

Liberal Zionism and the Troubled Committed

What does troubled and committed mean

A Shifting North American Discourse

Donniel Hartman

Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman is president of the *Shalom Hartman Institute*, author of *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion from Itself*, and host of “*For Heaven’s Sake*,” one of the most popular Jewish podcasts in North America.

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[I] Chief Points

[A] Liberal Zionists need a liberal orientated Israel

- Israel needs Liberal Zionist
- Liberal here means traditional liberal values – freedom, equality, equity, democracy, social harmony,

[B] Moral Issues central

- Legal arguments cannot be separated from moral ones
- Accepting the status quo is not moral
- In Israel the moral issue has faded
- Most Israelis have accepted the status quo
- Status Quo is problematic – politically, morally, Jewishly

[C] Moral Questions pertaining to War need to be applied to Israeli administration of the West Bank and other areas

- Questions of Morality of War are:
 - Question 1 – Is the War Just?
 - Question 2 – Is the War being conducted justly?
- Questions of Morality of Administration / Occupation
 - Question 1 – Is the occupation / administration is just
 - Question 2 – Is the way the occupation is being carried out in a just way?
 - Hartman – Yes to Question 1 and No to Question 2

[D] 4 Categories of Involvement with the Israel

	Uncommitted	Committed
Troubled	Troubled & Uncommitted	Troubled & Committed
Untroubled	Untroubled & Uncommitted	Untroubled & Committed

- How can one be Troubled and Committed
- How long can one be both troubled and committed?

[E] Definition of a Jew:

- “To be a Jew is to be troubled, to view one’s life, and one’s society, through an aspirational lens.”
- “To be a Jew is to take responsibility for defining and indeed elevating reality, and this conviction itself is critical to achieving this end.”

[II] Crucial Questions:

Does our Israeli Advocacy program address the issues highlighted in this article?

How can we address the moral ambiguity of Israeli actions in the administration of Judea & Samaria (West Bank, Occupied Territories) and with the Israeli Arab population?

Can we re-center our discussion of Israel in ways that engage the “troubled –committed?

How can we use Donniel Hartman’s understanding of Jewish engagement to achieve the Zionist vision of Israel as not only a “start-up” nation but also a “values” nation?

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The Comments in the Text Boxes are my highlights

Troubled Committed Zionist

I am a “troubled committed Zionist.” I’m both unconditionally committed to Israel’s survival and deeply honored to be part of a generation of Jews who are building the homeland of the Jewish people. I view Israel as one of the most exciting projects in Jewish history: to build our own country in accordance with the highest Jewish and liberal democratic values. To be a committed Zionist is to be invested in shaping the outcome of this project

Gap between Israel as it was and Israel as I believed it should be

Shortly after I made *aliyah* in 1971, however, I knew that something wasn’t right, that there was a gap between Israel as it was and Israel as I believed it should be. I recognized that there was a people who did not want to be a part of my state, and whom, conversely, I did not wish to occupy.

To be a Jew defined: “To be a Jew is to be troubled, to view one’s life, and one’s society, through an aspirational lens.”

To be a Jew is to be troubled, to view one’s life, and one’s society, through an aspirational lens, always striving to be more. I’m troubled because this project is an ongoing process that requires constant revision. I’m troubled by the enduring gap between ideals and reality.

What Troubles Hartman

- 1. Issues of human rights**
- 2. Israel no longer pursuing peace**
- 3. Power has desensitized us to moral concerns**
- 4. We are no longer trying to do better**
- 5. Israel cannot simply leave Judea and Samaria**

Today, I am troubled because something very wrong is going on in our country,

1. because our commitment to human rights and equality, to treating all people as created in the image of God, is inconsistently applied in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza.
2. I'm troubled because Israel, however committed to peace, is no longer resolute in pursuing it.
3. I'm troubled because our power has afforded us the ability to maintain the current political status quo while desensitizing us to the moral abuses it conceals and legitimizes.
4. I'm troubled because we can—and must—do better, but many of us are no longer trying.
5. *[I am troubled because even though I'd like Israel to simply pack up and leave most of Judea and Samaria and bring the occupation to an immediate end, I believe that in doing so Israel will cease to exist. – from beginning of next paragraph]*

