Jewish Peoplehood and the Toxic Discourse around Israel

Surprisingly, many North American Jews who are pluralistic in matters of religion are intolerant of Jews who disagree with them on Israel. Turning polarization into respectful conversation is vital to the health of the Jewish collective

Jewish life is meant to be aspirational – who we are does not exhaust or define who we ought to be. From the moment when God commanded: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am Holy" (Leviticus 19:2), the standard was set. Being a chosen people is not an indication of inherent holiness, but entails an obligation to aspire to holiness.

By **DONNIEL HARTMAN**

This aspirational ethos found its way into the Jewish legal code in the form of the commandment to correct and admonish others when one perceives them to be doing something wrong: "You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him" (Leviticus 19:17). In a sense, Jewish law requires that every Jew be a social critic; that every Jew be responsible for the perpetual improvement of others. We Jews are obligated to not remain silent when other Jews fail to live up to their responsibilities.

As Maimonides has taught us, a critic is neither a judge nor a vigilante, nor one whose aim it is to find fault, but a fellow insider and friend who can fulfill his or her responsibility only within the context of a culture of conversation, in which fellow Jews speak and listen to each other out of love, care and concern. (See Maimonides, HiIkhot De'ot 6:3-8.) Together with the responsibility to correct comes the obligation to master the art of criticizing and the art of receiving criticism.

Rules for the Discourse

One of the most troubling failures of the contemporary discourse about Israel within the Jewish community is the absence of this art. While there is no shortage of critics, and vibrant debate abounds, it all too often does not reflect a sense of mutual care and loyalty, but rather self-righteousness, judgmentalism and mutual acrimony.

On the surface, disagreement over Israel and its policies should not pose a significant challenge for the North American Jewish community. Despite being an ideologically and denominationally diverse community, the great majority of Jews, in the area of religion, have by and large found ways to live with each other despite their differences. Tolerance and pluralism on issues of belief and practice are generally the rule. Exclusionary positions, characteristic of the ultra- or right-wing Orthodox, are repudiated by the others. In fact, such positions are viewed as antithetical to the American and Canadian way of doing things, and their Israeli manifestations are widely criticized by North American Jews.

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In many ways, Jewish life in North America follows the model advocated by Rava, the prominent 4th-century Babylonian sage, who argued that diversity will not undermine social cohesion so long as each faction has its own sources of authority. Explaining how differences in Jewish practice, so prevalent in Rabbinic Judaism, did not countermand the law prohibiting the creation of sects and harmful divisions, Rava argued:

> The commandment prohibiting the creating of opposing sects (*"lo titgodedu"*) is only violated in such a case as that of one court of law in the same town, half of which rule in accordance with the views of Beth Shammai while the other half rule in accordance with the views of Beth Hillel. In the case, however, of two courts of law in the same town [each offering a counter ruling, the difference in practice] does not matter. (BT Tractate Yevamot 14a)

Sectarianism only results when the differing sides are competing for hegemony within the same court. Since one court can only side with one position, it inevitably leads to power struggles over the approval or control of the court. Remove the reality of a zero-sum game and both unity and diversity can coexist. With its wealth of non-centralized, independent institutions and denominations, North

American Jewish life serves as a paradigm for such coexistence.

It is therefore surprising and puzzling to witness the lack of tolerance coupled with extreme tension and animosity which accompanies much of the discourse around Israel and its policies. For the vast majority of Jews – be they Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Post-Denominational or Secular – tolerance in areas of religion is second nature, and they vociferously defend their right to follow their own particular Jewish path. Yet it has become increasingly common for these same Jews to be intolerant of and belligerent toward anyone who differs from them on issues pertaining to Israel. Being tolerant when it comes to Judaism does not stop those who are either on the political right from accusing the left of treason and betrayal, nor those on the political left from condemning the right as immoral and enemies of peace. Instead of tolerance and respect for difference, one regularly witnesses combativeness, aggression and arrogant and toxic self-righteousness. When it comes to Israel, the Jewish community of North America, on all sides of the political map, has surprisingly adopted a culture of conversation and debate which is foreign to its core principles and identity.

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The basic questions are these: why is this so, and can anything be done about it? In this essay, I will suggest an analysis of some of the root causes of the current malaise, and offer what I refer to as "Rules for the Discourse." These rules will not attempt to delineate what a Jew who aspires to be a loyal and committed supporter of Israel, from either the left or the right, is "allowed" or "not allowed" to do or say. I take it for granted that our different visions of Israel and the challenges it faces give birth to very different notions of our "duties of love" and requirements of loyalty. We will never agree on this issue. By proposing "Rules for the Discourse," I want to attempt to bring back to our culture the art of civilized criticism, and to ask what behavior is best for the Jewish people as a whole. What I will be arguing for are guidelines that I hope can help heal this damaging rift, which undermines both the collective identity of North American Jews and the significance of Israel for North American Jewish life.

