

Liberation Today in Israel/Palestine

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Unfortunately, we in the Jewish world have another major challenge. We have to face the set of distortions that have accompanied a blind and idolatrous worship of the State of Israel — distortions that are apparent whenever Jews close their eyes to the suffering of our brothers and sisters, the Palestinians. Go into most synagogues or Jewish institutions in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, or France, and you'll find that you can denounce God, question the Torah, or refuse to follow various Jewish ritual practices, and you are likely to be met with a "ho-hum" response. But dare to question Israel and its policies, and you'll find yourself being denounced as a traitor, a self-hating Jew, an anti-Semite, or "an accomplice of Hitler." The blind worship of Israel has become the only contemporary religion of too many of the Jewish people, a people still so traumatized by our long history of oppression and so angry at God for not intervening during the Holocaust that we've come to believe in the religion of our enemies, the religion that says that we can only trust in our power, our army, and our ability to wipe out our enemies.

To be sure, that celebration of violence and hurt against our enemies was always there in the Jewish tradition and is present in the famous song that Moses's sister Miriam is said to have composed while watching Pharaoh's army drown in the Sea of Reeds. But that chauvinist triumphalism was the compensation for our powerlessness, an empowering fantasy that made it possible for us to believe that no matter what those who hated and oppressed us were doing to us, no matter how bitter their treatment of us, we would survive because there was a Force of Healing and Transformation in the universe: God. We believed that God would ultimately be there for us as God had been there for us in Egypt, when we had been utterly degraded as slaves. To see God as redeeming us when we could see no rational path to self-protection had a positive value. But today these very same thoughts have a very different meaning when it is we who are powerful, and when our Jewish community aligns itself with the State of Israel, even as Israel uses its power in heartless and cruel ways against another people over whom it rules. Israel's approach is structurally cruel because on the one hand it denies Palestinians the right to vote in Israel, but on the other hand it denies Palestinians the freedom to create their own state and run their own affairs free of the military presence of Israelis.

Our Torah understood the potential of this problem, which is why its most frequently repeated command (mitzvah) is a variant of this: "When you come into your land, DO NOT OPPRESS THE STRANGER. Remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Indeed, it commands us positively: **thou shalt love the stranger.**

We cannot turn this Seder into a meaningless ritual by ignoring the ways in which we, the Jewish people, have been acting as Pharaoh to another people.

Yet we also have to approach these issues with a high degree of compassion, both for Israelis and for Palestinians. Both peoples have co-created the current mess. Both are suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder so acute that they cannot recognize the humanity of the other, nor can they see their way to the peace and justice both legitimately seek. And both have been victims of a horrendous history of oppression. So while we as Jews have a responsibility to challenge our own people's distorted vision, we have to mix that challenge with a high level of love and caring for our own people, and recognize that our people needs healing and not just chastisement. We have to acknowledge that some Israeli intransigence is rooted in genuine fear that has been reinforced by terrorist attacks and by Hamas' bombing of Israeli cities, just as some Palestinian intransigence is rooted in the daily violence imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli Occupation, as well as by the targeted assassinations, the killing of hundreds of civilians, and the jailing of tens of thousands of Palestinians, who are often imprisoned without formal charges. Because our people has vastly more military power than the Palestinians, we must mix our compassion with a firm commitment to end the Occupation with its inevitable consequences of human rights violations and its hatred-generating behavior, which in turn has already ensured that there will be generations of Palestinians who will feel justified in acts of terror and hatred against our people. Both peoples need healing, and that can only happen when there is both a genuine peace accord that brings justice to the Palestinian people and also a fundamental change in the dominant paradigm of thought so that our people become the embodiment of Torah values of love, generosity, repentance, and forgiveness. We must escape the "blame game" of who did what to whom and focus on how we can embody more loving and compassion for both sides of this struggle.