Why Occupation Cannot Suddenly End

I am troubled because even though I'd like Israel to simply pack up and leave most of Judea and Samaria and bring the occupation to an immediate end, I believe that in doing so Israel will cease to exist. I do not want to deny another people their right to freedom and self-determination, yet I do not know how that can be achieved without undermining my right to freedom and self-determination. While I am troubled by my people's behavior, I don't believe that our failure to pursue peace is the sole or even principal cause for the continued occupation. The Palestinian leadership has yet to accept my right to exist, and any unilateral withdrawal will transform the territories into a Hamas controlled launching pad for terror and missiles against which all the Iron Dome batteries in the world will not provide sufficient protection. With 80 percent of Israel transformed into Sderot and Ashkelon, Israel's ability to survive—let alone thrive—will come to an end. I am troubled because while we must and can do better, I know that doing so will not alone change our reality.

Troubled Committed and Untroubled Committed

As the glow of the 1967 Six Day War began to fade, as our hubris cracked under the near disaster of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and as the 1982 war in Lebanon came to seem morally problematic, a great many Israeli and North American Jews became “troubled committed” as well. North American Jews by and large remained within this part of the Zionist camp. But sometime after the failure of the Oslo Accords, the pain of the second Intifada, and the disappointment with the consequences of Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza in 2005, the majority of Israelis gradually began to shift to the camp of the “untroubled committed”—committed to the Zionist enterprise and the survival of Israel, but no longer troubled by questions of occupation or by disparities between Israel as it is and Israel as it should be. Israelis have come to accept that we have no peace partner, as disconcerting as this may be.

Untroubled Committed – Includes Most Israelis – Reasons:

- [1] price Palestinians pay for rejecting peace,
- [2] economically beneficial.
- [3] Places moral onus on Palestinians who reject peace
- [4] Places responsibility on Gazans who embraced Hamas

A majority of Israelis and Israeli political parties either tacitly accept or actively support the egregious behavior of some of the more extreme settlers as well as state-sponsored settlement building and expansion. For some, this is the price Palestinians must pay for saying “no” to our peace overtures. For others, it is simply an economically beneficial policy (the price of housing in settlements being a fraction of that of housing within the Green Line), which, in any event, has negligible impact on the non-existent peace process. The moral implications of the occupation do not keep them up at night. Since we offered peace and they said “no,” the moral onus of the occupation lies on the Palestinians. Most Israelis are not bothered by the predicament of Gazans. We left, and instead of building a society for the wellbeing of its inhabitants, Gazans embraced terrorists who use the territory as a periodic launching pad for attacking innocent Israeli citizens. The “untroubled committed” Israeli has all but given up on peace, content instead with peace and quiet, tempered occasionally by manageable spasms of violence. For the “untroubled committed” Israeli, until the day comes when the wolf will lie down with the lamb, we must be grateful that Israel is the wolf.

Troubled Committed – Most North American Jews – Reasons:

[1] progressive discourse and value system

[2] dissonance between liberal Jewish values and reality in Israel

As the majority of Israelis became the “untroubled committed,” most North American Jews remained “troubled committed” (even “hyper-troubled,” but as the Pew surveys demonstrated, still committed, nonetheless). At the same time, a segment of liberal Jews became “troubled *un*-committed.” For some, it was the result of a renewed embrace of a progressive universalist discourse and value system which rejects particularism and national identities. For others, the dissonance between their liberal Jewish values and the reality on the ground in Israel simply grew intolerable. In their eyes, the extended occupation made Israel no longer an ongoing experiment but a failed one.

Challenge of Troubled Uncommitted

Until recently, the “troubled uncommitted” were relatively marginal. The real fear in the American Zionist community, up to a few years ago, was to combat the growth in the “untroubled uncommitted”—those who simply had become disenfranchised and uninterested in Israel. The newfound fear, however, is the drift of the “troubled committed” toward the growing camp of the “troubled *un*committed.” The events in Sheikh Jarrah and the latest Gaza campaign served as a tipping point: the “troubled *un*committed” have entered the mainstream of Jewish and North American life and discourse. Recent surveys indicate that close to a third of American Jews believe that it is legitimate to associate Israel’s policies with apartheid.

How to Talk About Israel to Hyper-Troubled Committed

Many “troubled committed” parents do not know how to talk about Israel to their increasingly hyper-troubled children for whom being committed to Israel is no longer taken for granted. Many “troubled committed” themselves wonder whether they should become increasingly uncommitted.

What has changed, and what can we do about it?

