

‘Talking about Talking about Israel’ – Part I

by Rabbi Rosalind Glazer

For millennia our prayers and our thoughts as Jews have been directed toward Israel. The establishment of the state in 1948 and daily news about Israel undoubtedly increases our awareness and concern for the Jewish state. Many of us have a more personal relationship with Israel after having visited or lived there, or because of close relationships with Israeli friends and relatives.

At these past Yom Kippur services I shared my concern for my sisters’ families in Israel; in particular a concern for my sabra nieces and nephews who have either completed or are anticipating service in the IDF. I spoke publically of my Israeli family partly to explain why my prayers for and conversations about a lasting peace in Israel do not derive merely from my rabbinic duty. My prayers, talks and efforts toward peace in Israel are also very personal. They are direct plea that the day of shalom be upon us soon, *bimheyra b’yameynu* speedily and in our day; and they are dedicated on the behalf of my nieces and nephews so that they may be spared the obligation of having to fight to defend their country.

In my Yom Kippur sermon I included the reading of a letter by Israeli POW Gilad Shalit who was captured in Lebanon in 2006 and who remains in captivity today. The moving letter was addressed to his beloved family and expressed the challenges of sustaining hope. I then shared a tearful piece written by Gilad’s mother about all that her son has meant to her since his birth and her struggle of knowing that all her efforts to protect him have left her powerless in this situation. As a call to action, I urge you to complete and mail the postcards that I have included in this bulletin. Addressed to our congressional representatives, they demand that unrelenting pressure be put on Gilad’s captors in order to secure his immediate release. Your effort on Gilad’s behalf is the fulfillment the mitzvah, *pidyon shevuim*, freeing the captives, a mitzvah we worked so tirelessly to fulfill some 20 years ago different in freeing Soviet Jewish refuseniks.

Here at BIJ we are not afraid to express our love for Israel. From time to time I speak about Israel issues from the bimah and I often meet with congregants to discuss their personal concerns on the subject. We’ve hosted speakers from the New Israel Fund, from AIPAC and from the local Israeli consulate. We’ve attended fundraisers as a community and have raised *tzedakah* for an Israel Emergency Fund; we’ve bought thousands of Israel Bonds. As a community we’ve attended Israel in the Gardens to celebrate *Yom Ha’Atzmaut*, Israel Independence Day, and we hosted a community wide ‘Israel at Sixty’ celebration in partnership the Israel Center.

Yet sadly, as proud Jews who support the state of Israel, we do not have a community forum in which to engage in regular, open dialogue about our feelings about Israel or in which to exchange ideas about what it means to support the Israeli state. We do not all think alike on this nor on any other subject, and as a people we cannot afford to avoid the most challenging and important Jewish conversations of our time.

This past fall the Northern California Board of Rabbis hosted Rabbi Donniel Hartman from the pluralistic Orthodox Shalom-Hartman Institute of Jerusalem. Rabbi Hartman shared the complex feelings of a father whose son was in active duty in the IDF while simultaneously expressing concern about the IDF’s treatment of Palestinian families. He spoke of the enormous challenge Israel faces as a ‘normal’ nation that must also live up expectations that it be ‘light unto the nations.’ He shared his appreciation for the support of American Jewry for Israel, while identifying problems in the way we express our support. And he laments the absence of open and civil dialogue in the American Jewish community about Israel. And he insisted that there must be a range of discussion that avoids the polarities of either mudslinging or silence and supports a more broad and nuanced dialogue like that which one might hear in a café in Jerusalem.

Hartman, who was born in the US and lectures frequently to American Jewish audiences speculates that the decreasing rate of affiliation in the American Jewish community, particularly here in San Francisco Bay Area, is due in part to the inability of the established Jewish community to allow diverse views and perspectives on Israel. Could it be that our fluctuations between divisive speech-as in the letters to the editor in the J. Weekly regarding the controversial film 'Rachel'- and the avoidance of the topic is responsible for a shrinking Jewish community? "Israel is more of a liability than an asset to the American Jewish community," said Hartman. Whether you agree or not, his theory is certainly worth considering!

Last year, a self-selected group of Rabbis from the Northern California Board of Rabbis, seeded a task force which has since named itself, 'Rabbis for Respectful Dialogue'. We have met several times and the fact of our existence will soon be published in the local and national Jewish media. To a person the rabbis and professionals who sit on the task force have expressed deep sadness over the lack of candid and respectful dialogue about Israel in our individual congregations and also within the larger Jewish community. We all agreed that this is serious problem that we are committed to tackling.

In our first meeting, the most interesting notion was that the two camps in the Israel debate are divided not between pro and con but between the one that is willing to engage in dialogue as a matter of principle and process, for the purpose of greater understanding and the one that ceases to dialogue at the moment the position runs counter to deeply held feelings and views of the right way to support Israel. As a greater Jewish community we know that we simply have to learn how to discuss Israel with civility and respect.

During the time I was interviewing at BIJ I trained a facilitator with the Jewish Dialogue Group, based in Philadelphia. I had also been hired to facilitate Israel conversations at Swarthmore College, but soon after that I decided to take the position here. In my training I learned that in order to be successful in the long term, dialogue requires serious preliminary reflection upon the reasons we take each take the issue so personally. This can only happen in a safely when a dedicated group of individuals agree to respectful exploration of deep concerns and issues. Undoubtedly we all hold deep feelings for and about Israel. But only when we commit to understanding and appreciating one another's experiences and perspectives can we work together to develop effective Israel advocacy. I believe this is possible and have seen it in action. And I agree with Eleanor Roosevelt that if to make a difference in the work, "Each day we must do the thing we think we cannot do."

During my three years at BIJ I have dreamed of the formation of an Israel dialogue group and I am now seeking for partners who are interested in being part of such a group. Please contact me if you are interested. Meanwhile, as a start, on Sunday morning 2/21/2010 I am convening a conversation for parents and adults on the subject of our complex and ambivalent relationship with Israel. That will be followed by a 3/21 2010 workshop on and, how to speak about Israel with our young children and grandchildren. Please join us then!