The Nature of the Difference

At the heart of the current divisiveness one can find two distinct assessments – often perceived as mutually exclusive – as to the central challenges facing the future of Israel. For some, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Despite Israel's economic and military power and prowess, Israel's enemies, in the Middle East and around the world, have not given up their quest to see Israel destroyed. Increasingly complex dangers continue to face the young State, orchestrated by old and new enemies: a nuclear Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, terrorists, the UN, the international Israel delegitimization campaign, and post-Zionists. Israel's survival, therefore, depends on the Jewish people around the world "keeping their eye on the ball" and assigning top priority to their individual and collective efforts to combat these dangers.

For others, the critical existential danger facing Israel has now changed. It is a danger that Israel confronts not on its borders, but within Israeli society; a danger instigated not by external enemies but by Israel itself. This danger is the threat to the identity of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and its role as a

Members of the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta sect, London, 2007. Photo by Peter Mulligan.

homeland for all Jews. An Israel that might lose its Jewish majority, that does not sufficiently respect international law, that does not abide by the commitments outlined in its Declaration of Independence to grant equal rights to all its citizens, Jews and non-Jews alike, and does not accept the equal rights and freedoms of all Jews, regardless of their beliefs and denominational affiliations, is simply no longer Israel. In this struggle, Israel faces a different set of adversaries, namely, the occupation, Israeli nationalists and the settler movement, Haredi parties and the Israeli governments and citizens who acquiesce to their demands. In this view, too, Israel's very survival is dependent on combatting these dangers and prioritizing all efforts accordingly.

It is important to state that from both a theoretical and practical perspective, these two lines of thinking are not mutually exclusive, and in fact can and do coexist within the same person. One can believe, as a significant percentage of Israelis do, that both assessments are correct, and constitute essential challenges for the future of Israeli society. Both must be taken into account in our policy decisions. To ignore either is to put Israel at risk. The prevalent opinion in Israel, which supports a two-state solution in order to ensure a Jewish majority in the State of Israel, but rejects a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank and insists on security guarantees, is one example of the possible harmonization of the two.

Where the two visions do conflict, in the current climate, is in competing for the mantle of "most important challenge." If each side would avoid the superfluous temptation to win the competition and "own" the self-righteous accolade of being the one who "gets it" and who is really and truly working to save Israel, much antagonism would be avoided and new avenues of mutual accommodation could be opened up. At the moment, however, we are a community deeply divided, and Israel, which in the past was a significant source of unity for our religiously bifurcated

community, is now itself one of the primary sources for its divisiveness. Can we continue to function as a unified community under these conditions?

Living with Difference

Obviously, divisions of this sort are not unique to the Jewish community. In any society, different people think differently. In order for families, groups, communities or societies to function as cohesive entities, they need to develop a model for allowing for differences among their members, while at the same time setting boundaries that define their shared cultural and ideological space, their "community of meaning." A group that demands monolithic beliefs and practices will inevitably split apart and self-destruct, while one lacking boundaries will lose its identity and have difficulty perpetuating itself as a distinct entity.

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Accordingly, when individuals and societies encounter difference, they tend to handle it through one of the following categories: **pluralism, tolerance** or **deviance**. They use the category of pluralism for those differences which they consider to be of equal value or legitimacy to their own positions, practices or policies. The North American Jewish and Christian communities' evaluation of each other is a good example for pluralism. The accommodation and respect for cultural differences in Canada is another. In these cases, difference is assimilated with the greatest of ease, and coexistence is easily maintained.

Tolerance, on the other hand, as the British philosopher Bernard Williams has argued, is reserved for that which one experiences as intolerable – for those differing positions which one views as wrong. One does not tolerate that which one values or with which one agrees. Tolerance of those who are wrong can ensue from a variety of considerations – for example, if the difference is perceived as not sufficiently substantive or consequential, and the other is assessed as only "marginally" wrong, as is the case in many family disputes. It may surface in political disagreements when one has a developed sense of individual constitutional rights, which includes the right to be wrong – what Isaiah Berlin in his essay *Two Concepts of Liberty* coined "negative liberty," i.e., the liberty to be free from external coercion. It can also be the result of one having a more modest evaluation of the certainty ascribed to one's own "truths," especially when the issue at hand is exceptionally complex. Regardless of the cause, the assimilation of difference within our collective lives necessitates the application of tolerance, because the spectrum of difference for which pluralism is applicable is too narrow on its own to sustain our collective life.

