

JEWES IN CONFLICT: FACING THE WORLD, FACING EACH OTHER

This activity is designed to suit a wide range of ages and learning environments.

Included in this booklet is an introductory essay, supplementary readings, and discussion activity suggestions. It also can be used in conjunction with the Jews in Conflict webinar and the accompanying slideshow. We have also provided the quotes for easy distribution.

Leader should review the contents and select statements to read aloud or share in their own words.

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INTRODUCTION

By Dr. Elana Heideman

This intro should be read in advance by the program leader. It can be read aloud, or used as a guide for your own opening presentation.

Nearly all of Jewish history has been plagued by virtually continuous conflict. We have been driven by the purpose bestowed upon us as Jews, but also by our sense of obligation to all of mankind. This juxtaposition is, perhaps, more unique to Jews than for any other people, creating a complicated crisis of identity.

The rise of identity politics and new conceptions of social justice have pushed Jews everywhere into new kinds of ideological discomfort. As a result, far from the description of “one people, scattered and dispersed among the nations,” Jews start to identify more as the left and the right, of the Orthodox or reform, from Israel or England or the United States. Am Yisrael hardly seems like one people at all.

Most discuss the crisis of Jewish identity in terms of religious observance or communal belonging. But with “social media self” now a strong element of everyone’s public image, many feel an obligation to shape their personal identity on how they want others to see them, how they want their voice to be used. Sadly, the enticement of the social justice movements is forcing a redefinition of what community it is that they belong to.

In the aftermath of the Shoah, the call of “tikkun olam” took on even a greater purpose. Yes, we suffered, but so did millions of others. Young Jews, in particular in America, have been raised to associate Judaism itself with social justice in the name of repairing the world, one of the fundamental elements of Jewish purpose.

Yet at the same time, the motivation to social justice as a Jewish ideal also creates a sense of shame about Judaism itself, particularly when attached to Israel. They feel under immense pressure to show their “activist credentials,” using hashtags such as #notinmyname and #jewsforpalestine, and doing what they feel is needed to feel a part of the “enlightened social conscience” upon which peers and colleagues, family and community members, could scale commitment as a member of the broad collective of humanity.

When faced with a lie that thoroughly implies “the Jews” are inflicting “Nazi-like atrocities” on the “Palestinians”; without the knowledge base from which to negate the claim, the common person is easily drawn into the empathic appeal of the pro-Palestinian movement. This is the perfect example of how Jews today, of all ages and backgrounds and locations in the world, are being challenged. Forced to choose between what appears as “right or wrong,” the facts become irrelevant in the face of an emotional charge.

Having suffered centuries of persecution, Jews are used to seeing themselves as victims rather than oppressors. For a time, Israel embodied an alternative self-image: a tough, new breed of Jews who refused to be victims; David confronting Goliath. American Jews felt ennobled by their association with these new, courageous Jews. But now, David has become the monster, the threat, the oppressor, the murderer.

To the extent that Judaism and Jews are conflated with racism, apartheid, and military occupation, Israel's existence can be considered the "source" of Antisemitism. Israel is now the demon, and the only acceptable Jew is the one who joins the fight for her destruction.

As a result, Jews young and old are:

1) facing the world

What is the "public face" of the Jewish People?

Do I agree with it?

How does it represent me, even if I don't agree with it?

Does the public image of the Jews as a nation matter to me?

How do we face the challenge of potentially conflicting values from non-Jewish influences in the civic sphere of our lives?

2) facing each other

How do I relate to others in my community or family that I don't agree with?

Am I still interested in having the conversation?

How do we see each other?

How do we hear each other?

Is it different because of our being Jews?

Many American Jews seem to see Israel as both the target and the cause of Antisemitic attacks, more like a loose cannon than a safe haven. Many Israelis, on the other hand, seem to see themselves as putting their lives on the line to protect Jews everywhere, while American Jews criticize them from the comfort of their homes for using disproportionate force in doing so.

The intensity of the conflicts wanes in accordance with current events. Petty animosities and passive indifference pave the way for physical and vocal resistance. Periods of confrontation become more frequent, increasingly intense. And the silence of the majority gives room for the outgrowth of violent hostilities. Eventually, the fires burn so far, so fast, they will no longer be able to be contained.

But what about the silence within each individual? And the silence that we suffer between us?

Internal diversity has become even more recognizable from within the Jewish community through social media. A stage for opinion-sharing in the echo chamber, the animosities grow exponentially.

How much has this added to the creation of a “two faced Jew” complex?

An individual is continuously developing his identity, combining his personal perceptions of the world and his understanding of how the world perceives him. What are the differences between how the individual is seen by the community, his status, and how the individual sees herself, her identity?

The point from which we begin and the process by which we seek answers are determined by how we consider ourselves as a part of a collective. How broad that collective is becomes, in turn, another personal challenge many have to face - for if you choose to identify more with each other as Jews, above being members of the “public society,” you then become ostracized by the society in which you live, the world that is pushing its particular agenda.

