.

This moment in time remains frozen for me, because it represents where our community is stuck. The conversation rarely breaks through shouting and name-calling. It is, I think, alienating younger Jews from Israel and from the Jewish community.

In recent months, major Jewish demographic studies have argued different sides of the "distancing" thesis, as it's called. One study published last month, entitled *Still Connected: American Jewish Attitudes about Israel*,[1] suggests that there is not too much to worry about. It found that a "majority of American Jews feels attached to Israel and the overall level of attachment has remained stable for nearly a quarter of a century." It attributes the apparent generation gap to "*stages of lifecycle* rather than *generational turnover*." In other words, younger Jews are predictably less attached to Israel and become more connected as they get older.

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[1] Theodore Sasson, Benjamin Phillips, Charles Kadushin, and Leonard Saxe. Brandeis University: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, August 2010. http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/noteworthy/still.connected.html.

Another set of reports[2] published earlier this year points out a limitation in the other study's numbers: that it only considers "those who say that their religion is Jewish." It omits "the growing population of Jews 'who identify as Jewish, but see their religion as *none*.'" *This* study, by Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman, reaches a different conclusion. They find that younger non-Orthodox Jews are markedly less attached to Israel, and that it's part of a longer trend. Disengagement from Israel correlates with the decline of American Jewish ethnic cohesion, the weakening of institutional ties, and the rise of selfhood and personal meaning as the bases for Judaism and Jewish identity. In this context, the question is not, *How do I act on my bond with the Land and People of Israel?* but rather, *What does Israel mean to me?*

From my vantage point, this latter conclusion seems to be more accurate. As younger generations of Jews become more assimilated, ties to Israel and all things ethnic fade away. The ironic blessing of American Jewish prosperity is that we have forgotten what it feels like to fight for survival. Is this a mixed blessing?

Much ink has been spilled recently to explain the shift among younger Jews. Some have suggested that the alienation of younger Jews from Israel arises from the clash between most American Jews' liberal values and their growing perception of Israel as an aggressive, power-abusing state.[3] Interestingly, the numbers don't seem to support this conclusion: in surveys, both liberals and conservatives show distancing from Israel.[4]

I think the reason for this distancing is neither ideology or merely assimilation. I believe that lack of dialogue -- the angry noise -- is responsible for much of the distancing from Israel. It's less about what Israel says and does, and more about how her extremist supporters and detractors demonize each other. The reasonable ones in the middle, who don't want any part of a shouting match, walk away.

That's what I did that day in college. I walked away. I felt like an outsider, certainly from the Divestment supporters, but even from the Hillel group. Mostly, when people walk away like that, they disengage. I wanted to try something different, so I wrote an op-ed in the student newspaper criticizing the lack of actual dialogue or debate and suggesting that rallies for either extreme position would not serve the cause of peace. I invited those of similar mind -- that is, committed as much to an open exchange of ideas, including opposing ones, as to one position or another -- to join together for conversations.

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[2] Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel,* and "Distancing is Closer than Ever," author's proof, July 2010. See also Cohen and Samuel Abrams' *Israel Off Their Minds: The Diminished Place of Israel in the Political Thinking of Young Jews*, The Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner 2008 National Survey of American Jews.

[3] See for example Peter Beinart, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment" http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/10/failure-american-jewish-establishment/?pagination=false and Daniel Luban, "No Direction Home: Maybe American liberal Zionism Simply Isn't Worth Saving" http://www.tabletmag.com/news-and-politics/35105/no-direction-home/.

[4] See Cohen and Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*, pp. 12-13. www.acbp.net/About/PDF/**Beyond**%20**Distancing**.pdf

We formed a leadership team, which consisted of two American Jews, one American Muslim, and one Palestinian-Israeli Jerusalemite. We met regularly with a larger group for just such an open conversation. Our deepened relationships led us to a more nuanced understanding of the conflict and its context. For the first time, I was convinced from firsthand experience that an exchange of ideas between opposing sides of this debate is possible, and even productive.

On that note, I want to invite you to attend an afternoon discussion session on Israel (today at 4:00 PM at the chapel).[5] We will look at ancient and modern texts and, most importantly, we will *listen* to each other's views.

No one of us has all the answers or knows all the facts. That's the nature of our human limitations. We are better served when we are willing to admit this -- not to throw away all our convictions, but to acknowledge our fallibility.

What saddens me most is the vitriol directed by Jews at other Jews for their Israel politics. As someone who cares deeply about building Jewish community -- and who thinks that our future depends on it -- I find it painful to witness Jews denouncing other Jews for their positions.

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In one sense, Jewish tradition doesn't help. You can cite traditional texts to support just about any point. You can, for example, bring the mitzvot and stories in the Books of Deuteronomy and Joshua to show that Jews have a right, even an obligation, to conquer the land between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates and kill all the inhabitants. On the other side, you can cite the Talmudic prohibition against "going up en masse" to Eretz Yisrael,[6] for centuries the prooftext used to denounce Jewish efforts to bring about by human force what only God could decree.

