

### Israel and Inconsistency

The first time I lived in Israel, I was 17 years old and knew three words of Hebrew: *ken* (“yes”), *lo* (“no”), and *ahot* (“sister”). Not a lot to go on. I was placed as an exchange student with a host family in Hofit, a small town near Netanya, and I learned Hebrew at Ulpan Akiva with a few Jewish immigrants, a Christian missionary, and a Bahai couple who were moving to Israel to volunteer at the Temple in Haifa for two years. None of us could understand what the others were doing there. Eventually I was placed with a family in South Tel Aviv, in *Sh’chunat ha-Tikvah*, in a subsidized housing block then filled with Yemenite Jewish immigrants; Ofra Haza grew up in the neighborhood, I was told. My new host parents had been born in Yemen, and their native language was Arabic, which is what they spoke to each other at home. AND they were proud Israelis who prized their Hebrew knowledge and mercilessly corrected my grammar and my accent. They certainly had no love for Ashkenazim, and they told stories of the ways Ashkenazi Jews had discriminated against their families when they made Aliyah. AND they embraced me, lovingly calling me *Ashkenazi masri-ah* – “stinking Ashkenazi.”

This being the mid 1980’s, many Palestinians commuted daily to Tel Aviv from Gaza, and my host father worked with many Gazans and had friendly relationships with them, enjoying speaking Arabic together. AND his politics were militantly anti-Arab, supporting ultra-conservative parties that promised to harshly curtail the Arab presence in Israel. With dark skin and heavy Mizrahi accents, the family had experienced racism within Israel all their lives. AND they exhibited frank racism against more recent immigrants, particularly against the Ethiopian Jews who were just starting to become a force in Israeli life. My host mother kept a strictly kosher home and had a deep knowledge of Tanach. AND she loudly proclaimed that she was an atheist and made fun of her close relatives who were religiously observant. I grew to love this family. AND coming from my Reform Jewish small-town California upbringing, I couldn’t for the life of me understand how to reconcile all that they were. How could they live out what to me were such striking contradictions? They were, to put it mildly, wildly inconsistent. And that became the first thing I truly understood about Israel.

In classical logic, something is inconsistent if it leads to a logical contradiction. My early experience of a year of living in Israel with Israelis was full of logical contradictions, irreconcilable opposites, and opinions that folded in on themselves. And that experience of inconsistency has only been born out and strengthened in the times I have lived in Israel since, including in my family’s sabbatical in Haifa in 2014-15. I met a teacher who identified as an Israeli Arab and who was passionate about teaching Arabic to Jews, at the same time that she lamented the ways in which Israeli society curtailed the opportunities available to her and her family. I met a Palestinian man in the West Bank whose brother had been killed by Israeli soldiers, who kept a photo album dedicated to hatred of Jews in his home, and when he learned that a rabbi was coming to his house, he ran out and bought a huge sack of coffee marked kosher so that I would have something I could drink. I met a Jewish man who was an active member of a Conservative synagogue yet identified himself as “completely, totally, utterly secular.” I met Jews and non-Jews who had been attending “dialogue” meetings

together for decades, had despaired of creating peace or a *hevrah m'shutefet* – a “shared society” – and yet kept showing up at the meetings anyway. I have a million of these stories. Contradictions everywhere. Strong feelings everywhere. Conflict and compassion everywhere. But consistency? Nowhere to be found.

Yet when we talk about Israel here in America, and right here in our community, when we can manage to do so without shouting, we demand consistency from each other. We declare that only our position is coherent, and we delight in pointing out the contradictions in others' points of view. We insist that we are 100% right, and those who differ from us are 100% wrong, and we deny even the faint possibility that some of the arguments others make against us might have some merit, and that some of our own arguments might be weaker than we would like. We hide our own inconsistency and project it onto others. How can we be so consistent and so sure about Israel when Israel itself is so full of inconsistencies and doubts?