Finally, the classification of deviance is reserved for the sort of difference which is not merely seen as wrong or sinful, but as antithetical and possibly destructive to the larger meaning and purpose of the community. Deviance, in the words of the American sociologist Kai Erikson, is that "conduct which is generally thought to require the attention of social control agencies – that is, conduct about which 'something must be done.'" ("Notes on the Sociology of Deviance", in H. Becker, ed., *The Other Side – Perspectives on Deviance*, 1964.) As distinct from tolerance, the classification of deviance triggers a whole array of social and legal measures aimed at undermining and marginalizing the individual or group in question. As the sociologist Robert A. Scott has written:

> When a deviant label has been applied to a person, he is often demarcated off from the rest of the group and moved to its margins. As a rule, he is excluded from participating

fully in group activities, and he may even be denied the kind of freedoms that are accorded to others as a matter of right. He is sometimes physically confined and denied the sorts of privileges that are routinely granted to people who are considered to be "in good standing." Thus, when a person has been labeled a deviant, he becomes a second rate citizen, who is in a symbolic sense "in" but not "of" the social community in which he resides. (Robert A. Scott "Framework for Analyzing Deviance as a Property of Social Order," in *Social Deviance*, edited by Ronald A. Farrell and Victoria Lynn Swigert, 1975.)

Which difference is associated with which category depends on the nature and identity of the community, the nature of the difference, the historical period, as well as on the individual or society in question. Ascribing pluralism, tolerance or deviance to a particular act may change over time and is often influenced not merely by the nature of the deviance in question, but as we will see, by the preponderance of individuals who practice it.

Living with Deviance

One of the realities of contemporary Jewish life is that our differences are not always containable within the categories of pluralism and tolerance. In areas of Jewish faith and behavior, and now on the subject of Israel, some members of our people adhere to beliefs and policies that other Jews perceive as deviating from the core values of Judaism, and as an actual threat, in some cases, to the future viability of the Jewish people and Israel. These differences are located under the category of deviance, and as such raise significant questions as to our ability to maintain one unified structure as a people. When it comes to Israel, calls for tolerance, and the erection of a "broad tent" in which there is room for all, often fall on deaf ears, for the fact is that we often see each other's positions as deviant and dangerous – a status which is seemingly, by definition, not tolerable.

Here too, we are not unique – and the reality is that most communities do find ways to accommodate some differences which are defined as deviant. This is particularly the case when the difference in question is widespread and encompasses significant portions of the society. One of the most critical rules pertaining to the assigning of deviant status is that unless a social entity wants to redraw its collective map or commit collective suicide, it will not classify as deviant something that a large segment of its society does or believes. In a healthy and well-functioning society, great care must be exerted to ensure that difference and deviance are not perceived as synonymous.

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In order to avoid this circumstance, two measures are used. The first is to ensure that the status of deviance is an exceptionally limited one. Great care and nuance needs to be maintained in the application of this category and to ensure that difference and deviance are clearly delineated from each other. The second is to create a division within the category of deviance itself between **tolerable** and **intolerable** deviance. Tolerable deviance is that which, while theoretically "intolerable," is functionally ignored and thus de facto tolerated by the legal, cultural and social forces, primarily because the standard is simply not being upheld by large segments of the society. The fact that a form of behavior is commonplace does not morally or intellectually justify it. It does, however, position it as a social fact within the community in question and thus in most cases, from a socio-political perspective, as tolerable. To sanction or marginalize the numerous individuals in question, instead of strengthening

the community, will divide and destroy it. Only in the most extreme of cases is such a policy either sensible or required, for example when one's society has become so morally corrupt, that its preservation ceases to be of value in one's eyes. To designate as intolerably deviant a major segment of one's community is equivalent to leaving one's community and to relocate oneself in another.

Consequently, in instances when a form of deviance is prevalent, the status of tolerable deviance may be assigned by its critics. By retaining the classification of deviance, the moral agenda of the community is preserved, to be actualized at a later date if and when conditions change. One combats tolerable deviance through education, not through sanctions. A common example of tolerable deviance is adultery, which, while often condemned as immoral, nevertheless remains generally unsanctioned, legally or even socially.