The way a person, or a family, handles the conflict invariably reflects self-perceptions as well as greater community values. Social acceptance, community status and personal identity are neither completely interdependent nor mutually exclusive.

In the aftermath of the ethnic pride movements of the past, today's social dynamic seeks a submergence, rather than the promotion, of ethnic differences. The comfort with hyphenated identities has led to the cancelation of those unwanted labels - namely, Jew, Zionist, Israeli, Orthodox.

By addressing common concerns that overcome such factionalism, by elevating the value of belonging to the Jewish people over other ideological commitments, a strong sense of communal identity could strengthen Jews' connection to Jewish life and to each other. To do so, we must strip bare the ideological armor of the dogmatists - whether Zionist religious, or Socialist - so that all parties could discern their common commitment to Jewish survival.

READING 1

It was only a matter of time. Living on a steady diet of anti-Israel propaganda was bound to have an effect on American Jewry, wearing down their critical thinking skills and turning them against their brothers in Israel. The propaganda is not stealthy, but is completely out there: served straight up not just on social media, but in the ivy halls of academia, from the pulpit, and in the pages of the New York Times.

This is crucial, because it's one thing if you hear it at a party or see it on Twitter, but if your college professor and/or your rabbi tell you that Israel is occupying Arab land, and the New York Times publishes only articles critical of Israel, then that's all there is. The average or even very educated American Jew isn't going to dig deeper. Why should a Jew question what the rabbi says in her sermon in temple? Why would the New York Times, an august newspaper—perhaps the newspaper of all newspapers—hide the truth? Why would your professor tell you straight up lies within the hallowed halls of the college classroom?

These are the sources we were taught to respect: our clergy, our teachers, the Gray Lady. Over time, even the most educated of Jews—perhaps especially the most educated of Jews—cannot help but absorb the barrage of disinformation and conclude that Israel is engaged in war crimes against the “Palestinian” people. This salvo of anti-Israel propaganda is the “water falling upon it constantly, day after day.”

This painful reality was brought home to me during a recent phone conversation with my cousin. We had become close over the past year and a half, as both our mothers went into decline and then passed away within six months of each other. It began when my mother told me that my aunt had been diagnosed with lung cancer and didn't have long to live. I reached out with regular phone calls to my cousin, who lived with my aunt and was her sole caregiver. If nothing else, I thought, I can listen and lend emotional support.

After my aunt died, my mother began her own decline that ended in her death. At that point, my cousin became my emotional support and listening ear, and the relationship deepened. This was very good for both of us. I think we both looked forward to our long, regular phone calls.

During our most recent call, my cousin asked if all my children and grandchildren had returned to their homes after taking refuge with us during the rocket fire—if my home had returned to normal. I confirmed that this was the case, though I lamented that this was likely to be temporary, until such time as Hamas restocks its rocket supply. “How I wish the world could see my granddaughter melt down on hearing a passing ambulance, thinking it was a rocket siren,” I said. “Maybe then they'd finally understand and stop pointing a finger at Israel!”

“Children on both sides feel the same way,” my cousin said, shocking me to the core. I'd had no idea that was coming. “Both sides are suffering.”

What??? Was my own cousin “both-siding” me???

“They shot 4,360 rockets at us, 4,360 rockets! Did you want us not to respond??” I sputtered. “Is it on Israel when Hamas places rocket launchers in residential buildings, hospitals, and schools to hide behind human shields to create photo opps to make the world blame and hate Israel?”

“Our response was surgical. We called every resident of every building and warned them, giving them an hour to vacate before every attack. We used the knock on the roof tactic. But they gave us no such warnings.

“We targeted terrorists. They targeted civilians,” I said, trembling, the heat rising to my face.

READING 2

A century ago, anti-Semites sought to deny entry to Jewish immigrants on the grounds that they lacked the superior character traits of Northern Europeans who had populated this country in the 18th and 19th centuries and brought it to greatness. Now Jews face discrimination because they allegedly are co-conspirators with white supremacists or are simply part of the undifferentiated mass of American whites, the oppressor class.

The name-calling and stereotyping are bad enough, but if the equity agenda is broadly enacted, Jews will find few opportunities to land jobs in the civil service, education (especially in higher education), corporate America, and the innovation-based, creative economy emerging today. After all, Jews constitute only 2 percent of the population, but they are overrepresented in these fields. In the cause of pursuing equality of outcomes, quotas are now proposed as the solution to ensure proportional representation by every subgroup in every sector of the economy. Jews have seen this movie before: Their numbers at European universities were limited, as was their representation in the civil service of some countries; during the interwar era and well into the 1950s, American universities placed unofficial but very real quotas on Jewish enrollments on both the college and graduate-school levels. Under the “equity” regime, Jews will face the same obstacles. For a small minority population, this would lead to marginalization and downward mobility, and eventually emigration to countries that value merit!

