

**MISPERCEPTIONS, MISCONCEPTIONS: A DIALOGUE TO DISPEL DIFFERENCES**

**By Rabbi Aviva Goldberg and Elise Eisenkraft Klein, Sept. 14. 2015/5776**

**(The following transcript is the foundation of a speech by Rabbi Aviva Goldberg and Elise Eisenkraft Klein, a long-time member of the congregation. Both of them added remarks and dialogue during the discussion on the bimah, as appropriate to the delivery. Please look for the final recorded speech in an upcoming podcast on our website.)**

Rabbi Aviva Goldberg: I have mentioned in the past how embarrassed I was, cringing in fact, when my father in giving his High Holy Day sermons in the late 1960's and early 70's, would vehemently talk or as I felt rant against those like me, who opposed the Viet Nam war. We rarely discussed our contrary views at home and I certainly hid from him the fact that my husband of the time had come back to Canada after living in the States lest he be called up to the draft, as I knew it would create more than upset stomachs at the dinner table.

And so usually my policy has been to follow the dictates of etiquette first presented in print in the late 1800's which is to "Never discuss religion or politics with those who hold opinions opposite to yours." Or to put it more succinctly when it comes to High Holy Day sermons I have usually practiced the law of Linus, he of the

Peanuts comic strip fame, who said “There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people...religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin.”

But this morning I, actually we, Elise Eisenkraft Klein and I, are going to break this rule.

No need to worry though as we will not be talking about the Great Pumpkin, who only existed in the imagination of Linus the Charles Schultz comic character. What we will be talking about, having a dialogue about, is some of the contentious understandings of the Israel and Palestine situation.

Why you may ask? Why bring up an issue that creates as the Viet Nam war did such controversy? Why bring up an issue that has no ready solution and where the opposing parties often end up in vitriolic arguments leaving those who attended these discussions feeling bitter, alienated and misunderstood.

Well, that is the very reason why I think that it is important to hear one another, to communicate properly, to listen to one another, particularly in light of the events read in this morning's Torah portion. For as I noted, this is a narrative of cruelty, misunderstanding, family violence and horror, what feminist scholar Phyllis Trible has called a tale of terror.

Though not quite the same as our contemporary situation, it is not wholly dissimilar, for it is interesting that we too, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and the descendants of Abraham, Hagar and Yishmael are in a place where miscommunication, misunderstanding, animosity and hatred are alive and well. Indeed often our own families are torn asunder when discussing these issues.

Therefore, today Elise and I would like to have an honest discussion, so that unlike our biblical ancestors, we can come to, if not necessarily agreement, at least more open communication and the beginnings of an understanding of our respective views. Over several weeks and a couple of marathon days of talking – sometimes even yelling – we have finally written this dialogue which I hope expresses somewhat the difficulties of some of these issues. I have learned a great deal from Elise and am very grateful that she has had the courage to stand here and speak. We cannot do justice to all that has to be said and explicated but we do hope together that this is a start.

I've asked you in the past to speak Elise and you have been loath to do so yet somehow I convinced you to today – could you explain why you have been so uncomfortable in speaking on these issues in shul?

ELISE: Well, in my experience, I often find that Jews I know who hold somewhat similar views to my own, vis a vis Israel and Palestine, have had a wide variety of bad experiences in reaction to them expressing certain perspectives. So for the most part, they often tend to either avoid a lot of Jewish communal spaces and organizations entirely, or remain silent in these places. In fact, particularly to those of us for whom Jewishness – in all of its definitions and manifestations – is important, I think we often tend to exist within the agony of the tensions we internally feel about these topics and so do not often (*specifically*) share them out loud.

AVIVA: There are aspects of what you are saying that I understand, Elise, that sense of not being heard or understood by the so-called ‘ Jewish mainstream’, but could you explain further how you have perhaps been made to feel when you are expressing your opinions?

