

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5777
The Room Where It Happens:
Progressive Jews, Israel, Palestine, & Our Shared Values
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The Broadway show Hamilton has captivated the world with its energetic, vibrant, Hip Hop rendition of the remarkable story of one of America's Founding Fathers, Alexander Hamilton. Who would have ever thought Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical about the American Revolution would have created one of the most popular Broadway shows in history?

In one of the most poignant scenes of the story, Aaron Burr—Hamilton's long time "frenemy"—who later becomes a Senator and Vice President—laments that Hamilton (an immigrant), James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson (both Virginians) have brokered a powerful political deal: Hamilton gets his financial system for the country in exchange for Washington, DC becoming the nation's capitol. Only the three of them were in the room to make the deal.

And Aaron Burr is flabbergasted.

"Two Virginians and an immigrant walk into a room
Diametric'ly opposed, foes
They emerge with a compromise, having opened doors that were
Previously closed. Bros!

No one really knows how the game is played
The art of the trade
How the sausage gets made
We just assume that it happens
But no one else is in
The room where it happens."

"I've got to be in the room where it happens," Burr laments.

Tonight, I want to talk about what it means to be in the room where it happens, to bring our progressive Jewish values into the room where it happens, and to claim our rightful place at the decision making table when it comes to Israel and Palestine.

I know that this congregation here tonight cares deeply about human rights and justice. At the same time, far too many of us have checked out of the conversation around Israel-Palestine. And, frankly, it makes a lot of sense. As Rabbi Melissa Weintraub—our Robert N. Schlesinger Memorial scholar a few years back—explains, “Long standing, polarizing social conflicts tend to calcify into a self-perpetuating system of destructive conflict where.... [Many of us] feel [our] only options are antagonism or avoidance.” [Resetting the Table: Building Dialogue and Deliberation on Israel. August 30, 2016].

This is a complicated, intense debate. And I understand that one of the most significant reasons we don’t go to the room where it happens is that many of us don’t feel credentialed. Some feel like they don’t know enough and even if we are well versed in the myriad issues, who wants to enter a conversation where you know someone is gonna be angry with you? As my colleague Rabbi Sharon Brous says of this dialogue, “We in the Jewish community have a surplus of certainty and a deficit of humility.” Maybe we don’t want to confront our other liberal ideals and how they play out in a rough international neighborhood. Maybe its because we’re new to Judaism or we grew up secular. And for some of us, we feel it just isn’t our problem.

Let me say with absolute clarity: You do not need a Ph.D. in international relations nor be the descendent of Israel’s founding rabbis to be in the room where it happens. We need people with a moral conscience and an openhearted willingness to listen to, learn from and respect others. At the end of this sermon—its not like I’m telling you what happens at the end of Hamilton!—I will share four ways to engage in the conversation and reshape the outcome in the room where it happens.

Engagement with Israel-Palestine is ultimately about us—the American Jewish community and our relationship with Israel. Specifically, this is about us as progressive Jews, our values, our Torah, our vision of equality and human dignity.

Despite how toxic and poisonous, how shrill and intimidating the discourse around Israel has become, I believe it imperative to discuss it as a synagogue community.

Why now? *Im lo achshav, ei matai?* If not now, when?

Without our voices, without our vocal commitment to equality, justice, and human dignity, our values will be lost and Israel will shift further and further to the right. Without us in the room where it happens, I fear that Israel will be forced to choose between existence as either a democracy or a Jewish state, but will lose the moral mandate and capacity to be both.

The situation of a political stalemate between the Israelis and the Palestinians continues to be vexing. Netanyahu's government continues to construct settlements and appears to ignore legitimate Palestinian human rights. Abbas, the Palestinian leader, regularly demonstrates anemic moral leadership at best, and has too often given nods of tacit support to violent regional actors like Hamas and Hizbolla. The current prospects for peace seem bleak. The one thing the right and the left seem to agree upon in this debate?

