

## What Does Israel Mean To You? Rosh Hashanah 5777

Milan Chatterjee is an unlikely candidate for a pro-Israel college campus activist. That is because he isn't. Chatterjee, is, in fact, a 2nd generation Hindu American, who is deeply connected to his Indian heritage and still speaks Hindi at home with his parents. He has never really been involved in any political activity and certainly didn't consider himself particularly pro-Israel. He grew up in Colorado, where he had lots of friends of all different faiths and ethnicities. Of the Jewish ones he said, "I've gone to Shabbat dinners. I've learned about their religion. These are some of the smartest, most hardworking, high cultured people." Smart and determined himself, he attended Cornell University and UCLA Law School, which is where his odyssey began.

Elected president of the Graduate Student Association, (GSA) Chatterjee and his fellow officers and board members were tasked, among many other things, with allocating funds for campus events. Last October, a group requested funding for a Diversity Caucus. Wishing to remain "viewpoint neutral," and not use Student Body Funds for topics irrelevant to the nature of campus politics, like being pro- or anti-Israel, Chatterjee checked with, and got approval from, the college administration, to grant the funds with the proviso that, the event not be used either to promote or to reject support for the State of Israel.

Based on past experiences at the campus, he was particularly wary of BDS activists. BDS -- Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions -- is a fifteen year old, international movement, which on its surface, seeks to delegitimize Israel by pressuring institutions and organizations to boycott Israeli goods and services, divest from companies who do business with Israel, and sanction Israel for its treatment of Palestinians. "On it's surface" being the operative words; but at this point, this was all Chatterjee knew.

The event went off without a hitch, with different groups, including those representing BDS providing literature tables for students to visit as well. Free speech supported? Check. Campus diversity respected? Check. Viewpoint neutrality adhered to? Check. Great right? Wrong. In the week following the program, the anti-Israel group, "Students for Justice in Palestine," filed charges with UCLA, demanding an internal investigation. In spite of the opinions of Dean Erwin Chemerinsky, one of America's leading constitutional law scholars, and four legal organizations, all of whom determined that Chatterjee and his administration had acted justly, UCLA resolved that Chatterjee had "violated viewpoint neutrality in the allocation of student funds."

That would have been enough of an injustice, but what ensued was far worse. BDS activists on campus and beyond conducted a yearlong, personal, grassroots smear and harassment campaign, starting with the false accusation that an Indian American Hindu, with no pro- or anti-Israel agenda, was not viewpoint neutral. After enduring relentless verbal attacks and bullying, defamatory articles in the *Daily Bruin* and on social media, and several attempts to remove him as GSA president, with absolutely no help from the university's Administration, Chatterjee wrote last month to Chancellor Gene Block, " I write to inform you that I have decided to

complete the final year of my UCLA School of Law program at a different institution. The hostile and unsafe campus environment that I am facing at UCLA has left me with no choice, but to move away from this university at great additional expense to me and my family."

I do not share this story with you to defame UCLA in particular, but rather to make you aware of an epidemic on our college campuses, where every single one of us has a child, grandchild, or some Jewish child we know and love who will be educated in an institution of higher learning in his or her lifetime. Because of the BDS Movement, last year, anti-Semitic incidents on campuses nationwide increased 45% over the year before. They include things like: Kids are smeared for being committed, serious Jews . . . academically or socially, let alone religiously or politically. Threatening flyers are shoved under dorm room doors. Students are attacked on social media for their views. Dozens of schools host anti-Semitic Israel-Apartheid weeks, complete with checkpoints for students to pass through. Others are harassed by protesters when attending Israeli cultural events. Still others are faced with anti-Israel courses like "Palestine: A Settler Colonial Analysis" and others experience hostile professors to any objectivity or, even, neutrality on Israel. And, last year, thirty-three colleges and universities faced BDS resolutions. Fortunately, none of them voted to divest from Israel; the campaign is not working on an economic level; and firmly pro-Israel students usually choose to ignore it.

But these groups and events are succeeding in a much more important way; they are causing most of our kids, who are less clear about their stand on Israel, to question their support of the Jewish state; eroding their confidence in their Jewish identities; and causing them to question their love of Judaism and the values they hold most dear. In part, this happens because BDS' anti-Semitic rhetoric is insidious. Like most anti-Israel bias, it taps into the values of equality and fairness that define young American Jews, and oversimplifies a very complex situation, making it very difficult to unmask or condemn. It happens to adults too. The biased media, portraying Israel as the morally bankrupt occupier and presenting us with a barrage of images of bleeding children, make it very difficult to respond, let alone to be objective, to look for the truth, or to intervene. So we don't.

