

A little over a year ago, Stephanie Gurwitz, a member of CJC, walked into my office and asked if CJC would consider running another congregational trip to Israel. I, like all good Jews, answered a question with a question. “Are you willing to help to work with me to develop the trip and the educational opportunities in the coming years?” One of the aspects of CJC that has always impressed me is that almost all initiatives here are co-led by lay leaders and staff. Anyway, back to our potential trip to Israel. She graciously said yes. I then went to CJC’s board and was granted permission to spend time developing a trip and an educational programs that matched it. Over the course of last year, we researched different travel agencies and developed an amazing trip. Now that we have the itinerary, the travel agency, the cost, I knew I wanted to officially launch this iteration of CJC’s exploration of Israel during Yom Kippur this year. I knew the hardest hurdle that I was going to have to jump was convincing people that going to Israel was worthwhile. So I read many articles and books looking for *chochmah*/wisdom on why American Jews should engage in a study of Israel, why American Jews should go and visit Israel. What I found surprised me. There are plenty of articles and books about the great divide between the American Jewish community and Israel. There are plenty of commentaries on how this great divide will in the end hurt the two largest Jewish communities in the world. The truth is that all too many American Jews would rather travel to France, Italy, Argentina or Japan, to name a few countries, rather than to Israel, especially those under the age of 29. According to the 2013 PEW study, American Jews 65 and older (79%) say they are attached to Israel, as do 75% of those ages 50-64. Sixty-one percent of those ages 30-49 say they feel very or somewhat attached to the Jewish state, while only 25% of 18-25 year olds feel the same. With all the books and articles I read, very few asked the really legitimate questions: Why should Israel matter? Why should I as an American Jew care about Israel? Or even more locally, why is CJC dedicating staff time and resources to creating and implementing a really cool

congregational trip to Israel in the summer of 2019? Why does it matter? Why not listen to a drosch about Zimbabwe, Syria, France, or Hong Kong?

In many congregations like CJC, there is no topic more controversial than Israel. As a result, all too many progressive Jewish communities like CJC have become mute about Israel. It is in part my responsibility to find a way that we can engage around this difficult topic without losing our belief in each of our right to believe differently. I am afraid, like much of the American Jewish community, we have failed to do this.

Israel has often become the rallying cry for the far right or the far left. There is no room for nuance or sophistication, only right or wrong. This combative stance reminds me of the poem by Yehuda Amichai, “The Place Where We are Right”:

From the place where we are right  
Flowers will never grow  
In the Spring.

The place where we are right  
Is hard and trampled  
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world  
Like a mole, a plough.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined  
House once stood.

I was reintroduced to this poem by columnist Parker J. Palmer who asked, “How might things change if we began our political conversations not from our certainties, but from our doubts and loves?”

Now let me be clear, if I had the answer to the Middle East crisis, I would have a Nobel Peace Prize in my back pocket, at least 5-10 speaking engagements around the country, and a book deal

coming out next year. Unfortunately, none of that is happening. The Middle East is a myriad of contradictions and complications. In fact, we often get caught up in all these very important political details; we lose sight of something even more important. Why should we care? The most I found with all my research was a quote here or there giving an afterthought as to why we should engage in developing a relationship with and about Israel.

So what I would like to do today is break the silence, create a safe space for us to share, disagree, learn, and discuss the importance of this complicated historical relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel. I would like to share with you this morning how Israel fits into my identity as a Jew, hoping that you will come to my discussion group this afternoon and let me learn from you.

Personally, I did not grow up in a Zionist home. My parents were proud of Israel until the Lebanon war. Even before that watershed moment, Israel took a back seat to the anti-Vietnam war, civil rights marches, and the feminist movement. My real consciousness about Israel started to form when I was 19. Though the truth of the matter is that it was either through luck or *bashert*, depending on your theology. You see, when I graduated from high school, I did not want to go to college. My parents, like the parents of all my friends, felt that my career options without college would be very minimal. So they strongly encouraged me to go. At the time, I did not have the courage to disagree. So I went to college for one year. Somewhere in the winter, it became clear that I needed time away from school. Just to date myself for a second, at the time, there was no such thing as “gap years.” So I guess I was a trend-setter. I went to one of the dean of students and told him that I was quitting school. He persuaded me to take a year off. If I still did not want to return, I could quit later. Then I told my parents, who promptly said, “If you think you do not need school, you must have a way to support yourself because we are not going to support you.” The only place

where I knew you could live for free, get a job with limited marketable skills, and travel was on a kibbutz in Israel. So I worked for 3 months, shared an apartment with 3 other women and a couple of mice, literally saved my money for a round trip ticket to Israel and left to live on kibbutz Alonim, which today is kfar Alonim, a village. So you see, my relationship with Israel began either by dumb luck or *bersherit*.

I lived on Kibbutz Alonim for 6 months and grew up in so many ways: as a woman, a Jew, an American, and a young adult. Those 6 months exposed me to myself, my religion, and my historical being in ways I could never have imagined. And the truth is, I have never been the same since. For my journey back to Judaism and the American Jewish community began the day I landed in Tel Aviv so many years ago.