Following the sectarian struggles of the Second Temple period and the separation between Rabbinic Judaism and the followers of Jesus, Jewish sages devoted considerable attention to the management of deviance. In classical rabbinic and legal sources, the category of intolerable deviance was for the most part limited to idolatry, the total rejection of Torah, and the denial of one's affiliation with

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Toxic graffiti at home of Peace Now activist, Jerusalem, 2011. Photo by Tomer Appelbaum.

the Jewish people. But if one saw oneself as a part of the Jewish people, and felt bound by any part of Torah, one was not classified as an intolerable deviant. Even if someone sinned by violating many (but not all) of the laws, he was still perceived to be "of" and not merely "in" the community, and measures of marginalizing were not activated. (BT Tractate Hullin 5a. Also see Donniel Hartman, *The Boundaries of Judaism*, 2007.)

In addition, if historical circumstances changed and deviance considered intolerable became widespread, its status might be switched to "tolerable." A primary example of this move was the removal of the public desecration of the Sabbath (a symbol of one's affiliation with the Jewish community) as a boundary issue when Sabbath violation became prevalent in the 19th century. As the German Orthodox leader Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann ruefully observed:

> Quite to the contrary, the pious in our generation are considered as if they were separated and distinguished (from the community) while the sinners (who desecrate the Shabbat in public) function in a manner that is considered normal. (Melamed Leho'il 1:29)

In non-Orthodox Jewish communities, a parallel move is evident in the changing attitudes towards intermarriage, as the phenomenon of Jews marrying non-Jews has become commonplace. Here too, an historical shift may not have eliminated disapproval of the behavior in question, but has rather changed the categorization of the acts and their social and legal consequences. Such transformations are not the result of weakness of character, or a lack of commitment to principles, but rather reflect a commitment to peoplehood and are a necessary and healthy response of a community obligated to the perpetuation of its collective life. At the end of the day, boundaries can only reflect the lived realties of the community and must be used to define the shared cultural space of the majority of its members and not redraw who is a member.

Rules for the Discourse

Similarly, the differing perceptions regarding the State of Israel and its challenges should not pose an insurmountable challenge to contemporary North American Jewish life. The same community that has found the wisdom to incorporate Jews who are marginally observant, or atheists, or intermarried, within the broader tent of Jewish collective life, should have little difficulty with the variety of opinions regarding Israel and how best to support it. For the left or the right to reject each other is akin to some Orthodox positions – resoundingly rejected by these same Jews – which view liberal Judaism or intermarried couples as beyond the pale and intolerably deviant. The same logic which prevents classifying more than 50% of the Jewish people as "outside" should apply to the varying political positions regarding Israel, with their millions of followers.

There is no doubt that the current state of affairs within the Jewish community is influenced by the larger societies within which we find ourselves. Tolerance on issues of religion and faith are ingrained within North American culture, and the Jewish community, as a minority culture, is especially invested in maintaining it. On the other hand, the recent increase in acrimony in the American political discourse between the right and left may have had a significant negative impact on the Jewish community's culture of public debate. Jewish discourse on Israel seems to be mimicking Fox News versus MSNBC. However, the excesses that American culture at large allows itself are not necessarily a worthy model for a small minority with an increasingly weak collective identity.

Jews have long "depended" on anti-Semitism to help them gloss over internal differences and bolster their unity. But anti-Semitism, as an external enemy, is on the decline in North America. Jews feel very much at home, and can no longer count on others to ensure Jewish collective identity. Foolish and shortsighted social behavior, which may have had a marginal

impact in the past, can no longer be afforded. The Jewish community needs to educate itself not merely in the principles and values of our tradition, but also in the principles of community building and the responsibilities of peoplehood. If we are going to survive as a collective, it will be because of our wisdom and adeptness in creating policies for a unified community of meaning, and not because of some external enemy.

Simply put, much of the discourse and debate around Israel must be removed from the category of intolerable deviance to that of tolerance, or at the very least tolerable deviance. Ideally, more pluralism would be nice. It would be healthy and constructive if both sides of the debate could stop thinking in mutually exclusive terms and see the other as complementary and even beneficial. However, at present this type of intellectual transformation seems unlikely, and as I argued above, unnecessary. All that is needed is a more circumspect use of the categories of deviance and intolerable deviance.

This is not to say that when it comes to Israel, we need to do away with all boundaries and notions of intolerable deviance. Every community needs boundaries to help define and protect its core values and identity, and Israel, as a value and a reality, needs to be protected as well. While we do need boundaries regarding what is acceptable and what is not, we need to be exceedingly careful as to where we locate them. Following the model set by the rabbinic tradition, which limited intolerability to one who rejected all of Torah or who separated oneself from the Jewish people, we must distinguish those arguments and positions which reject the legitimacy of Israel or call for the destruction or abolishment of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people, from those which identify with Israel and its needs, but whose expressions of such identification are seen by some as destructive. While the former appropriately fall under the category of intolerable deviance, the latter do not.