When I have the chance to talk to young adults who are about to leave home and go to college, I don't caution them about what kind of environment they might find toward Jews or toward Israel on their new campus. Instead, I give them this advice: You are going to go to a new place, a new environment and new community, and people are going to tell you that you are inconsistent. They are going to say that you can't be this and that. You can't be gay and Jewish. You can't support Israel and be a defender of the weak. You can't demand justice for Palestinians and value Jewish community. You can't be both this and that, you will be told, and they will tell you that the reason is that it's just not consistent. And when that happens, I want you to say to them: Yes, I can. I can be this and that, I can be who I am and support what I support and feel what I feel. Your limited idea of consistency does not define me. I define myself. And I let you define yourself. And if you let me, I can learn from you, and if I let you, you can learn from me. Not because we'll now suddenly agree about everything. But because we'll recognize in each other's inconsistencies an echo of our own.

Israel is inconsistent, and we are inconsistent right along with it. And there is good reason for us to try to hide our inconsistency because it is so very painful. It is painful to watch the military of a country we love drop bombs on children. It is painful to see media reports that condemn Israel but never mention Palestinian violence. It is painful to see friends here and in Israel torn with worry over their children and grandchildren in the Israeli Defense Force who are in harm's way. And it is painful to watch Israel sometimes succeed and sometimes fail to live out its promise, to sometimes succeed and sometimes fail to be a nation unlike other nations, to sometimes succeed and sometimes fail to be a place we can be proud of, to long for peace and to end up with the continuing tragedy of war. If we are not torn, we are not paying attention. And if we insist on consistency, we are covering up and denying our pain and our longing, our joy and our disappointment, our connection and our critique.

Some may insist that we must take sides, that we should declare our allegiance to one particular advocacy group or another, that we should ignore any misgivings or doubts we might have in favor of taking a strong position in the ongoing struggle over Israel, even when that

struggle threatens to tear American Jewish communities apart. But if we demand consistency from each other, we will inevitably be disappointed. We are inconsistent about Israel, and expressing that inconsistency with all of its nuances and contradictions is not equivocation; it is a key source of insight. The rabbis of the Talmud knew all about this, which is why they often insisted on playing out both sides of an argument, showing the perspective from which this rabbi's position makes sense, and then showing the perspective from which his opponent's position makes sense. This is what they called learning. It is not shouting. It is not winning. It is not triumph. Its goal is understanding. The truth is that as much as we might want to, we are not going to solve the problems of Israel or Palestine by what we do here in America. Most probably we are not even going to be able to change the minds of those in our community with whom we disagree. But where we can succeed—if we try—is in attempting to understand each other's inconsistencies and our own, to build a more subtle and nuanced knowledge of all that is wrapped up in ourselves and in that land that animates so many of us in so many different directions. And at least at GJC, a place that contains a much fuller range of opinions and positions on Israel than most Jewish communities, and a place devoted to treasuring the diversity of our members, that must be our goal.

So as we enter another year in which events in Israel and Palestine will challenge and delight and frustrate and inspire us, in which the news we read will give us pain and happiness and confusion and inspiration, I want to ask us all to look at our inconsistencies. They are really the way forward and the way back to each other. And maybe I am wrong and you are right. Or more likely, maybe I am wrong about some things and right about others, and maybe you are, too. Instead of letting conversations about Israel become a battleground, let us make them exercises in understanding the most challenging kind of diversity: the contradictions inside of us all. By all means, for those who would like, let us support what we believe in with contributions of time or advocacy, by buying Israel Bonds or contributing to NIF or to Leket or to one of the thousands of NGO's in Israel working for a million different kinds of change. But here, in our community that so loves to learn deeply together, may we examine and consider and express our contradictions in gentle ways, with gentle words, and with the mutual understanding that it is inconsistency that actually unites us, that draws us close, and that makes us all just human beings, looking for a way forward together in a very complex and difficult world.