

Dear Friends,

Within the frame of two weeks in January, “The New York Times” published three articles on Israel that have kept rabbinic chat rooms buzzing. The last and most controversial of the three by Michelle Alexander was published the day before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Using Dr. King as her “straw man,” Alexander posited that were he alive today, King would certainly condemn Israel’s actions against the Palestinians as strongly as he had spoken out against America’s war in Vietnam. The article, titled “Time to Break the Silence on Palestine,” challenged humanitarians to descry Israel’s injustices against the Palestinian people. But I have not ‘heard’ the silence of the world. Quite to the contrary, the issues that Alexander raised have been the subjects of conversations for years in the larger world and in the Jewish world, too, even in our own congregation. In addition to the appropriation of Dr. King and the implication that Jews are so powerful that they can subvert world opinion was the equation of Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians to that of America’s in Vietnam. Hanoi is 8286 miles from Washington, D.C.; West Bank Palestinians and residents of Gaza share a border with the State of Israel. America’s conflict with Vietnam was ideological; concern about the Palestinians is existential.

Matti Friedman put the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a broader context in the second of the two articles, “The Wide-Angel View of Israel.” While acknowledging Israeli injustices, he argues that the situation cannot be resolved by Israel alone or even by the Israelis and Palestinians together. “No peacemaker can bring the two sides together because there aren’t just two sides,” he observed. To the contrary, “There are many sides.” Israel’s wars haven’t been fought against Palestinians. Israeli soldiers faced Egyptians, Syrians, Jordanians, Lebanese and Iraqis. At present, Israel’s great enemy is not the Palestinians or the Arabs, but Iran. As Friedman notes: “When I look at the West Bank as an Israeli, I see 2.5 million Palestinian civilians living under military rule, with all the misery that entails. I’m seeing the many grave errors our governments have made in handling the territory and its residents. But because I’m zoomed out, I’m also seeing Hezbollah (not Palestinian), the Russians and Iranians (not Palestinian), and the Islamic State-affiliated insurgents (not Palestinian) on our border with Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula. I’m considering the disastrous result of the power vacuum in Syria, which is a 90-minute drive from the West Bank.”

The article that I found to be most troubling, perhaps because it is the closest to home, was the first of the three published pieces. “American Jews and Israeli Jews Break Up,” authored by Jonathan Weisman, who wrote (*Semitism*): *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump*, details the growing chasm between the Jews who live in the two great population centers of the Jewish world. The embrace of Donald Trump by Israelis underscores the *political* differences between the two communities. But the more critical problem, because it is more personal and internal, is the dismissal of the Jewish (religious) concerns of American Jews by Israeli politicians and citizens. While an argument can be made that Israeli Jews should no more interfere in the political affairs of America than American Jews in the decisions of the Israeli government, if Israel’s leaders declare the State to be the homeland for the Jews of the world, they cannot sanction religious restrictions that marginalize or exclude progressive Jews. It is absurd that Israel is the only country in the world where liberal rabbis like me will be arrested for officiating at a wedding between two Jews because of the (Orthodox) Rabbinate’s stranglehold on the government.

This schism threatens our future as a People. Whatever our politics, if we become estranged from one another, we will destroy ourselves. We each are responsible for our collective survival.

With hope,
Lee

P.S. I hope to talk about these three articles at services on Friday night, February 8. Join us for “Shabbat Unplugged” and for an initial discussion on these matters.