A Letter to My University Age Child
Rosh HaShanah Day 5785 - Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
October 4, 2024

Dear Judah

When I went off to University 35 years ago my parents packed me with a black and white Macintosh Computer (your Aunt and Uncle had each taken a typewriter only a few years before); and a long distance phone calling card. The “talk” that Bubbi and Papa gave me as they delivered me to my residence hall dorm room was about showing up for class, how to do laundry and to quote a then recently retired First Lady of the United States, “to just say no” to drugs and a few other things under that same heading.

All of that advice and all of those admonitions are still true today for you as you start your University journey, time management, laundry and the danger of drugs but I wish that was all I needed to tell you at this moment.

Unfortunately packing you for University in a post October 7 world is not only different in generational technology (the phone in your pocket has more computing power than my first Mac Plus) but it’s also generationally much similar to what your grandparents lived through in the 1930s, 40s and 50s than the Golden Age of North American Judaism that mom and I grew up in.

Judah, on campus as in the world you’re going to encounter opinions you disagree with and facts that are in dispute. Some will come from strangers, but some will also come from professors who are demonstrably learned and smart. Some will come from friends who you otherwise like and admire. And of course some come from family.

Your experience is not unique to being at university or even being part of Gen Z. Everyone in this room has had a conversation that became an argument with friends, family, co-workers about Israel, Gaza, this past year. Oh I should mention, there are about a thousand people listening to my letter to you right now, and many more online; it might as well be a sermon.

So as I pack you for university let me try to help you and all of us navigate these interactions.

There are three types of people we encounter when we argue about Israel and the plight of Palestinians.

- Jew Haters
- Trend Followers
- Deep Thinkers

The first group, the easiest to identify, are those that simply hate Jews and hate Israel.

Hate is a strong word, not one we have ever let you use carelessly in our home, but it's the right word to describe their feelings towards our small but resilient Jewish tribe and state.

They may tell you that they ONLY hate Israel or Zionists and are fine with Jews but don't believe them. They may be fine with Jews as long as those Jews don't hold any beliefs that they disagree with. But it's never ok for other people to demand that you abandon your core convictions or identity for their acceptance.

Jews have been praying and working for a return to our ancestral homeland since Jacob and his sons first migrated to Egypt during the famine that preceded our enslavement to Pharoah and that's why for 3700 years at the Passover Seder we cry out "Next Year in Jerusalem". You cannot separate the Jew or Judaism from the land of Israel any more than you can separate the roots from a tree. Don't let them separate you from yours.

Similarly you're never going to convince these people to be sympathetic to Jews or Israel. Even if Hamas had killed 10 times as many people on Oct. 7, there would still be protesters marching and blaming Israel and Jews for all the world's problems. And even if Israel's subsequent military operation killed zero civilians, these same people would still be chanting "Genocide!"

You have left the "Jewish Bubble" of our home, of Temple Sholom, of King David High School, of BBYO and Jewish Summer camp and ventured out as our ancestors did when they left Egypt, into the Wilderness, which for the moment we will call The University of Ottawa.

It was in the wilderness that our people received and learned how to live guided by the Torah millennia ago and it was in the wilderness, in the long shadow of the Shoah that our people developed political and military power to defend ourselves, return to our ancestral homeland, and establish the State of Israel. The wilderness is harsh and unforgiving but time and again throughout history it's been the most formative and transformative experience of our people. In the wilderness we become.

Maybe that is the burden and the blessing of being a diaspora Jew, we are always in the wilderness, striving toward a promised land, a promised time, but never quite getting there, confronting the brutal reality of the world as it really is. In the striving, in the wilderness journey our true character is formed and the dangers to our survival are revealed so we can confront them and as our people have done time and again for 5785 years - survive and often thrive in the face of them.

To this first group, the Jew Haters, the Israel Haters call them out for their racism and violence. Hold them accountable to the authorities and the rules of your school, clubs or place of work. Don't ignore them but also don't waste your time trying to convince or convert them.

The Talmud teaches "*B'makom sheh ayn anashim histadel l'hiot ish* / In a place where people are acting inhuman, be a human being." You will find yourself in situations on campus and throughout your life where the first question you need to ask yourself is who is acting inhuman? First make sure it's not you. Second, the response to hate and inhumanity is not to be more like them but to be more like you, the *mensch*, the moral, ethical person we have raised you to be. That's how you fight antisemitism and racism by being consistently better than them.

The second group of people we encounter are the followers, they don't really know what this whole thing is about. The line often repeated is that they don't know which river or which sea they just know that innocent people are dying in Gaza everyday and they want them to be safe and free.

They may or may not know that innocent people were murdered, raped and kidnapped from their homes in Israel at the start of this war by a brutal terrorist organization that currently rules over the people in Gaza; they see suffering and they are moved to care. They follow movement leaders who see the world through an oppressed vs oppressor binary. Literally through a black and white lens, where Israelis are white, privileged and powerful and Palestinians are brown, poor and powerless. That's not wholly true or wholly untrue about either peoples. And as was said by Rachel Goldberg-Polin, mother of Hirsh, one of the Israeli hostages murdered by Hamas, "in a competition of pain there is never a winner."

So they are caring and compassionate people. But they are also naive and so easily manipulated. Their compassion for everyone and everything has left them without the perspective to tell right from wrong or good from evil. In a phrase attributed to Vladimir Lenin of all people it might be correct to call them "useful idiots". They think they are fighting for a cause but they don't fully comprehend the consequences of their actions,

and don't realize they are being cynically manipulated by Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and host of other extremist groups that do not care about them and would just as soon attack them for their progressive values and agenda as they would Jews or Israel.