ELISE: First of all, I have often heard comments such as ‘you’re self-hating’, ‘you want to annihilate your own people,’ ‘how can you call yourself a Jew’ and so on. When I hear people say these types of things – either to me or to friends – I can’t help but feel silenced, anxious and disenchanted with certain forms of Jewish communal engagement.

There exists another contentious piece of the puzzle, at least in North American Jewish life. That is, the power dynamic is such that expressing views often deemed outside the realm of acceptability can leave one high and dry when it comes to participation in Jewish life as it is connected to mainstream Jewish organizations and resources.

It seems particularly ironic that it is precisely my investment in Jewish communal life and history that has led me to many of my current viewpoints and understandings of Zionism. In fact, when I was attending McGill University, it was my decision to pursue Jewish Studies, combined with activism in other arenas, that eventually contributed to many of my present perspectives.

AVIVA: Okay, let's get down to the nitty gritty. I think you know my views but I would like to share them with this congregation. I think that the State of Israel has the right to exist, safe in its borders. I think that Palestinian Israelis also have a right to exist as equal in every respect to Jewish Israelis within this state. I think that the Palestinian peoples have a right to their own state safe within its borders, respecting Israel's rights to exist. I personally am more than uncomfortable with settlements and their expansion. And understand, please, that I am not a political pundit, a political scientist, nor an expert in this field. My gut feelings come from my age, my history, and my love of our people and tradition— which of course

doesn't mean I cannot be critical of these very people. And now it is your turn to explain what your views are regarding a two-state solution or one-state solution.

ELISE: My view is that, regardless of a one-state, two-state (or utopian-future-where-there-are-*no*-states-at-all) solution in the long-term, I strongly believe that Jews should be able to live *safely*, anywhere and everywhere. I feel that all Jews – like all people and peoples – must be allowed freedom of movement, everywhere – including, but not *only* within (what is now called) the “Jewish state”. And I believe that a *Jewish* state does not have to – nor should it be - the fallback when we talk about anti-Jewish oppression, and the potential future safety of the Jewish people.

AVIVA: I see Elise, but I want to know how you feel about the following. When many of us see photos of Palestinians throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers, making tunnels with ammunition whose final destination is a children's nursery in a kibbutz, we panic. And when we see synagogues being bombed in Europe, and Jews being attacked in France, in the name of anti-Zionism, we panic. And when we hear the (so-called) ‘radical left’ condemning what feels like every aspect of Israeli society, we panic. How do you come to terms with how you understand Palestinian anger, and how do you deal with a ‘radical left’ that at times seems to express anti-Zionism in anti-Semitic terms?

ELISE: These questions are huge, and our time is limited. I do not feel that I can really answer them in full. But I will try my best to be succinct (though that is not one of my strong points).

With regards to Palestinian anger – one thing that I feel is particularly important to explore is that of uneven power dynamics. Palestinian anger is in many ways understandable in the context of living under Israeli occupation. Furthermore, I do not think that it is so farfetched that these same Palestinians might conflate Israelis with Jews more broadly. When Israel is *The Jewish state*, and Palestinian identity and peoplehood are erased, then it is only logical for this people to see “The Jews” as the ones doing this erasing.

It is important to understand that this is *not* the same as similar sentiments expressed in the form of, say, current-day neo-Nazism originating out of Europe, which uses anti-Zionism as a thin veil for anti-Semitic sentiments and systemic anti-Jewish practices. This brings me to the other part of the questions you were posing, about Europe, and about anti-Semitism disguised as – or perhaps coated in – anti-Zionsim. And I would agree with you in that regard.

I do not think that anti-Zionism is *necessarily* - or always - anti-Semitism, but it *can* be, and many people do not take the time to piece out the differences.

AVIVA: How do you see these differences manifested especially when for some Jews in the Diaspora it feels like there are no differences.

ELISE: 1. Well, the first involves scenarios in which sentiments being expressed are not *necessarily* anti-Semitic, but are phrased or framed in ways that seem that way to Jews. They connote older anti-Semitic tropes or anti-Jewish stereotypes. This can be purposeful, or it can happen completely by accident, because frankly – though I can only speak from my own observations – some involved in Palestine solidarity organizing and elsewhere do not know or recognize these stereotypes anymore.