The problem with the application of intolerable deviance status, however, is that once it is let out of the bottle, it is not simple to put it back in. Doing so requires a willingness to understand the impropriety and social consequences of applying the classification of intolerable deviance to major segments of one's community. We need to educate our community to understand the difference between disagreement and deviance, between tolerable deviance and intolerable deviance, and to learn to use each appropriately.

The way to begin is to change our behavior. One of the well-known principles in the Jewish tradition is that change in behavior can activate a change in consciousness. What Jewish law often demands is a leap of behavior, a willingness to alter one's actions even before one feels internally motivated to do so. Internal transformation does not necessarily serve as the catalyst for change in practice, but is the outcome of such action.

To repair our communal structure and collective consciousness we need three such leaps of behavior. The first is an immediate transformation in our culture of conversation and criticism. One of the lessons Israeli society learned (albeit imperfectly) from the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin is that language can lead to murder, and that Israelis need to stop leveling the word "traitor" (*boged* in Hebrew) toward our political adversaries. North American Jewry must apply a similar lesson. There must be an immediate moratorium on traitor language, indeed on all derogatory language that questions the commitment to Israel of the advocates of an alternative narrative. We must stop making heroes of our "attack dogs" – the scholars-in-residence and essayists whom we flock to in order to reaffirm our own self-righteousness and the moral bankruptcy of the other, and whom we follow automatically as they purport to lead the charge of "us" against "them." In our community, there can be no place for such behavior. We cannot tolerate those who advocate intolerance.

The second leap is that we need to replace "big tent" language with big tent policies. We simply need to sit down with each other, left and right, and stop all mutual boycotting. I remember that when I served as a rabbi in North America, there were Orthodox rabbis who would not sit on a panel with rabbis from non-Orthodox denominations lest their actions be perceived as implying or conveying legitimacy. To see those who are the objects of delegitimization mouthing similar arguments with regard to those who disagree with their views on Israel and its challenges is bizarre and dismaying.

The third shift in behavior requires a renewed embrace of public debate and criticism as acts of love rather than betrayal. Such an affirmation will ensure the permanent position of aspiration as a foundation of our collective life and avoid the over-idealization and idolization of Israel at it is, instead of constantly aspiring and working to build the Israel as it should be.

Our fractious community needs a healthy and robust culture of conversation and argument if it is to avoid falling into mutual delegitimization. The greatest danger to our collective life is not disagreement per se, but rather disagreement that leads to alienation. We need to relax many of our "conditions" for acceptable debate, conditions that often serve to stifle conversation rather than guide it. Arguments about what positions are acceptable, and where one can voice them and to whom, are understandable in today's anxious climate. But they often undermine Jewish peoplehood and weaken the association with Israel. While according to some, myself included, the needs of Israel are best served by more circumspect behavior – as opposed to urging the American administration, for example, not to veto a UN resolution condemning Israel's settlement activity – the larger needs of the Jewish people today are served best of all by refraining from setting limits on what constitutes "legitimate" discourse and action among those who care about Israel. Let's disagree and vociferously debate the merits of each position instead of attempting to remove the opposing position and its advocates from the camp. When loyalty to Israel is more broadly defined, more Jews will be seen, and see themselves, as loyal – an outcome that can and will benefit Israel itself.

Let's stop trying to monopolize the labels of "loyal" and "justified" and start being a community that is smart. Ever-increasing numbers of Jews aren't simply angry with Israel's policies but are disengaging from Israel altogether. A community with a robust public debate is able to field a broad spectrum of opinions, thus maximizing affiliation within the community. Just as no single denomination can contain the religious sensibilities and needs of all Jews, no single view of what it means to love Israel and serve its interests will encompass the moral and political sensibilities of all Jews. It is time for Jews who are open-minded about their Judaism to apply the same standards when it comes to Israel.

Lurianic Kabbalah teaches that the world could only come into being when the omnipresent God willingly underwent a process of contraction (*tzimtzum*) and thus enabled the world to exist alongside God. The members of our community and especially our leaders need to exercise analogous policies of self-contraction in order to enable increasing numbers of Jews to find for themselves a place at the community table where Israel is discussed, a table where each member sets his or her own place, and is not defined or controlled by others.

I am aware of the fact that such *tzimtzum* is difficult to advocate, let alone adopt, if we believe that other Jews are harming Israel and its prospects for survival. We need to realize, however, that the failure to repair our flawed conversation is itself generating an existential challenge for Israel and Jewish peoplehood. If we can find the strength and wisdom, we can reinforce the bonds and expand the parameters of Jewish collective life, and lay new foundations for a healthier and stronger relationship with the State of Israel.

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