What We Can and Cannot Control

Factors Beyond Our Control:

- [1] Israel as a Republican Partisan Issue,**
- [2] work against systemic racism in USA**
- [3] radical progressive embrace of universalism**

Some factors, of course, are beyond our control. The mutual embrace of Israel and Donald Trump has painted Israel as a partisan Republican issue, on the wrong side of most North American Jews who are liberal Democrats. Meanwhile, the campaign to uproot systemic discrimination and injustice in America, correctly supported by the liberal Jewish community, has generated a greater awareness of, and intolerance toward, systemic oppression. This has cast Israel’s 54-year-long occupation in a new and unfavorable light. Finally, the radical progressive embrace of universalism and rejection of nationalism, and the attack against white power and privilege has drawn a direct line between Black Lives Matter and Palestinian Lives Matter, and mainstreamed the criminalization of Israel. Put together, these circumstances have strengthened an American milieu that challenges Israel’s legitimacy, not to speak of its claim to being the moral victim in the conflict.

Need to Develop a Liberal Zionist Discourse and Narrative.

Yet leaving aside the doomsday predictions of the takeover of the radical progressive agenda of America and of the next generation of Jews, the future is not determined. The majority of Jews embrace their particular identity and are even proud to be Jews (95 percent, according to Pew). Support for Israel among most American and Jewish liberals is still strong. If we are to ensure a future for liberal support for Israel, we must seize those circumstances that are under our control. We can and must develop a liberal Zionist discourse and narrative which is coherent for liberal Americans and Jews.

“Blatant antisemitism is couched and whitewashed as moral ‘wokeness.’”

Problem: Most American Jews are Troubled Committed and Dominant discourse is shaped by the Untroubled Committed.

Herein lies the problem: most Americans and Jews are liberal “troubled committed.” While the official pro-Israel community embraces liberals and engages “progressives,” to use AIPAC

terminology, the dominant discourse in response to criticism of Israel's' behavior and policies is still shaped by the "untroubled committed." This discourse, which may have been adequate ten or twenty years ago, no longer addresses the troubles of today's "troubled committed." The pro-Israel community resembles the military general who is perfectly prepared to engage in the last war. We have all the "answers" for the "troubled committed" yesterday, but have very little to offer them today. What is worse: we are unaware of this. When we fail, instead of adopting new methodologies, we blame those who we want to reach, further alienating them. With our own hands, we in the pro-Israel community undermine our most fervent aims.

Problems

These are disturbing and painful times.

1. The growing delegitimization and criminalization of Israel is frightening.
2. Blatant antisemitism is couched and whitewashed as moral "wokeness";
3. universalism is increasingly seen as morally superior to particularism;
4. supporters of Israel are ostracized from progressive circles;
5. and mainstream Jewish voices are unabashedly aligning with Israel's enemies and criminalizing Israel.

At times such as these, our instincts are to circle the wagons, embrace our friends, and attack our foes. We do not want to hear about what we are doing wrong. It feels like "victim blaming." We Jews are facing unprecedented attacks, and you want to blame us for the current situation?

Need to engage with the moral criticisms directed against Israel

I do not blame us for the rise in antisemitism, nor for the normalization of anti-Zionism among progressives, nor do I believe that Israel is an apartheid state. But beyond making the case for Israel wherever ignorance and bias prevail, we must refocus our efforts and take greater responsibility for the weakening of the "troubled committed" camp. The longer we continue to avoid engaging the moral criticisms directed against Israel, the more difficult it will be for the troubled to remain committed. There is an inherent tension embedded in the status of troubled committedness. If one is troubled, why stay committed? Isn't it one's moral responsibility to act on one's troubledness? At some point, one's moral disapproval ought to lead one to break one's relationship and end one's support. "Troubled committed" ought only to be a temporary status. If it becomes permanent, it puts the moral seriousness of one's troubledness into question. If the only place where the issues of the troubled are seriously considered is amongst the un-committed camp, liberal Jews will not remain "troubled *committed*."

Two Faulty Defenses: Mainstays of the Untroubled Committed

[1] The Factual Defense

[2] The AntiSemitism Defense

Two "defenses" are regularly offered to mitigate the troubledness toward the occupation and the injustices toward Palestinians: the factual defense and the antisemitism defense. Both of these mainstays of the "un-troubled committed" discourse rest on the claim that while the moral

difficulties with the occupation are real, the situation is “complicated.” As a result, one can suspend or de-intensify one’s troubledness and extend the duration of one’s commitment.

