DO WE SAVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE?
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It all started and honestly it all nearly ended with one Facebook post.

What user of social media, email or even the telephone hasn't had that experience before?

Right? One seemingly innocent post and all of a sudden you discover that you started WWIII.

[SOUND OFF STAGE - DING, SLIDE ON SCREEN]

"Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, you're a rabbi, how can you defend this brutality? It's ethnic cleansing, aparthied, it's not Jewish, not the Judaism of love your neighbor, tikkun olam and social justice that I grew up with; that you taught me in Hebrew school."

The post that prompted that reply - it was this:

[ON SCREEN: Israeli Flag - I stand with Israel]

Oh, there is so much to unpack here, so much that needs context.

Let's start with the fact that my "Israeli Flag - I stand with Israel" post and his accusation of "genocide" came during the first days of the Israeli bombing of Hamas in Gaza in response to rocket fire into Tel Aviv and southern Israel this spring.

Which itself was a response to the pending legal decision on a property dispute and potential eviction of Palestinian homeowners in the village of Sheik Jarah near Jerusalem.

Which was an outgrowth of the five decades settlement of Israeli citizens in pre-1967 Palestinian lands.

Which was an outcome of the Six Day War, a massive attack by all the surrounding Arab countries, hell bent and sworn to push the Jews into the sea and wipe Israel off the map.

Which was by its very existence as a Jewish State an affront to nascent arab nationalism which arose around the same time as modern Zionism and Jewish nationalism post World War II;

Which was given life with the end of British Colonialism and the vote of the United Nations in the shadow of the holocaust to grant the Jewish people, the most persecuted people in history a state in their indigenious lands.

Which was, which was, which was, I could keep going back but this text message is staring me in the face, its words chosen for their inflammatory nature but also coming from a person who I genuinely know cares about their Judaism and is clearly in deep anguish.

I start to write back:

[ON SCREEN]
“Genocide? Really? You think Israel is committing genocide? Think about your words.

[READ FROM PHONE]
Because what you are saying is that our people who were the target of genocide by the Nazis in the Holocaust are doing that to another people. You think Israelis, you think Jews are Nazis? Set aside the fact that the Palestinian population is growning not declining; whatever Israel is doing, and we can talk about it its not genocide.

DELETE - DELETE - DELETE

Ever hear of Godwin’s Law? It says that as an online discussion grows longer (regardless of topic or scope), the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Adolf Hitler becomes a near certainty.

My own modification of this law is that the first person to invoke the Nazi’s in a debate loses. In truth I think he started it with the genocide comment, but I’m not going there.

DELETE - DELETE - DELETE

I check the profile again - it's Michael, he’s 27, University graduate, socially progressive, BLM, Climate Crisis and Rainbow banners adorn his page. He lives in the states; I did his Bar Mitzvah 14 years ago; it's impressive that he Facebook friended his childhood rabbi - he’s not a casual Jew.

I’m wondering, is he anxious about the country over there across the ocean or his own identity as a Jew here amongst his progressive circle of friends?

Just that morning I read a letter written by 90 rabbinic students representing nearly 20% of the next generation of leaders of Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Renewal congregations in Canada and the United States.

The letter spoke from the heart about the suffering of Palestinian people – both from this recent conflict, and from life under occupation. In eloquent, sermonic prose they wrote of heartbreak and tears, of “fires burning on the hills of Jerusalem and buildings smoldering in Gaza. Violence spilling onto the streets of Lod and Haifa”. It accused Israel of “violent suppression of human rights” and “aparthied” toward the Palestinians.

It condemned Israel's conduct, but made no mention of Hamas, of the fact that Israel was under attack or of Hamas' explicit intent to destroy Israel.

These future rabbis wrote of Israeli Aparthied and drew a direct line between the "racial reckoning" in North America and how Israel and by extension all Jews, because of Israeli policy and actions are thus complicit in "racial violence".