And neither do our college age kids. Like us, many are simply conflict adverse; they are at college to have fun not to be political. No matter how strongly, or not, they feel about their Judaism, lots of them don't want to do Jewish stuff while there. This is a time of individuation for them, when they are experimenting with their own beliefs and practices on a myriad of levels. They are also determining their own Jewish beliefs and practices -- cultural, religious, social, and political. We've also taught them to be open-minded and to respect the humanity of all people. So no matter how smart or savvy they are, they, too, fall prey to the anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric that confounds us. Groups like "Jewish Voices for Peace" and even "Black Lives Matter" confuse the issues by morally equating Israel's right to exist and to defend herself with acts of terror caused by Palestinians. They argue: It is okay for Palestinians to stab citizens or tourists or to blow up civilians in cafes because Israel "occupies" and "settles" the land that the Palestinian people claim as their own. Or you cannot support the civil rights of African Americans in

this country without also protesting the treatment of Palestinians in the Arab Israeli Conflict.

For us, let alone for our children, it is hard to unpack these issues. Many of us are pretty ignorant about Israel's history; its own struggles and hard fought battles for and rights to its land; and the many, many positive contributions Israel makes to humanity worldwide. The media never covers the ways in which Israel helps Palestinians and its neighboring Arab people; the resources it provides for them; and the great pains it takes to defend itself humanely, always considering the lives of innocent Palestinian people at mortal peril to its soldiers. It is no wonder that so many of us, let alone our kids, are ambivalent about the Jewish State.

How many of us know that Israel has treated 10,000 wounded Syrians in its hospitals; or that Israeli cardiac surgeons have provided heart transplants for Palestinian children; or that the IDF informs the people of Gaza, beforehand, that it is about to incur into their neighborhoods to seek out Hamas terrorists imbedded in their homes, schools, and hospitals?

When was the last news report or article you saw or read on Israel's sharing its water technology with drought-ridden sub-Saharan African countries; or that there are no fewer than five Israeli components in every piece of technology you rely on every minute of every day; or about the medical advances Israel has discovered that are saving your life and the lives of those you love; or about non-governmental agencies like Isra-AID, which, over the past decade, has provided life-saving disaster relief and long term support to over a million people in 35 different counties?

Of course you haven't heard about them because these stories are simply not reported. Yet even if they were, I am not sure they would help with the ambivalence toward Israel created by what's called the "*matzav*," the situation within the country.

Last month, I attended a session at the annual AIPAC Rabbinic Symposium on BDS and how to combat it. AIPAC's Acting Leadership Development Director, Adam Teitelbaum, a baby-faced twenty-something himself, argued that what we need to do is "invest in positive reinforcement -- in a positive Israel message." He is so right. But how can we expect our children to do that, if we don't explore our own ambivalence about Israel? How can we help our children to make sense of the extremely complex Israeli-Palestinian quagmire if we don't address our own discomfort first? How can we help our college age kids to articulate their very real questions and concerns if we won't talk to them about our own, let alone theirs?

Jeffrey Goldberg, national correspondent for the *Atlantic*, who was also at the Symposium, challenged the 300 rabbis gathered in the room. He said, if you want to make sure the next generation cares about, no . . . even loves Israel, you need to answer the question for yourself, "What does Israel mean to me?" So I'm passing that challenge on to you today, for you, for your children, and grandchildren, for Israel, for the Jewish people. Let us explore during this new year of 5777, and sooner rather than later, what does Israel mean to you?

If it means nothing, try to articulate why that is and whether or not that matters to your identity as an American Jew? Are you safer because there is an Israel? Does its existence allow you to live a more fully Jewish life?

If you believe Israel is a blight on your Jewish social values, or challenges them, explore why. What are its offenses? What changes could the Jewish State make to be more Democratic?

If Israel means everything to you can you put those feelings into words? For example, if you believe Israel is our Jewish homeland, a refuge for all Jews everywhere, how might you transmit that feeling to generations who can't internalize that Jews, especially in this country, might ever need a safe haven?

If you believe that Israel is the only Democracy in the Middle East and on the forefront of the War on Terror within its borders, in the region, and, throughout the world, articulate why and how that is true for you? Is Israel's survival determinant of World Jewry's survival?

If you believe that Israel is the freest and fullest expression of our Jewish culture, what do you know about that culture? Is it about eating Falafel, facility with the Hebrew language, listening to its music? Can Jewish culture survive without it?

Perhaps Israel, for you, is the repository of our history: the place where you can touch the ancient stones of the holy Temple in Jerusalem; stand where our ancestors martyred themselves on Masada rather than being subjected by the Romans; and where you can see the land promised by God to our ancestors in the Torah from the Mediterranean on the West to the Jordan River on the East, from the tip of Mount Meron, 1200 meters high in the North, to the seaside community of Eilat bordering the Sinai Desert in the South.

Have you visited? Should you in your lifetime? Do you want your children to go on a Birthright Trip? The Reform Movement's "Go Keshet" registration opened recently. Would you encourage your kids and grandkids to sign up?

This past February, thirty Ohel Sholom members, family, and friends, travelled to Israel. I am certain, that to a person, they will tell you that their lives were transformed; their views on Israel both challenged and affirmed; their Jewish identities moved and deepened in ways they never imagined. I hear it from you all the time. You return from a trip to Israel, -- either ours, or a family trip, or a Tauck Tour, or Birthright, -- and you tell me, "You know, Rabbi Roz, I really didn't want to go. Or I really wasn't thrilled about this trip. Or I've never wanted to do it. Or I was really scared to go. And I was shocked and overwhelmed by my visit. I never expected to feel as deeply and passionately as I did. I've never felt more Jewish. I've never felt more proud of my people and heritage. I never knew it could be so meaningful and fulfilling for me as a Jew. I cried when I left and I can't wait to go back."