The Factual Defense: Focus on Past rather than on the Present

The Factual Defense

In the factual defense, critics of Israel’s policies and actions are said to fail to consider the hundred years’ pattern of Arab and Palestinian aggression and rejection of any and all peace proposals. The continued occupation is said to result less from Israel’s power and its abuse than from Palestinians’ refusal to accept Israel’s legitimacy. Were Palestinians to grant that recognition, the conditions for the occupation would evaporate, and a two-state solution could be implemented. A direct line connects the ongoing and most recent Hamas missile attacks with Arab attacks in 1948, 1967, and 1973 and the ongoing terror campaigns and intifadas that have been launched against Israel since. A direct line also connects the current peace stalemate with the Arab rejection of the UN Partition Plan in 1947, the three “no’s” of the Arab League’s Khartoum Resolution in 1967 (“No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel”), and the rejection of the Oslo Accords and subsequent peace proposals (which went so far as to grant over 90% of Judea and Samaria and all of Gaza to a future, independent Palestinian state). Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, instead of advancing peace, only catalyzed further Palestinian aggression.

These facts position Israel as the victim of aggression, and portray the tragic suffering of the Palestinian people as a self-inflicted result of their rejection of peace and embrace of terror. As a result, they also serve to differentiate between the Israeli Palestinian reality and the race discourse in America.

Antisemitism Defense: Denies any moral weight to criticism of Israel

Anti-Zionism as Antisemitism

A second line of defense argues that critics of Israel are motivated not by an honest, factual assessment of the Israeli-Palestinian reality but by antisemitic sentiments. Those critics are not really troubled by what Israel *does*, but the fact that Israel *exists*—not by a particular exercise of Israel’s power, but by Jewish power *per se*. Jew-haters have no trouble accommodating the powerless Jew. For the antisemite, victimhood is the Jews’ rightful status. As long as Jews were the victims, we were tolerated. Accordingly, Zionism and Israel—which have altered the course of Jewish history, granting unprecedented power to the formerly powerless Jew—are intolerable.

Accusations of antisemitic motivations are reinforced by claims of double standards in how the so-called moral critique is applied to the Jewish state. While critiquing Israel is not in itself antisemitic, those who single out Israel for criticism (while overlooking and excusing far worse abuses of power elsewhere, including by Palestinians) draw from the age-old vilification of the

Jew as *the* personification of evil and embodiment of corruption. Israel, as a stand-in for the Jew, is demonized as *the* evil state, as the embodiment, more than any other nation on earth, of white supremacy, colonialism, privilege, and corrupt nationalism. In this view, anti-Zionism has embraced millennia-old antisemitic tropes and blood libels.

What is Wrong with these Two Defenses:

[1] Untroubled Committed Ignore the Troubled Committed

[2] Wrong Facts arguing the Wrong Case

Ignoring the Troubled

While ostensibly geared to address criticisms expressed by the “troubled committed,” the arguments from facts and antisemitism in fact serve as principal foundations for the “untroubled committed.”

1. The factual defense presumes to resolve any and all blame which is placed on Israel,
2. while the antisemitism defense denies Israel’s critics any moral weight.

For every Israeli policy alleged to be immoral, ten counterexamples are offered of Israel as a moral exemplar. If one remains nevertheless troubled, one must be either biased or ignorant.

Engaging the “troubled committed,” however, cannot entail our “conversion.” It cannot be premised on an assumption that our troubledness is the result of lack of knowledge or lack of nuance. The troubledness perseveres and is growing despite the above facts and arguments, and it is *this* fact that must be understood and addressed if liberals are to continue to be troubled while nevertheless committed to Israel.

**The Facts used in these two defenses are not relevant to the current situation.
They answer the wrong questions**

The Wrong Facts

Why then do American liberals continue to be troubled despite the facts that the “untroubled” find so compelling? It is not that the facts are wrong. In fact, I believe that the facts as outlined are correct and compelling. And yet they are the wrong facts.

The Question is not why Israel controls the Palestinians in Judea, Samaria and Gaza but how.