They said all that but made no mention of the ever-present antisemitism that is patently visible in social media, in beatings and murders of Jews around the world, in slogans chanted at these very same rallies linked to their progressive ideology, rallies claiming to be pro-Palestinian, pro-human rights, pro-inclussion but which traffic in public calls to kill the Jews and push them in to the sea so that Palestine can be free.

I love Israel and I have no time for haters of Jews, Israel or both.

I want to ignore Michael's post, and that painful letter. I see these attacks on Israel, even from Jews as a part of a larger progressive battle against particularism, national identity, and white power.

I think it's a deliberate campaign to attribute the qualities that this generation regards as the most loathsome and apply those to the Jewish state, the Jewish people and to do so in, in a singular way, in an obsessive way. To criminalize Zionism and by association Jews and Judaism; and it's working.

A recent PEW study found that Jews under 35 are far less likely to support Israel than those older. In another study ⅓ of American Jews believe Israel is an aparthied state, ¼ believe Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians.

The generation who has arguably had the most opportunities to visit Israel, meet Israelis, learn Israel's story; the generation of Birthright Trips, Israeli counsellors at summer camps and the popularization of Israeli art, music, food and culture. They, THEY think Israel is guilty of genocide?

Do I walk away from that generation of Jews we have invested so much in? Do we walk away from Michael, excommunicate those future rabbis?

This is not only a question when it comes to Israel, we have been living with these fissures in our social fabric for years now. Left vs Right, Progressive vs Conservative, Trumpers vs Never Trumpers, Climate Changers vs Climate Hoaxers, Vaxxers and Anti-Vaxxers. If we keep voting people off the island we're going to find ourselves deserted and alone.

There is a Mishna from the period of the Talmud in tractate Midot -chapter 2 – paragraph 2. It deals with who can approach the Holy Temple and by what direction they should approach – from right side or left.

This is what it teaches: “The Temple mount was five hundred cubits by five hundred cubits…All who entered the Temple Mount entered by the right and went out on the left, save for one to whom something had happened – they entered from the left and went around to the right.” OK – so far so good I get the picture – some entered from the right – some from the left – from the left meant there was some kind of issue – a problem.

Who entered from the left? The Mishna continues – “Why do you go around to the left? If he answers – because I am a mourner – you comfort him. If he answers – because I am excommunicated – they answered “May He who dwells in this house inspire them to draw you near again.”

You see what has happened here?

The Mishna is telling us that there was a place where those who had been excommunicated were able to gather even at the holy Temple. Wow – that’s a shock. The whole idea of excommunication was to break the person off from the community because he held ideas that were outside the communal norms. The last place you would expect a person who has been excommunicated to be welcome would be the Holy Temple. And not only was he welcome – a Rabbi Yossi goes on in the Mishna to remind us not to be harsh in our words – but to be careful to invite him to continue participating in the debate – in the dialogue.

He was not cancelled – as difficult as it was for the community to hear these ideas the Rabbis insisted that he still had a place in the Holy Temple – he was still part of the discussion.

If the ancient Temple was a place that could tolerate vigorous debate and welcome even those who held ideas considered outside the communal norms – ideas that they believed were threatening to Jewish tradition or the safety of the community – then why can’t our synagogues – and our schools and our communal institutions – OUR holy places, our Facebook pages – why can’t they be places where everyone has a seat at the table?

Before I can respond Michael adds another reply.

[ON SCREEN]
“Israel is killing women and children, hundreds of innocents have died in Gaza; hardly any have died in Israel. It's disproportionate, it’s a war crime.”

I check the user profile, am I debating John Oliver, the HBO commentator and comedian? None of this or THAT was funny.

[TYPE ON SAME SCREEN BELOW ABOVE]]
“How many Jews would you like to die so that this is a fair fight?”

Rabbi Yossi would admonish me for using harsh words, but I'm a rabbi not a saint and he's pissing me off.