I urge you to see these folks as well meaning but ill informed. They need education and patience. Start by asking them why this matters so much to them? What are the values that have moved them to speak up, speak out. To wave flags of a country not their own and wear symbols and clothing of a culture and religion foreign to them until October 7. I think you will find that many of them are simply following the crowd. Particularly amongst your generation where social acceptance is so important (by the way that's been true of every generation of teens and twenty something's). Like the simple child at the Seder, they need education, to be exposed to your own heartfelt perspective. Share with them why YOU care about Israel and the Jewish people. They may have never met a Jew or a Zionist before. We have spent a lifetime showing you why Judaism and Israel mean so much to us and to the world. Share some of that with them. They will ultimately make up their own mind (or have it made up for them) but at least try, giving them something to think about. Show them the proud and knowledgeable Jew you are. And if you don't feel knowledgeable then you have just as much a duty to learn the origins of this conflict and these two peoples as they do. Socrates said, "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."

The third group of people you're going to encounter when you argue about Israel and the plight of Palestinians are not haters from birth or the well intentioned but miss informed. The third group you're going to encounter are often friends and family, people you know, love and admire. People you thought were your allies.

You're going to discover that a professor, a supervisor, a mentor clicked "Like" on some anti-Israel Instagram post or shared pro Hamas propaganda and you're going to question your entire life choices.

Let me tell you that parents are encountering this every day with our children and grandchildren too, and it's like the proverbial, "challah knife in the chest."

We raised our children to be thoughtful and caring, to do something in the world, and to think for themselves. But we never thought members of our own family, fellow Jews even, would charge us with being complicit in genocide, apartheid and colonialism. We never imagined that the same children we drove to Hebrew school, sent to Jewish summer camp, sang songs at Seder and Hanukkah with would show such disdain for Jews, Judaism and Israel.

We can't talk with those friends and family about Israel or Judaism, and because of that disagreement we can't talk about anything of substance anymore.

Families are breaking apart, parents and kids are disowning each other, lifelong friendships are ending. The war is 6,000 miles away but it's also in family WhatsApp groups and around dinner tables.

On one level you can dismiss the Jew Haters and the Useful Idiots, but we can't so easily dismiss friends and family, nor should we. So how do you talk to people who hate Israel, even when they're people you love?

My answer is ... a question. I know that's very rabbinic of me.

When you realize you're speaking with someone whose views on Israel are very different from your own, ask, "What do you want?" "What's your solution?"

Some will say the not-so-quiet part out loud: They want Israel and its Jews to disappear. It is what I hear when protesters chant, "By any means necessary!" They think terror will drive the Jews out, dead or alive. Even if they are friends or family I put these folks in that first category of "Jew Haters" - don't waste your breath trying to convince them, use it instead to fight back against their hate and drown them out.

Others, thoughtful friends and family will say they want equal rights for all people between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. This is the most generous meaning of the chant, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

Ask them if that vision includes Jews and Israelis? If it doesn't you know who you're dealing with. Here it's appropriate to enforce boundaries "if you find that a friend or family member is not listening to you, has core values that devalue you or those you love, or is attacking you based on your identities. it's ok to say, "we're just not going to talk about this, I love you too much to hate you and if we keep doing this that's where this is headed so let's stop."

Judah, boundaries as "lines you set for yourself that are followed by actions you take to hold those lines,"[1] Long ago the poet Robert Frost wrote, "Good fences make good neighbors"; fences and boundaries are really important, especially when you're sharing the same physical or emotional space with another person. Just ask your roommate.

[1] Joanna A. Solomon, an assistant professor at the Kent State University School of Peace & Conflict Studies,

But if your friend or family member says, “yes”, ”yes, they see a future where Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians live side by side in peaceful coexistence in the land both hold as sacred and ancestral.” Ask them, “how?”

This is the most important question. **How** would they build a peaceful future after so much bloodshed? **How** would they handle the Jewish and Palestinian Right of Return? **How** would they deal with violent extremists on both sides?

You can have long, constructive conversations with even the fiercest Israel critics by asking, “What do you want? How will you achieve it?”

By the way, this question, “how?” also works when you meet staunch Israel supporters whose positions you oppose. We have a few of those in our circle of friends and family too.

If they answer, as extreme right wing members of the ruling coalition have said in Israel, “It’s all ours, Gaza and Lebanon,” ask them how exactly Israel can rule over so many people and remain a stable, economically viable democracy? Let alone a Jewish State? Ask them how they propose removing Palestinians from their homes and villages and not doing to them exactly what has been done to Jews throughout history?

“The urge to destroy everyone you perceive as the enemy is understandable after Oct. 7, but my follow-up question to these people is always the same: “Then what?”

So Judah - I’ve spent a lot of time in this letter talking about why the people you encounter might hate Israel. Let me close my telling you why Israel is so important to me and to the Jewish people.

Section here about why Israel is so important to me

One last thing I have a homework assignment for you and for all the people who are listening to this letter right now. Go home and write your own. To your children, your grandchildren, your dear friend or colleague. Put down on paper what is in your heart. Why does Israel matter to you and what do you hope to see for its future? Ask them to write the same back to you about Israel, about the people of Gaza, about Palestinians in general. Engage in the conversation from a place of values and curiosity. You may not solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but you might heal your own relationship with each other, and that would be the greatest of blessings and hope in the New Year. I can’t think of a better place or better time to start.