

November Adult Education Beit Midrash

Cultivating Constructive Conversations About Israel/Palestine

Rabbi Toba Spitzer and Rabbi Brant Rosen

In this month's Evolve Beit Midrash, we'll be exploring how we talk about Israel/Palestine as much as the topic of Israel/Palestine itself. In 2018, Rabbis Toba Spitzer and Brant Rosen engaged in an epistolary back and forth on Evolve about the questions of narrative writing around Israel/Palestine. By studying their words, we find a model for how to engage with kavod in a makhloket leshem shamayim.

The essays we'll explore are:

Israel & Us: Creating a New Narrative by Rabbi Toba Spitzer

Drawing from her involvement with groups ranging from T'ruah to the New Jewish Agenda, Rabbi Toba Spitzer explains the power of two disparate narratives in describing, understanding and working to find commonality within the American Jewish discourse on Israel/Palestine.

Israel, Palestine and Us: A Response to Toba Spitzer by Rabbi Brant Rosen

In this response to Rabbi Toba Spitzer's essay "Israel and Us: Creating a New Narrative," Rabbi Brant Rosen argues that the "justice narrative" outlined by Rabbi Spitzer is more than a narrative; it's a reality that should be placed at the forefront.

Reply to Brant Rosen by Rabbi Toba Spitzer

Adding onto Rabbi Rosen's response essay, Rabbi Spitzer further defines her use of "narrative" in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the struggle for liberation from trauma and oppression.

Evolve prioritizes the follow four conversation *middot* (values). Share these as a framework for your session, explore ideas of how they might be implemented as a group, and refer back to them throughout the conversation.

Tzelem Elohim

Regarding and treating all people as created in the Divine image

Kavod

Respect

Redifat shalom

Pursuing peace

Makhloket leshem shamayim

Disagreements for the sake of heaven

Israel and Us: Creating a New Narrative by Rabbi Toba Spitzer

In more recent years, things have shifted once again. Support for a “two-state solution” has become a mainstream position (even if that support often comes with a lukewarm commitment to the actual changes needed to accomplish it). With the emergence of the international BDS movement, and Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow on the American scene, the American Jewish community has opened up to include a span of opinion not seen since the pre-1947 debates about Zionism. Yet one thing remains the same: our continued difficulty in having mature, respectful and useful conversations about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

... Whatever the causes, the result is an American Jewish community truly fractured over Israel. It is the third rail of synagogue life. Huge numbers of younger American Jews feel completely alienated from the organized Jewish community because of Israel. Close friends and family members avoid the topic for fear of losing precious relationships.

Does this mirror your experiences of discussing Israel/Palestine in your family systems? In your congregation and/or school?

Someone who is critical of Israeli government policy gets the message that they are not a “good Jew” or a “real Jew,” or that it is traitorous to even bring up the subject of oppressive policies enacted by the Israeli government. Those who feels supportive of Israel, even if they do not agree with everything that the Israeli government does, can feel that they are being branded as a right-wing extremist if they defend Israel in a group that is predisposed to be critical.

Where do the stakes from this originate? What are the results of these labels? How do you understand the author’s position here? What is at stake for her in the conversation?

A central component of this complexity is the issue of Jews as oppressors/Jews as victims. For significant portions of the last 2,000 years of Jewish history, Jews were victims of discrimination, hatred and violence—facts that ultimately drove the Zionist movement to claim the right of Jews to once again exercise political power in our own state.

Whether left or right, the history and experience of Jewish victimization often distorts our ability to clearly see current realities, and our own feelings about Jewish power and victimization play into our feelings about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While we all have our own unique, idiosyncratic relationship to Israel/Palestine, I see two dominant narrative frames that shape much of the American Jewish discourse. I call these the “existential” narrative and the “justice” narrative.

Spitzer establishes two narratives to explore: the existential narrative (which sees the survival of Israel and the Jewish people as paramount) and the justice narrative (which stresses that Israeli policies must be just and not oppressive).

Where have you seen these narratives at play?

Rather, I imagine something—like the Talmud, perhaps—where vigorous disagreement does not mean enmity or betrayal; where minority opinions are acknowledged as potentially the majority of the future; and where our relationships with one another are deepened, rather than frayed, by our collective wrestling.