So why does Israel matter so much to me? Why do I think it could matter to so many other Jews? A few weeks after landing in Israel, I remember waking up and for the first time in my life, I did not have to worry about anti-Semitism. Although throughout my childhood, I had experienced anti-Semitism, I never realized until that morning how much of my subconscious energy was sucked up by wondering who would judge me, hate me or try to save me from eternal damnation because I was a Jew. I must admit if I had given this sermon five years ago, I might not have mentioned this because I thought I knew it was not the Howard County way. But the truth is, anti-Semitism is on the rise not only in the United States or Eastern Shore, but also here in Howard County. To wake up one morning and feel such a heavy burden lifted off me allowed me to engage with life in a completely different way.

While I was living on my kibbutz I studied Hebrew in Ulpan. This ancient language that I had learned to decode in Hebrew school and understood maybe a dozen words came to life. I was exposed to contemporary songs, TV shows, movies, and everyday conversations in Hebrew.

Hebrew was no longer a frustrating puzzle to solve but a living organism bringing not only the Hebrew language alive but also many Jewish texts, liturgy and history along with it.

At the time, I did not keep Shabbat. I remember one Saturday trying to find something to do and realized that the only things open were synagogues. Ok, this might be overstated; the point is still the same. The only time we as American Jews really get to experience Judaism in the public square is in Israel. There are Jewish neighborhoods in the United States which approximate this feeling. And the Jews who live in those neighborhoods will tell you that nothing approximates this feeling like being in Israel: banks, school calendars, vacation times, government offices all close down on Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, opening again first thing Sunday morning. As Daniel Gordis, Senior Vice President and Koret Distinguished Fellow at Shalem College in Jerusalem, wrote, “But here is a curious fact about many of those same American Jews, so rigorously absolutist on the issue of the separation of church and state and so thoroughly accustomed to observing their Judaism strictly in the privacy of their homes and synagogues: upon deplaning in Israel and getting their first taste of the undeniably Jewish character of its public square, many experience a keen sense of warmth, comfort, and reassurance. Shedding the inevitable sensitivity that life as a Jew can entail even in the benign American Diaspora, they find themselves thrilling to the plethora of heads adorned by kippot,, the ubiquitous flower stands that pop up in the hours before sunset on Friday afternoons, ...the empty highways on Yom Kippur,...: for many a Jewish American visitor, these and other manifestations of a society pulsing with Jewish life can tug at the heart.”

In the world I grew up in almost all Jews were Ashkenazi. Even today, where my circle has expanded, the majority of American Jews, I encounter come originally from different parts of Eastern Europe. In Israel, I can encounter Jews from so many diverse, rich, cultural heritages. Each trip back deepens my understanding of what it is like to be part of the whole Jewish community-not

just my thin slice of it. Asher Lopatin: President of Yshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School wrote, “Throughout its history, Judaism has always had at its cultural and spiritual core a relationship with either Israel or the language of Israel. It is true, of course, that in some ways Yiddish and Judeo-Arabic served to bind the Jews together culturally, and each was regarded as, in some sense, the Holy tongue. Yet there is no chance that these languages will come back to unify American Jewry. Only Israel can bring back to American Jewry a common, unifying cultural purpose. American Jewry and American Jews are so Americanized, even in their most Orthodox and traditional form, that a stronger connection to the Holy Land, to the Jewish State, must be the critical link between Tikkun Olam Jews, Trumpian Jews, and everyone in between, giving them all a uniquely Jewish focus that differentiates them from all other Americans.”

As I was preparing for this drosh, I asked different congregants to write why they thought it was important to be connected to Israel. One CJC member wrote: “I think of Israel as part of the world community of Jews, with the diversity, richness, challenges and wonders it includes. Spending time there has a remarkable effect of helping people find out who they are as Jews and what they believe, especially when exposed to the history that happened there and the variety of Jews who lived there and still are ‘Jewish.’”

At different points during that first trip, the Ulpan took us on field trips to different parts of Israel, each trip exploring a different aspect of Jewish history. We visited the Temple in which countless Israelites celebrated Sukkot, climbed Masada where Jews died because of their strong belief in Judaism, swam in the Dead Sea where the salt content is so high we could not swim under water, and lifted our eyes up, as the psalmist wrote, to see beautiful mountains, gorgeous deserts, and wondrous fauna. As Stuart Berlin wrote, “I was chaperoning a four-day three-night trip of tenth graders to the Galil. I was bringing up the rear with one of the tour guides who was giving me a

private explanation of the flora and fauna and history. We came around the bend of the road overlooking the Jezreel Valley. She stopped and pointed to the right and said, 'This is where the Philistines were. The Jews with Deborah and Barak were over there and the battle was right there, pointing to the middle.' As the old story says, in Israel, a call to Gd is local, not long distance. Getting past the differences between Orthodox and non-Orthodox, Israel is where it happened...No matter your faith, no matter how deep that faith is, there is something for everyone in Israel. ... Kinda of like taking the bus from Tel Aviv to Haifa and looking at the aqueducts that are on the road. We as Americans don't get the depth of that history. To us, anything 100 years old is old. Even 400 years ago is like yesterday in Israel."