Since 1982 every one of Israel's conflicts has been asymmetrical. Israel is always fighting wars that pit a conventional army against a rag tag force. This frames Israel as the bully as John Oliver in fact said.

Deaths are disproportionate. Hamas is fine with disproportionate; it's good for their brand, that's why they build terror tunnels and not bomb shelters, that's why they launch unguided rockets into civilian centers; and it's why Israel tries everything it can not to create collateral damage; including sending text messages to people in the building they are targeting telling them to get out.

Some might look at Israel vs Palestinians, where Israelis are Goliath and the Palestinians are David but widen the lens... it isn't that simple.

Look at the reality that Israelis live with, it's unlike any other country in the world. On three borders they are confronted with terror entities that are committed to Israel's destruction. Its context and its complicated and neither stands a chance on social media against buzz words like colonialization, apartheid, ethnic cleansing and now genocide. These are all the words you need on social media to make your case; to criminalize Israel.

The criminalization of Israel has moved from the fringe and is now a mainstay of progressive discourse, including progressive Jewish discourse; like that of Michael and those future rabbis. They draw a direct line between Black Lives Matter and Palestinian Lives Matter.

He writes back:

[ON SCREEN]
"I don't want anyone to die, not Israelis, not Palestinians.

I write back:
[ON SAME SCREEN]
I agree.

I want peace; Jews and Arabs are cousins; both peoples have a connection to the land. Israel is willing to share it; the Palestinians are not. How many times have we offered peace only to be met with violence?

He replies:

[ON SCREEN]
The problem is the occupation;

[CONTINUING IN HIS VOICE - BUT NOT ON SCREEN]

He went on, "*the problem is Israeli soldiers and Israeli settlers terrorizing the Palestinian people. I can't accept that our people who have been through so much, who have been persecuted and enslaved are occupying another people."*

[ON SCREEN]
We must end the occupation!"

He uses the term "we", he sees Israeli actions as Judaism done in his name. It's not; it's a liberal democracy, he's no more responsible for how Israel governs than how Trump or Biden or Trudeau govern. In fact less so, he doesn't live there. He doesn't have a vote.

I write back:

[ON SCREEN]
THESE THINGS ARE TRUE:

- *Israel is the only democracy in the middle east*
- *Israel is the only democracy that is engaged in an open ended seemingly permanent occupation of another people*
- *Israel is the only country on the planet that lives under threat of a permanent death sentence that has been taken out on it by its neighbours*.

Michael, how can you criticize the occupation you don't live there?

He writes:
Rabbi, how can you defend the occupation you live in Canada? Israel is not only a Jewish State but it's also The State of the Jews. It was created to be an Or Lagoyim a light unto the nations. When Israeli soldiers or settlers tear down olive trees, bulldoze homes or target Palestinians for reprisal and abuse - is that Judaism, is that the best we can do or be?

His argument is hard to hear; Israel speaks for me as a Jew in the world even when I have no control over what it says or does. I don't have to give up my liberal progressive values to support Israel, but if I take my liberal progressive values with me it's difficult to support some things Israel does; and they do them in my name.

And really that's the thing; this debate we are having me and Michael, you and your kids, your friends it's not really about Israel or Palestinians it's about us. We are talking about our Judaism and our Jewish identity which is inseparable from Israel. And we want it that way, our torah tells us, "If we forget the O Jerusalem may my right hand lose its cunning".

He writes:

[ON SCREEN]
So, I should say nothing when I see injustice in the world? That's not what you taught me, you taught me tzedek, tzedek t'rdof - justice, justice you shall pursue. Rabbi I support BDS, the boycott, divest and sanction movement. Only an international boycott will force Israel to leave Palestine, just like it did in South Africa, and in the civil rights movement. Jews supported those boycotts; proudly.