What new narrative would you write?

ACTIVITY

In the pursuit of a new narrative, roll out a large piece of paper. Drawing the elements that the new narrative would show as a group, co-construct a new set of agreements and ways of talking about Israel/Palestine.

EXPLORE

Our Boys series (HBO)

Yaffa and Fatima: Shalom, Salaam (children's book)

Standing in Solidarity With Palestinians: Reflections of a Reconstructionist Rabbi by Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman

To Live This Utopia, for Moments by Penina Eilberg-Schwartz with Sulaiman Khatib

Healing the Soul and Healing the World by Sheila Peltz Weinberg

Israel, Palestine and Us: A Response to Toba Spitzer by Rabbi Brant Rosen

I unabashedly ascribe to her “justice narrative,” but categorically disagree with her suggestion that it is by itself “simplistic, limited and limiting.” Toba herself admits that everyday injustice is the lived experience of the Palestinian people. If this is truly so, how can we possibly reduce their experience to the academic category of a “narrative”?

... In this regard, I would also respectfully disagree with Toba's description of this situation as a conflict between “two peoples claiming historical rights to the same land.” Such an analysis suggests an equity of power between two peoples.

Where is Rosen coming from in his position?

Toba suggests that we must appreciate the truth of the victim narrative as well, and I agree. We just disagree on what that appreciation should look like. I appreciate that violence has often been perpetrated by nations or communities that were themselves victimized. But appreciation of the truth of their victimization should not come at the expense of justice for those they are oppressing.

Where does Rosen disagree with Spitzer?

So where does this leave us in the American Jewish community? Is it possible, as Toba suggests, for us “to wrestle together with the questions that arise when we seriously engage with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?” For many years, this question was at the forefront of my work as a rabbi. But while I respect those who attempt to bridge this gulf inside the Jewish community, I personally believe that there is more important work to be done. When a people is being oppressed—particularly when that oppression is being perpetrated in my name as a Jew—I believe that the most important question to ask is, quite simply: “What must I do to end this oppression?”

I cannot help but believe that a genuine justice narrative has the ability to incorporate other real-life narratives within it—namely, a future of dignity, safety and security for Palestinians, Israelis and all who live in the land.

What narrative is Rosen calling for?

Explore

Explore the poetry from Rabbi Brant Rosen on his blog, [Shalom Rav](#).

Reply to Brant Rosen by Rabbi Toba Spitzer

... The “new narrative” I am urging the American Jewish community to adopt is by definition one that would provide a framework that could hold the broad diversity of views in our community, and end the invidious and destructive practice of marginalizing and demonizing certain views and political stances. In fact, I would argue that only by crafting such a new communal narrative can we even begin to imagine a communal conversation that would allow for such inclusivity (and that would also end, I would hope, the demonization that sometimes happens on the Jewish left as well).

What narrative is Spitzer calling for?

My critique of the “justice narrative” is that too often those who operate within it are simply unable to understand how anyone would disagree with it or operate within a different frame (and the exact same can also be true of those within the “existential narrative”). They implicitly, if not explicitly, accuse those people of “bad faith”—that to be in the “victim narrative” is to be either ignorant, evil or misled. But people take action based on the frame in which they operate, and to dismiss the “existential narrative” is to fail to appreciate what motivates others and how that behavior might one day change. I would also suggest that personal trauma might legitimately and plausibly lead one to live within this narrative, even given all the socio-political realities that Brant describes. Pain is pain, and my own is not mitigated by the fact that it pales in comparison to someone else’s.

What is Spitzer responding to in Rosen’s essay?

What is at risk for Spitzer in the justice narrative alone?

And here in the United States, I encourage all of us who are committed to changing the current reality in ways that lead to the freedom, dignity, safety and well-being of all those living in the Holy Land to start talking to and with one another in more productive ways.

What do you see about the nature of disagreement between the two authors? How did they go about the disagreement? What was at stake for them?

EXPLORE

Resetting the Table: Courageous Communication Across Divides (www.resettingthetable.org)

From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace by Amy Eilberg