2. Similarly, there are scenarios in which quote-unquote “Jewish power” is in fact a reality, but the way it is being discussed – again – draws upon older European or Holocaust imagery. I think that this is one of the more complicated examples, in part because ideas in which Jews are used as political and economic scapegoats existed in Europe for hundreds of years. These ideas perpetuated the notion that Jews held *disproportionate* power in these societies; which of course was ludicrous, especially in the context of the ways in which the majority of Jews actually lived at the time. And yet, of course, there exists *now*, in Israel especially, real power, in the form of the state and military. These are two very different

contexts, but the rhetoric around them is often the same, so it is understandably difficult to untangle, especially for Jews.

3. Finally, of course, there is the scenario of the bringing up of Israel or Zionism in situations that are irrelevant, and of different groups utilizing the idea of “Zionism” as a thin mask for underlying expressions of actual anti-Jewish sentiment.

AVIVA: Again I must interject and say that this specter of anti-Semitism particularly in France, Hungary and other European countries is most frightening. How do you deal with this in conversations with people who like you are in opposition to the politics of Israel?

ELISE: I too find these scenarios disturbing and depressing, particularly when they are left unchallenged by anyone other than Jewish Zionists or “The Right.”

I think that the idea of “anti-Semitism” is too often *wrongly* applied to situations that are *not* anti-Semitic, in which people are merely expressing their problems with the State of Israel. But what then sometimes happens in reaction to this, is that certain facets of the left (even sometimes Jews on the left!) respond to *actual* instances of *real* anti-Jewish sentiment or violence, with the notion that these people are ‘crying wolf’. The nuances are neither understood nor investigated.

As a proud Jew who is also involved in various activist spaces, I find this position very disheartening, but somewhat understandable. As I implied, on both sides there is a certain level of naiveté and manipulation. I think that the responsibility for creating a less binary narrative rests with both. But I do think that conservative Jewish organizations guilty of manipulating even sincere criticism of Israeli state policy do not do Jewish communities any favours.

That being said, I also think that when the Left only *reacts* to these points of view, without having more nuanced understandings of anti-Semitism and Jewish history, it demonstrates a political position that is unhelpful to both Jews and the cause of eventual Palestinian liberation. (Incidentally, I don't necessarily think that almost *any* of these "sides" have a particularly robust investment in investigating Jewish history in the context of the current political situation. But that is perhaps a conversation for another day!)

AVIVA: Speaking of which - I know Elise that there is a great deal more to be said but if we continue we will be here until next Rosh Hashanah. These are contentious times and more than difficult debates but in closing would you please attempt to answer the most difficult of all the questions how do you think we can disentangle ourselves from this morass of miscommunication and mistrust.

ELISE: I don't really know! I don't have a good answer. I think it's hard. I don't think there is any clear way to disentangle these questions from each other, or from flying off into more questions. I think that too many Jews in parts of the (self-declared) Left have either started to ignore anti-Semitism, chosen not talk about it, or have abandoned these spaces entirely. For now, I have chosen to stay in contact with certain communities and groups, and attempt to figure out ways in which I can point these instances out as they come. As frustrating as that is - I think that abandoning ship is not a way to change things.

I believe that Jewish history – and Jewishness itself – are much, much broader and infinitely more complex and interesting than all this. One of my qualms with discussions on Israel and Zionism is the way in which it has come to take up a very disproportionate amount of (psychic/emotional/logistical/) space within Jewish communities – including the time some put into working against it.

What is important is being able to converse more broadly and openly, and that is *something that we have started doing today*. So thank you Aviva! And chag sameach.

AVIVA: Thank you as well Elise for your honesty and your courage. I too hope that we continue this discussion in an open and non-confrontational manner, so

that we do not repeat the actions of Sarah and Hagar, so that we do not break up our families and our communities. Let that be one of our goals for the coming year. Chag sameach and shana tova.

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