“Oslo—the peace accord from 20 years ago—is dead.”

Amidst despair, we must hope. People I know and met this summer continue to do the great work of peace one person at a time.

Asswan, an Arab Muslim from Shoafat who works in the Old City shuk, explains with enthusiasm, “Arabs want peace. Israelis want peace. We must make peace.”

Ali Abu Awwad and Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger, a Palestinian Muslim and an Orthodox Jew, who together created the Friends of Roots initiative to bring together Israelis and Palestinians and work towards peace as they move beyond being “Pro-Israel or “Pro-Palestinian” to be “Pro-Solution.”

And there are organizations like Encounter, founded by Rabbi Melissa Weintraub and Miriam Margels, our recent Lou Wiener Memorial Scholar in Jewish Innovation, and Shovrim Shtika, who give voice to Israeli soldiers seeking to end the Occupation, and the Hartman Institute where Rabbi Donniel Hartman—an Orthodox Rabbi—who marched in the Jerusalem Pride Parade under a rainbow banner proclaiming that, “God creates all human beings as equal.”

These are ordinary people demonstrating exquisite moral courage. They are engaging the hard work of building an Israel based on a foundation of our Jewish values of equality, human dignity, and peace. They are taking tremendous personal risk to do this holy work. On Rosh HaShanah, let's be their partners in hearing the shofar's call to wake up and rise up and join in the recreation of the world. Let's join them in the room where it happens.

Why speak about this now? Because our values are vitally important and that when we don't add our voices to the conversation as American Jews, when we opt out of the dialogue, when we aren't in the room where these conversations happen, we embolden those who do not share our values of equality, human dignity, and the right of all peoples to have a homeland and live in peace and security.

When we don't claim our place at the table as liberal Jews, that seat doesn't sit empty. There are no empty chairs when it comes to Israel-Palestine. The seats are always filled.

Yes, there may be many reasons to shy away from dialogue about Israel-Palestine, but we Jews are instructed otherwise. And that's because I am not looking at this conversation as fundamentally about politics, though it certainly interfaces with them. But at its *ikar*, its essence, this work is theological. We read in D'varim 22:1-3: *Lo tuchal l'hitaleh*. You must not remain indifferent. You must not remain indifferent.

When Cain asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" the only moral response is, "YES!" Jews are the opposite of Cain; we are our sibling's keeper. We care about what happens in the world, to the world, and to the people of the world. Indifference is an offense to God.

There's a text in Talmud Bava Batra that teaches when you build a home, you must have windows that face the public courtyard. Why? We've got to be able to hear our neighbors. We can't shut out their joys and their pain; we must respond to their suffering. God is absent when we lock people out. There is a Divine expectation to be in the room where it happens.

We've got to be in the room where it happens.

We cannot underestimate how complicated and weighty it is to even approach the room where Israel-Palestine conversation is taking place, let alone enter. I understand because I'm in it and I see how unbelievably and desperately arduous this work is.

Yossi Klein HaLevi speaks of two mitzvot in the book of *Shm'ot*— Exodus— which frame the contemporary tension around the state of Israel and our moral responsibility to both Israel and the Palestinians. We hold these two truths, these two commandments, simultaneously.

The first: *Atem Yadatem et nefesh hager*. We know the heart, the soul of the stranger. Why? Because as we read at seder tables around the world each Pesach, "We were strangers in the land of Egypt." You and me. We know what it was like to be powerless and to be brutalized. The essence of our Jewish souls: Don't be brutal.

The second mitzvah: *Zachor et Amalek*. Remember Amalek. Who was Amalek? As the Israelites fled from slavery to freedom and wandered in the desert, Amalek and his tribe brutalized those in the back of the community: nursing mothers,

children, those with disabilities, the elderly, the weak. In a nutshell: Don't be brutalized. Or: When someone tells you they're going to kill you, believe them. Believe them.

