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I Take Israel Personally



By Marty Kaplan

I take Israel personally.

I also take Obama personally, and Jon Stewart, Paul Krugman and NPR. I take Trojan football personally. If I were more into baseball, I imagine I'd take the Dodgers personally, too.

What I mean by taking them personally is more than being a fan. I identify with them. I have the feeling — the delusion, you might say — that I actually *am* them. When they do something great, I'm proud of me. If they screw up, I'm not let down by them, or ashamed of them; I'm down on me, as though I were the one who blew it.

My trip to Israel this month was my first since I graduated from college, almost 40 years ago. When the El Al security people interviewed me before letting me proceed to the check-in counter, I loved how crafty our — not their — profiling is. We don't need to touch people's junk or ogle their body scans; we X-ray their minds.

On the other hand, when Israel's burgeoning ultra-orthodox population lives off the state's largess, but doesn't have to work, or serve in the armed forces, or pay taxes or even believe in the idea of Israel; when the ultra-orthodox rabbinate controls women's behavior at the Western Wall and has a monopoly on marriage and conversion; when Jews like me are called "Reform goyim," and their congregations are denied decent land; when extreme religious parties have a veto over government policy, and extreme religious "outposts" flout the rule of law and sabotage negotiations — when this, and worse, happens, I feel the failures and outrages personally: Where did we (not they) go so wrong?

If I have any hope of getting out of this rumination alive, this is the point where I have to, leap to, declare my love and support for the existence of the Jewish state of Israel. I think the international campaign to delegitimize Israel is based on a malicious misreading of history, abetted by a level of naïveté, ignorance and racism that would surprise me if I hadn't just lived through the past two years of media and politics. I reject the contention that Zionism is racism, colonialism or any other -ism designed to steal land,

disenfranchise citizens or exterminate enemies. The 3,000-year-old artifacts of Jewish civilization that I saw in the Israel Museum and the Nazi Who-is-a-Jew? genealogical charts that I saw at Yad Vashem and the secular Israeli majority I saw in the streets and know from the Diaspora, reminded me that Israel's nationhood derives from its existence as a people, not as a religion.

I actually came back from Israel more of a hawk than when I left. I am more respectful of the security fence — my security fence — than I was before. Yes, I know the case against it, but I've returned convinced that its designers are motivated by fighting terrorism, not by appropriating land or humiliating Palestinians. I haven't concluded that a pre-emptive strike on Iran is a good idea, but I'm less inclined to think that the threat Iran poses is only a politically pumped-up neocon job. I no longer think that "settlements" is a useful, or necessarily pejorative, term; it encompasses too wide a variety and history of dwellings to be deployed as a shorthand for obstructionism. Like everything else in Israel, it's complicated.

But don't get me wrong: I'm closer to J Street than to AIPAC. When Netanyahu acts as though the status quo can go on indefinitely, I not only despair at his delusion; I wear it as my own albatross, whether I want to or not. When he catastrophically bungled the response to the Gaza flotilla stunt, I was unable to prevent myself from feeling personally soiled. When Israeli parents tell me that they don't know their kids when they return from military service — when they describe what sounds like an epidemic of post-traumatic stress disorder — I feel as implicated as I do by my failure to spare our own Afghanistan veterans from the ravages of a war without end.

I went to Israel with a small group from my congregation, Temple Israel of Hollywood. One afternoon, we went to Bethlehem, in the West Bank, to meet with the head of the leading Palestinian news service. What we heard from him embodied a theme that pervaded our trip: the idea that Israel is a battleground between two competing narratives. The Palestinian account of history, its assignment of right and wrong, is a mirror image of the Israeli version; just about everything is flipped.

No negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians can settle the matter of which narrative is right. No historian, journalist, political figure or international tribunal can sort through the dueling accounts and create a composite that either side will accept. The closest I can imagine anyone coming to a resolution is an artist, whose talent is to embody irreconcilable truths. David Grossman's harrowing novel, *To the End of the Land*, which I read during the trip, makes emotional and aesthetic sense out of those contradictions, but unfortunately it's a meaning that doesn't help the people who have to draw land-swap maps and negotiate security forces. Tragedy isn't much of a diplomatic tool.

It was 4 o'clock when we left Bethlehem. We got off our Palestinian bus at the border crossing to make our way on foot through Israeli security. At the same time, hundreds of Palestinian men were walking in the opposite direction, going home from their jobs in Israel. I was the first of our group to clear the final Israeli checkpoint, and I realized that to get to the Israeli bus waiting for us, I had no choice except to plunge into the crowd of waiting Palestinians. I saw wariness, and weariness, on their faces. There might have been hatred, too, but the sense of danger that ambushed me — despite my best efforts at empathy — made me avoid eye contact and move as fast as I could through the throng. I was the Other to them, and they were

the Other to me. I cursed my involuntary anger. I took my fear, and my anguish, personally. You know what? I should.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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