Advocacy for critical race theory and intersectionality has given a permission slip to the left to target Jews as possessors of “white privilege” and to falsely label Israel as an “apartheid state.” That has served to enable both the silencing of Jews as well as to foment violence against them. But rather than seeking to get their share of equity, Jews need to realize that they have thrived because America is a place where you were judged as an individual, not solely as a member of a group – be it privileged or unprivileged – the way critical race theory categorizes everyone. Those who care about Jewish rights should be at the forefront of the effort to fight back against all aspects of critical race theory.

--- Jonathan Tobin

DISCUSSION AND ENGAGEMENT

These questions can be used in breakout groups, or as a roundtable discussion.

FOR EXAMPLE: Print this PDF of the questions and cut them into strips, fold them up and place them in a box/hat/bowl. Divide participants into groups according to set, and each person takes a slip of paper. Everyone reads their questions aloud, and then the discussion opens up on how to respond to them all.

DISCUSSION SET 1

Are Jews in conflict with each other and with their place as citizens of the world?

What are the conflicts you feel we face most?

How can we balance how the world views us and how we feel as a community?

What is the nature of our collective Jewishness?

How can we bridge the gap between the public and private elements of Jewish life, identity, and representation?

Is there a need to be “socially conscious,” and does it need to be at the expense of identifying as a member of the Nation of Israel?

Is this dialogue taking place or not? (In other words, is this something that is being ignored by the general Jewish population?)

How can we stand together when we have so many issues tearing us apart?

How should we see, listen to, and envision Judaism of today and for the future?

How do we begin to weave together multiple collectivities such as Mizrahi and Sephardim? Transnationalism, class, borders? What holds us all together?

Is it too late to love each other again as one people?

DISCUSSION SET 2

American Jews are increasingly secular, and tend increasingly to view their Jewishness through the lens of ethnicity rather than religion, becoming thereby more similar to their Israeli counterparts. But in both countries, the Orthodox are becoming increasingly estranged from the rest of the Jewish population. **How do you contend with these types of divisions when trying to build a voice of collective destiny as a people?**

Yehudi (feminine Yehudiyah) and related terms arose as assertive, emotive identity terms to reflect a strong affirmation of identity in an international situation. As a proud, Zionist American Jew, Yehudi, **how do you guide those who are publicly silent because of the fear they have in being seen or labeled in a certain way by their peers or colleagues?**

"You can't just tell American Jews to feel more connected to other Jews, and they will magically feel it. And that if they do feel that connection, Jewish life will flower once again.

You can't tell people to "belong" when they don't feel a sense of connection, any more than you can tell them to "believe" in something that is alien to their experience, or tell people to "behave" according to Jewish law when those laws are no longer relevant to their lives.

How does seeing yourself as a member of a "collective destiny" help someone see beyond Judaism as just faithful observance of form, tradition, or tikkun olam?

American Jews don't experience, any longer, a sense of organic connection to Jews with whom they are not in any immediate or close relation. An organic, powerful sense of belonging to a Jewish collectivity that is greater than one's own immediate Jewish community is more or-less a thing of the past for a majority of American Jews.- Rabbi Toba Spitzer

Does emphasis on belonging offer a path back to the affirmation of Jewish identity that would not sever important intellectual commitments?

In past generations, there were deep nostalgic connections to Judaism in a way which was acceptable both to the individual and to the wider intellectual circles in which they moved. It built on their established Jewish identities without requiring them to sacrifice their intellectual commitments. **How is that different today?**

How was it in previous generations when identity conflict became such a dominating factor in Jewish life? When the Jew had to come face-to-face with the various sides of who they are, what they believe in, how their behavior should be shaped by their identity and vice versa?

If conflict narrative is not only a modern dilemma, what can we learn from the experience of previous generations?

When anti-Jewish hate is less glaring or gets twisted up with Middle East geopolitics, people struggle to identify it and to understand that it is a severe problem. **What is your suggestion for people who may feel ignorant or uncomfortable when facing these world issues with others?**

While Israel and its politics are constant topics of debate in Jewish circles, there's at least one area of broad agreement: More than 80% of American Jews said caring about Israel was an important or essential part of what being Jewish means to them. **If that is the case, why are people, and organizations and communities for that matter, largely unsuccessful at finding a unified public stance that helps the global Jewish world?**

CONCLUSION

To wrap up the discussion and/or activity, leader should read aloud the following paragraphs or use them as a guide.

American Jews are not immune to the tribalism affecting the rest of society. Jews in each country are wrapped up in their own domestic divisions and political battles.

"A primary form of Jewish identification is belonging—that intuitive sense of kinship that binds a Jew to every other Jew in history and in the contemporary world. Whatever Jews believe, and however they behave as Jews, serves to shape and concretize that underlying sense of being bound to a people with a shared history and destiny."

--- Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments*, page xvii

But we are torn in different directions. So where do we go from here?

The only answer - more discussions, more dialogue. Fewer lectures, more resource sharing. Less organizational territorialism or bias, more efforts to finding a common ground, and above all, establishing a base level of literacy for young and old alike to feel confident to face the conflict of Jewhatred and anti-Israelism as one.