We are far more comfortable with the former than we are with the latter. But both are moral commitments. What is our spiritual obligation to these truths we hold as self evident: Don't be brutal and don't be brutalized? How are we implicated in them? What moral claims do they make on our behavior as Jews *visa vis* Israel?

Despite how polarized the situation has become, both left and right have valid and important perspectives. And we have the unique capacity to hold both of them as we move forward.

We on the left rightly condemn Israel's government for harsh conditions against the Palestinians; for inhumane treatment at border crossings; for restrictions on the Palestinian economy; for not doing enough to support moderate Palestinian leaders in Gaza and the West Bank. I concur and share this full-throated critique.

But what of Hamas and its decision to pay families of suicide bombers and force hospital administrators to hold weapons in their homes and facilities-facts all confirmed by independent international investigators? What of the Israelis stabbed, shot, and killed by Hamas members in the past 15 months?

[\[http://www.timesofisrael.com/cash-strapped-pa-spends-4-5-million-per-month-compensating-security-detainees/\]](http://www.timesofisrael.com/cash-strapped-pa-spends-4-5-million-per-month-compensating-security-detainees/)

Does not a moral system that says it is acceptable to murder civilians fail by definition?

Chevrei: I feel deep in my *kishkes* the hunger for moral certainty, to frame this narrative as those with state power and those as victims of occupation. Much of that is true. But the failure to attend to Israeli's legitimate security needs is a moral wrong.

Any explaining away violence or terrorism against Israelis or Palestinians—despite the desire to understand it as an outgrowth of the occupation—is morally untenable.

The left must continue to work to end the occupation and move Israelis towards a two state solution.

The right must acknowledge 50 years of occupation has damaged the soul of Israel—potentially irreparably. And the right must stop the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank immediately.

The left and right together: We hold that the joyous day Israeli Jews experience as Yom HaAtzmaut—Israel Independence Day—is held by our Palestinian sisters and brothers as Nakhba—Day of Catastrophe. At some point, amidst our ecstatic joy at the miracle of Israel’s creation, at the very least we need to see our Palestinian sisters and brothers tears—and we must ask them to acknowledge ours. As progressive people of faith, we are uniquely situated to help establish spaces where this moral complexity—these two competing and seeming mutually exclusive truths—is simultaneously acknowledged and honored.

To put it in the simplest terms: the practical, moral, spiritual, and ethical losses of failing to engage Israel, of failing to be in the room where it happens, are devastating.

Israel is only 68 years old. And we’re still building it! We’re having significant and substantive debates about Women of the Wall and the right to egalitarian prayer in public places and the power of the rabbanut—the centralized rabbinic authority in Israel—who is increasingly making it impossible for non-Orthodox rabbis to have any role in Jewish life whatsoever. When we aren’t in the room, the K’nesset member who claims that non-orthodox Jews aren’t Jews goes unchallenged; Haredi men police women’s clothing in public and go so far as to ask for separate seating on public busses and airplanes; and politicians dismiss entire ethnic groups out of hand as terrorists when we aren’t in the room, engaged in the conversation.

Is this the Israel we want? We need to keep influencing the debate and the creation of an Israel that reflects the highest aspirations of the Jewish people as we learn to be decent neighbors with our Palestinian sisters and brothers. For all the good that Israel has done—and it is abundant including powerful leadership in technology, agriculture, medical advances, and disaster relief—without our moral presence, the Jewish people and the state of Israel lose when we aren’t in the room where it happens.

Where is this metaphorical room of which I speak?

Here are four practical ways to engage in the conversation, to be in the room where it happens.

1: Join us in the actual room where it happens: Come with Michael and I and our daughters next June to Israel and the Palestinian Authority; meet the people, walk the history, fall in love with the complexity and the agony; listen as peace activists share their stories; make art together following Yad V'Shem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum; eat hummus (say it with me-hummus), drink coffee with

Bedouins, visit Rawabi, a new Palestinian city, and expand the reaches of your heart and invite the tears to water arid souls and arid soil.