The factual defense addresses yesterday’s debates, not the issues which liberal critics today regard as Israel’s current moral deficiencies. Principally, it does not address the critical fact that growing numbers of the “troubled committed” tolerated the occupation and discrimination against Palestinians in Judea and Samaria and Gaza only so long as it could be classified as temporary. Regardless of Palestinian complicity in its continuation, the duration of the occupation, coupled with Israel’s tacit and at times overt support for it, has moved many “troubled committed” to view it as a *de facto* permanent reality. As such, the absence of full and

equal rights for Palestinians can no longer be excused or ignored as a “temporary” reality. The discrimination and the Occupation which enables it, for an ever-growing number of “troubled committed,” must simply end now. Increasing, the “troubled committed” are asking whether their commitment to Israel can be sustained if Israel’s survival depends on adopting features of a non-democratic state.

In addition, the history of Palestinian rejection of peace does not exculpate a litany of claimed occupation power abuses which are unrelated to Israel’s legitimate security concerns:

1. the mistreatment and daily humiliations suffered by Palestinians living under occupation;
2. failure to adequately prevent or punish settler groups who terrorize Palestinian farmers;
3. use of natural resources in the West Bank to the disproportionate advantage of settlements;
4. unfair and biased treatment by the military judicial system;
5. and any number of other claims of underlying inequality and maltreatment of Palestinians.

If the occupation tragically needs to continue until such time that the Palestinians embrace peace, Israel’s behavior as an occupier still needs to radically change, now.

Even if the facts explain why a peace treaty has yet to be reached, they neither address nor alleviate the fact that Israel has failed for over a decade to *advance any peace proposals*. The fact that Israel offered peace and a two-state solution, and the Palestinians said “no,” should not prevent Israel from offering again. If one internalizes the immorality of the occupation, one must actively engage every effort to end it.

“An asymmetry of power is not morally problematic per se. It becomes problematic when it intoxicates the powerful.”

Israel Policy Undermines Peace Negotiations – and what Israel could do to Support Peace Negotiations

[1] Undermine

- [a] settlement policy,**
- [b] empowering of Hamas,**
- [c] disempowering PA**

[2] Support

- [a] dismantle settlements distant from Green Line**
- [b] tax liabilities to people who choose to reside in those settlements.**

Far from pursuing a peace process, Israel has actively worked to undermine future negotiations by settling hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens throughout Judea and Samaria. By empowering Hamas and undermining the Palestinian Authority, Israel has reinforced the status quo narrative that “Israel has no peace partner.” While Israel cannot unilaterally bring the occupation to an end, it surely can conduct itself in a more humane and equitable way. Instead of building more settlements, Israel could use resources to dismantle settlements outside of the settlement blocks adjacent to the Green Line, *now*. Instead of offering tax incentives to those who live in settlements, it can impose tax liabilities on all who live in settlements outside these

main settlement blocks, *now*. If the cause of the stalemate is Palestinian intransigence alone, then Israel could and should be preparing the grounds, *now*, in anticipation of a Palestinian transformation. Its failure to do so challenges the “factual” assumption that Palestinians are the cause of the extended occupation.

Untroubled defenders of Israel fail to internalize that the “troubled committed” are no longer merely troubled by a particular policy which can be countered with multiple facts pointing to moral sensitivity, but by a larger pattern of abuses made possible by Israel’s disproportionate power.

The False Promise of Military Power – Short Term Tactics Undermine Long –Term Strategy

An asymmetry of power is not morally problematic *per se*. It becomes problematic when it intoxicates the powerful. Power is so easy to use, so readily available, and the results so guaranteed, that more difficult long-term strategies go unexplored. More and more of the “troubled committed” wonder whether Israel has done all that it can to end the occupation and its subsequent abuses and to prevent—not merely deter—the next round of Hamas missile attacks.

Narrative- Telling the Story – Strengths and Weaknesses

Narrative Power

A central manifestation of a power imbalance is the belief that you alone have the power to shape the narrative of the conflict. From Israel’s perspective,

1. each round of violence in Gaza begins with a Hamas attack,
2. continues with legitimate Israeli acts of self-defense, and
3. ends only when Israel concludes that it has met its defensive objectives.

In this narrative, when Hamas missiles are fired on civilian centers, bombing Gaza is a morally justified act of self-defense. The only open question is whether Israel has fought the just war justly.

Current Question: Was the Recent War in Gaza Justified? Was Israel responding to an attack or did Israel provoke the Palestinians by its actions the imminent evictions in Sheik Jarrah and response at the Al-Aqsa Mosque?