Whether we like it or not, whether it is fair or a form of anti-Semitism, American Jews are often expected to answer for the government of Israel. Our personal opinion does not matter. The Xian world looks to us to answer for what is going on in Israel. Unfortunately, too many Jews barely know enough to give an extremely over-simplified two sentence answer. Steve Zurier wrote, "I have never been to Israel and I have felt stymied over the years when I give opinions on the Middle East. The first question knowledgeable Jews ask me is: 'Have you been to Israel to see it for yourself?' When I say 'no', the conversation usually gets shut down and any thoughts or opinions I have are discarded. I want to see the land of Israel for myself and see firsthand the many complex issues facing Israelis. CJC has taken great care to make this trip relevant to both first-timers and people who have been several times. I'm looking forward to sharing this experience with members of the CJC community and encourage everyone to read over the itinerary." During our last congregational trip to Israel, the one thing everyone we met in Israel said was, "Please let everyone know we are more than violence and hate."

From the moment we land in Israel to the second we leave, we could have easy access to Yeshivas from Orthodox to secular. Yes, in Israel there is such a thing as secular yeshivot. In Israel we will spend Shabbat dancing on the beaches of Tel Aviv, singing joyously in Kol Haneshamah in Jerusalem or being hosted to an Israeli's Shabbat table. We will visit a Cochin Jewish moshav, and hear about the Ethiopian experience. We will hike up mountains, take jeep rides in mitzpei ramon, and have a short wet hike through Ein Avdat Nature Reserve. We will witness our history, our Jewish history come to life as we walk through Hezekiah's tunnels, walk the ramparts around the old city, and visit with the mystics of Safed. We will listen to political discourse from settlers and Palestinians, Israeli Bedouin, North African Immigrants, and Israeli soldiers. If you come on this congregational trip to Israel, I do not promise you will return with a clear political agenda. But I do promise you will be exposed to many of the valid different points of view that make up this complex geo-political region.

Why care about Israel? In closing, let me leave you with three different points of view from three different CJC congregants. I hope to hear so many more this afternoon.

Helene Kass wrote, "I care about Israel because it is both the ancient and current homeland of my people. It is a country of many diverse and precious Jews, people who deserve to be listened to and cherished. ....Israel is a land of great significance to three major religions. It is home to people who have lived on the land for thousands of years, as well as recent immigrants. Israel deserves to be preserved, respected, and safe. It deserves to have many allies and peace. As an American Jew who lives in the Diaspora, it comforts me to know that there is a country that welcomes me and that would allow me to live there, no matter what."

Elliott Cowan wrote, "I visited Israel about 35 years ago, in a very different stage of life. Several times before, I have found that re-visiting a place many years later is a good way to

learn not only about how the place and the people have changed, but also about how I have changed. Are my impressions still accurate? Do I feel the same or differently about the place and the people? Who am I today? We always say Israel is the homeland of our people. I hope to find out whether seeing and experiencing that homeland today will make me feel more connected, more like one of “our people.”

Neil Fagan wrote, “Why care about Israel? Judaism teaches us to be patriotic to the country in which we live. My father was a WWII combat veteran who risked his life for this country. Israel is our spiritual home. It is a place where we can experience Judaism in a Jewish, Eastern context, not just through the lens of Western religions and cultures. Whatever your views toward Jews and Israel, you feel a much closer connection to both after visiting Israel.”

In reality the two biggest, most creative, thriving Jewish communities in the world are here in the US and there in Israel. These two Jewish communities complement each other. Israel provides a Jewish spiritual home where our customs, laws, holy days, way of life are the norm, a homeland for all Jews around the world no matter their education, or economic status. On the other hand, the Jewish community in the United States created one of the most “Jewishly” educated, creative, diverse communities the Jewish world has ever seen. We need Israel as much as Israel needs us. We have as much to learn from being in Israel as they do by worshipping here in our shul. How can we not care about our cousins across the sea? How can we not learn what differentiates us and what unites us? How can we not care? How can we not engage in all we, the world Jewish community, has the potential to be?

So what am I asking of you? I am asking you to engage. Come to our educational programs before and after our trip. Consider coming with us to Israel in the summer of 2019. Send me an email saying you would like to receive my monthly communications with different links to

important articles, YouTube songs, and Ted Talks about Israel; recommend programs about Israeli films, music, dance, food, and, yes, politics. Remember that the commandment “to engage in mahlohet/sacred arguing”, is greater than our need to be right. Break the silence and join us in this engagement in this complicated relationship between Israel and the American Jewish Community. Together we can write that article I was looking for this past spring and in the process enhance our understanding of who is part of our *kehillah kedoshah*/our sacred community.