The problem is, we rarely pay attention to context. We choose the text that fits the narrative we've already decided is right.

The solution is, we should pay more attention to the Rabbinic tradition's *method* than to its particular content. For thousands of years, beginning with the Mishnah, amplified in the Talmud, and sustained throughout Jewish history, Jews have been in the business of arguing well.

Living in the shadow of the Second Temple's remains, the rabbis were well aware of the destructive power of fanaticism and zealous certainty. They enshrined this caution into one of the most memorable stories from the Talmud, known as the "Oven of Akhnai." In this story, Rabbi Eliezer finds himself in the minority on the rabbinic council regarding an issue of ritual purity:

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[5] Download the handout of texts for this discussion: http://tinyurl.com/ykstudy-israel

[6] See Babylonian Talmud: Ketubot 110b-111a; Song of Songs 2:7; and Jeremiah 27:22.

> On that day, Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but the rabbis did not accept them. He said to them: "If the halachah [Jewish law] agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!" At that moment, the carob-tree lifted out of the ground, traveled 100 cubits, and fell back down to the ground! "No proof can be brought from a carob-tree," they rabbis retorted.
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> Again Eliezer said to them: "If the halachah agrees with me, let this stream prove it!" At that moment, the stream started flowing backwards! The rabbis were still unimpressed. "No proof can be brought from a stream of water," they rejoined.
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> Again Rabbi Eliezer urged: "If the halachah agrees with me, let the walls of the *beit midrash* [schoolhouse] prove it." And the walls started to fall. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked the walls, saying: "When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what right do you have to interfere?" So the walls did not fall, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, nor did they stand back up, in honor of R. Eliezer. They leaned!
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> Again Rabbi Eliezer said to them: "If the halachah agrees with me, let Heaven itself prove it!" At that very moment, a Heavenly Voice cried out: "Why do you argue with Rabbi Eliezer? The halachah agrees with him!"
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> The rabbis were *still* unimpressed. Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed: **"It is not in heaven" (**Deut 30:12). What did he mean by this? Rabbi Jeremiah said: "That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai. We pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because God has long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline.'"[7]

We would be wise to overlay this story on our current debates about Israel. There are those who, like Rabbi Eliezer, insist with a god-like fervor in their rightness, against the reasoned position of others. They shout more. They resort to theatrics, and sometimes to personal attacks.

But Rabbi Joshua's response -- "It is not in heaven" -- is one of the most life-affirming statements in our entire tradition. With that simple phrase, a quote from Nitzavim that we chant this Yom Kippur morning, Rabbi Joshua dismisses the religious extremist, the holy warrior, the "true believer." Religion, politics, and communal leadership should be in the hands of those who hear the voice of reason -- not those who claim to hear the Voice of God.

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So here I stand, not as a politician, or a journalist, or a diplomat, but as a rabbi. Dedicated to building and deepening Jewish community, and concerned for the Jewish future. And here is the landscape I see. On the far left, Jews have replaced Jewish substance with liberal ideology and universal ethics. On the far right, Jews have replaced Jewish content with right-wing, knee-jerk support for Israel. Neither of these substitutions can sustain us or cultivate a

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[7] Babylonian Talmud: Baba Metzia 59b, paraphrased.

vibrant Judaism in the next generation. Neither cares to challenge its own narrative, to mine our deep tradition for the wisdom that *has* kept our community alive for millennia. Both, left to their own devices, will leave a remnant of Jews who don't know or care much about what Judaism has to say or give to the world.

If you find yourself on one of these extremes, I urge you to consider the possibility that you don't have all the answers. Seek out the partial truths in your opponents' arguments. Consume media sources that don't simply reinforce the narrative you've already decided is True.

If you find yourself in the disengaged middle, I urge you to reengage. Don't let the Rabbi Eliezers on the extremes intimidate you with their sensationalism and dramatics. The future of peace depends on your willingness to be present in our communal conversation about Israel. To voice your concerns, to make your opinions known, to reclaim your right *not* to have made up your mind yet.

I'm NOT asking us, naively, *Can't we all just get along?* Jewish history has always shown the answer to be "no." I <u>am</u> asking, Can we learn how to disagree without demonizing? Can we rise to the rabbis' standard of *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven?

There is an epilogue to the story of Rabbi Eliezer and the rabbinic council. After the majority affirms rule by reason, we learn how God reacted:

> Rabbi Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? He laughed [with joy], [Elijah] replied, saying, "My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me!"

An astounding, subversive theology! God rejoices that we humans have taken the reins, ruling ourselves without resorting to divine intervention?! And yet this is precisely the legacy of our ancient tradition. Our Jewish identities, our Jewish communities, and Israel -- their futures depend on whether we can admit that "it is not in heaven"; it is in our hands. Let us relearn how to argue as Jews: not merely for the sake of personal victory, but for the sake of heaven.

G'mar chatimah tovah, may we all be sealed in the Book of Life.