[ON SCREEN]
Look Michael, I think your heart is in the right place but you're being used, conned. You care about justice and human rights but the BDS movement doesn't. They don't just want Jews out of the West Bank, they want the Jews out of Israel. From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free - is not just a catchy rhyme; it's a mission statement. If you're in allyship with people who want to wipe Israel off the map I have nothing more to say to you. I love Israel, as imperfect as it is. I want to help it live up to its ideals; not disappear.

He writes:
Rabbi - I was on a Birthright Trip, and then I stayed after and saw the real Israel. I saw with my own eyes that Israel uses laws, intimidation and violence to suppress and oppress the Palestinian people, while Israelis are given due process, freedom of movement and their civil rights are guarded and protected. That's apartheid."

I reply:
Aparthied is a loaded term, it's inflammatory and I don't think it fits here. I'm glad you went to Israel; and I am proud that the Jewish community paid for you to go. I know Palestinians and to a lesser extent Israeli Arab citizens of Israel are not always treated the same as Jewish Israelis, and this pains me as a Jew; just as racism in our own countries calls me to seek justice and pursue it.

The Torah says you must have one law for one people, Mishpat Echad - Israel doesn't always meet that mitzvah. This is wrong and it's why I support the Israel Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement that is fighting for civil rights for all Israelis.

I then quote the text - I love cut and paste

[ON SCREEN]
"Leviticus 24:22 says: "You shall have one law/standard of justice (mishpat) for the stranger (ger) and the citizen (ezrach) alike, for I am Adonai your God."

I love Israel and Israel can be racist, and it's not just against Arabs. Israel has a serious set of problems that revolve around questions of minorities, the role of the non-Jew in Israeli society, the role of non orthodox Judaism in Israeli society.

This brings to the surface the complexity of Israeli society. We have complexities with marginalized groups here in Canada too, we are twice as old as Israel and live in the safest neighborhood in the world and we haven't solved them yet either. Well Israeli society is also very complicated and it's difficult, and here Diaspora Jewish values and voices are important, they do have a role to play in helping Israel live up to its promise to be an Or L'goyim, a light unto the nations.

As former Israeli President and Prime Minister Shimon Perez z'l once said, "The Jews' greatest contribution to history is dissatisfaction! We're a nation born to be discontented. Whatever exists we believe can be changed for the better."

That was the end of our text exchange, like every social media debate no one's mind was changed; positions only hardened.

The experience has stayed with me for months; he was not the Michael I remembered, but of course that Michael was 13 and his voice was changing. This Michael 17 years later had clearly found his voice, I just didn't agree with much of what he was saying.

My finger hovered over the UNFRIEND button.

I'm thinking about the Seder table.

The Haggadah describes the famous four children – literally – or symbolically present at every Seder. There is the wise, the simple, the one who doesn't know enough to ask a question and – who is the other one – yes – the other one is called the Rasha – the rebellious child – the wicked child.

Why is he wicked, because he dissociates himself from the passover story and asks, "what does this all mean to you?"

We are told that we may speak harshly to him – we should challenge him – but we don't kick him out of the seder for his offensive question. Why, because he hasn't given up on the Jewish people – he hasn't given up on the family and so we can't give up on her.

How do I know – because she's there at the table. She came home for the Seder. He engages in the debate – just like Michael who reached out and challenged his childhood rabbi. This child expresses a viewpoint that disturbs the parent – but the parent answers – and the answer is not – leave the table – the answer is not – go away, I don't want to hear such things.

It is a harsh debate, probably one of those seders that includes some shouting but they are all still there when the afikomen is eaten, when we welcome Elijah the prophet and the hope for redemption, peace and reconciliation that he represents.

I move my finger off the button. I'm glad Michael texted me. I need to hear this and he needs to hear me.

I'm worried about some of his ideas and associations; but I'll worry more if he stops asking questions of his rabbi; if he stops showing up at the seder; stops caring about how his Judaism matches his values; if that happens then the challenges facing Israel will be eclipsed by the greater challenge facing the whole of the Jewish people.