2: Come study in I-Engage, a curriculum developed by the Shalom Hartman Institute that addresses the core issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The curriculum is framed around Jewish values and questions, hearing each other's voices, honoring the moral complexity of the situation, and learning with text, video, and respectful dialogue with those we agree with and those we don't. Join me as we create an environment to learn, to dialogue, and reclaim the conversation from those who seek division and demagoguery. You can register on line.

3: Religious school: We have an ethical obligation to teach our kids as they go out into the world what the issues are—which is why our confirmation class will join me in I-Engage. We are looking at how to best teach about Israel to our children and we're asking some vital and powerful questions: How do we teach based on our values? What happens when our values come into conflict? As a synagogue, we have a responsibility to teach about the conflict because college campuses are currently ground zero for this debate; to confirm our students without even a basic understanding of the history and the conflict is unconscionable.

4: Finally, for those who are hungry to keep building this great project in Israel, join me in supporting *Zion: An Eretz Yisraeli Community*. Rabba Tamar Elad-Appelbaum is a visionary—and she's creating a Jerusalem where Arabs and Israelis study together and learn together, do justice work together, and even pray together. Zion is a community in so many ways like Shir Tikvah: vibrant, open, inclusive, loving, dreaming impossibly big dreams to establish an Israel who radiates love and compassion.

In a few moments, we will sing “Shir LaShalom”—A Song for Peace. These are the words that Israeli Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Laureate Yitzchak Rabin (z"l) sang at his final peace rally on November 4, 1995 in Tel Aviv moments before he was assassinated. And these were the words I sung this summer with rabbis and leaders of Shalom Hartman's Muslim leadership program at the Rabin Museum, where we witnessed together the cost of peace work.

We sing for peace with open hearts and open eyes. Because we know: Peace is not cost free. There will be loss. Not everyone will get everything they want. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians will need to make substantive concessions for their own mutual peace and security. Like Abraham and Lot did three millennia ago, our peace will, in part, involve going our separate ways. The work of peace will not be completed in White House pronouncements or Tweets or rallies with snappy slogans; it will be done by people like you and me, slogging through the daily work of building two societies side by side that have decided the cost of

conflict is too great, and the moral devastation of burying our dead is simply too much to bear.

Peacework is how the sausage gets made: Kosher, Halal—in the room where it happens.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman, in a recent essay refers to himself as a “Peaceaholic.” “Peaceaholicism, if I may coin a term,” he writes, “requires a nuanced ideology and manifesto. To be a peaceaholic is not first and foremost a political position or the inheritance of a particular party, but rather a disposition and a sense of identity. It does not entail a specific proposal regarding borders, an opinion regarding the willingness of our negotiating partners to make peace, nor a preferred roadmap for how to proceed in our complex reality. It simply involves a commitment to never stop exploring its possibility and to constantly evaluate all of our actions in its light: Does pursuing a particular policy make peace more likely or less likely?”

As Jews, as we enter the New Year, we are commanded to be honest about who we are, but at the same time, hopeful about who we can become. We live in a difficult reality, some of it shaped by others, and some of it shaped by ourselves and our mistakes. The spirit of the New Year teaches us that while I cannot change others, nor rewrite my past, I can choose a different future, and as a result, am held responsible for my choices.

I am a peaceaholic, but more importantly, I want to be in the majority next year. I want the language of the pursuit of peace to reenter our imagination, culture, and songs. I want it to emerge from the dust of our prayers, from the dormancy of our messianic dreams, into the everyday language and policies of our people.”

[https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=1451&Cat_Id=273&Cat_Type=Blogs]

I conclude with the words of Shimon Peres, founding father of Israel, Prime Minister, President, and Perpetual Peaceaholic who died last week at the age of 93. Peres never gave up hope for a solution to the entrenched and entangled conflict of Israel and her neighbors. His wisdom was powerful. “Optimists and pessimists die the same way, but they live very differently. I choose optimism.”

Shanah Tovah. Let’s make this one a year of peace.