I promise you here and now that we will go back . . . again and again . . . as a congregation, every few years and as a Jewish community of Tidewater, this June, in fact. Will you join us? Or take a trip with another tour group, with your families, with your children? There is no better way to determine what Israel means to you than by going to see it with your own eyes. You wouldn't make other important determinations on hearsay, so why would you not base your opinion on your own personal experience when it comes to Israel!?!

I am not a Pollyanna. Israel is not perfect. True, it fought the Six Day War in 1967 for its very survival, winning the West Bank of Jordan and East Jerusalem from the Jordanians, in the process. But I am also certain that it never anticipated that it

would be in the position that it is today, some fifty years later, with those same Palestinian refugees living in its midst demanding a country of their own. And whether or not you personally believe the Palestinians have a claim to the land, the entire world, and Israel herself, agree that the situation cannot continue as it is; that the violence has to stop; that it would help, at the very least, if the building of settlements ceased. Unfortunately, that is about all they can agree upon.

It is far easier to blame Israel entirely than to admit that other peoples and governments might share in the responsibility. Oversimplifying the problem, movements like BDS, Jewish Voices for Peace, Students for Justice in Palestine, and other like-minded anti-Israel groups that target college campuses use the vilest anti-Semitic rhetoric to paint Israel exclusively as the aggressor; and to accuse her of apartheid, genocide, and every other evil under the sun. Theirs is an all out effort to portray Israel as the world's most monstrous abuser of human rights.

As Dennis Ross said, when visiting here just two weeks ago, "BDS is the new Anti-Semitism because it denies Jews the right to self-determination. BDS' agenda seeks not only to delegitimize Israel economically, socially, and politically, but also existentially. Their goal is not the reform of Israeli government policies and the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel; rather they seek a one state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict - a Palestinian state. In other words, the BDS movement does not believe Israel has a right to exist at all." David Brog, Executive Director of the anti-BDS education group, "Maccabee Task Force," adds that another danger of BDS is that it "multiplies anti-Semitism wherever it goes."

Case in point. Its coining of the overly simplistic expression, "The Occupation," has taken hold like wildfire and now resonates as the exclusive descriptive of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict -- particularly for younger people, defined as under-fifty. These are hundreds of millions of kids and adults, all born after 1964 -- you may have heard them referred to as members of Gen X, Gen Y or Millennials, and Gen Z, -- whose beliefs are primarily based upon what they perceive as being politically correct or fair. They are also far more impacted by visual images than by the written word. They see the Israeli Goliath's tanks powering over the David's in the guise of rock hurling Palestinian youths; yet they know nothing about how much Jewish blood was shed for the establishment of the State of Israel. They don't know how important Israel's survival is to the strength of Jewry worldwide. They don't remember the Holocaust, nor do they live in Paris or Nice, or Brussels, or Wurzburg or Nuremberg or know the record number of Jews who today are fleeing those Western European countries to make their homes in Israel. They don't understand the miraculous contributions Israel is making to civilization in science, medicine, technology, agriculture, cyber security, just to name a few. And there are far more individuals of these younger generations living today than baby boomers and the numbers of those under fifty are only growing. These are the leaders of tomorrow. They will determine our values and priorities.

Looking out at all of you, I am taking a leap of faith that you believe Israel has a right to exist . . . even though the government might not always make decisions with which we agree. So I want you to go home and name the reasons why you believe this -- the good and the bad. Don't be afraid to be critical, especially if your criticism comes from a place of love.

If we care about Israel, if we want our children to care, we need to articulate that message. We need to define and clarify it for ourselves and we need to share it with our children and their children and their children after them. And I am here to help you to do that any time, as are our other clergy and educators, members of our community's Community Relations Council (CRC) and many others. You can attend the AIPAC Policy Conference in March, the American Jewish Committee's Global Forum in June, or any of our United Jewish Federation of Tidewater's CRC Israel Today programs like the one we just had with Dennis Ross.

In our Torah reading this morning, Abraham waits for a miracle to spare his son Isaac, answering, "Hineini, here I am," only when the angel of God stays his hand. My friends, we no longer live in an age of miracles where we can wait for the intervention of angels to spare our children. If we want our most precious blessings, our children and grandchildren to be prepared when they go to college, not just academically and socially, but Jewishly, we need to be willing to ask the hard questions of ourselves. If we care about the future of the Jewish state and the Jewish people, we need to start talking about it today. What does Israel mean to you? Why is it important? What disturbs or challenges you? Of what are you proud? Why does it matter?

It is time to answer our children's call with guidance, strength, values, and, yes, love. So may we always be able to say, with pride and gratitude, today and for generations to come, "Am Yisrael Chai" the land and people of Israel lives. Amen.

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October 3, 2016