In past Gaza operations, Israel’s legitimacy in defending itself against Hamas’s aggression went unquestioned. The focus of the criticism was limited to how the war was waged. The UN Goldstone Report on Operation Cast Lead in 2008 serves as a case in point. During the recent bombing campaign against Hamas’s command-and-control infrastructure, the disproportionate number of children killed in relation to the overall number of casualties drew vociferous criticism. However, what changed in the current discourse was that the criticism of Israel’s

actions was not limited to the way Israel fought the war (known in jurisprudence as *jus in bello*), but whether Israel was justified in engaging in war in the first place (*jus ad bellum*).

The current critique rejects the Israeli narrative, in particular the origins of the latest flare-up. The Gaza conflict was widely read as coming in the wake of imminent evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and the police response at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Consequently, for many of the “troubled committed,” the story now begins with Israel perpetuating the occupation and relying on its disproportionate power to “solve” its problems, as evidenced in the events which preceded the war.

First Occupation War?

Many American liberals saw the recent Gaza campaign as the first “Occupation war,” i.e., as part of a continued unjust occupation, and not merely as a localized and therefore just response to Hamas’s missile attacks. For them, if Israel wants to claim the moral high ground and sustain their commitment, it must show through words and deeds that it uses power as an instrument of *last resort*.

Israel does not have to be perfect; no nation is. Individuals are also capable of distinguishing between a country and its current government. They do so in America and can be expected to do so with Israel. However, there has to be a belief that Israel shares their commitment to peace and human rights, that Israel has moral aspirations beyond maintaining mere peace and quiet.

For increasing numbers of “troubled committed,” this belief is fast waning. We see Israel ceding the moral high ground

1. by no longer raising the mantle of a peace process;
2. by putting up hindrances to a future peaceful resolution instead of dismantling obstacles;
3. and by tolerating and institutionalizing power abuses toward Palestinians.

IDF spokespersons argue that the army takes unparalleled measures to limit civilian casualties. This may be factually true and verifiable. But “knocking” on the roofs of a building before destroying it in order to give advance warning to occupants does not justify bombing these buildings in the first place. These are the questions that the “troubled committed” are asking. The factual defense, no matter how accurate, simply addresses questions that Israel faced at another time.

New Challenge – Not legal – factual but moral – intuitive

Beyond the Requirement of the Law

The argument from facts fails to engage the “troubled committed” for yet another reason. Factual and counter-factual evidence carry weight in a court of law or in a graduate seminar, but not in the public square and on social media where the challenge is to pass the moral intuition litmus test of the average person.

Take, for example, Israel’s attempt to evict a number of Palestinian families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, a predominantly Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Defenders of Israel’s actions arm themselves with a litany of facts that do indeed complexify the case: the Jordanians who expropriated this territory in 1948 never transferred ownership to the Palestinian families who remained tenants; the Palestinian tenants refused repeated offers to pay nominal rent to retain their protected tenancy status and avoid eviction; the Jewish ownership of the property is well substantiated; and so on. But even if all the above is true, the overarching picture that emerges from the Sheikh Jarrah case—the litmus of the “average person”—is one of underlying inequality: it is far easier for Jewish owners than for Palestinian owners to claim property under Israel’s legal system. If after the 1948 war, Israel assumed that most prior land claims of those who were evicted are no longer valid, this must apply equally to Jew and Arab alike.

**Need to Go Beyond the Requirements of the Law:
What Happens When Legal Distinctions are Disconnected from Morals**

“We need to separate the identity of the critic from the content of the criticism.”

Jewish tradition teaches that two thousand years ago Jerusalem (and with it Jewish sovereignty) was destroyed because Jews held fast to the law and refused to adhere to moral standards that go beyond the requirements of the law. We are repeating the same mistakes today. Legal argumentation aside, a moral stench rises from Sheikh Jarrah, and Israel’s defenders who fail to engage in this broader discussion come across as morally obtuse. Legalistic distinctions lose both the attention and the respect of the “troubled committed.” Instead of helping Israel’s case, they reinforce the argument that Israel has replaced its moral compass with the lens of power, that for Israel “might makes right.”

Do not use antisemitism as an excuse to avoid questions of morality

The Closing of the Jewish Mind

Like the argument from facts, accusations of antisemitism, however profoundly compelling for the “untroubled committed,” do little to alleviate the concerns of the troubled. Now, it is true that some of Israel’s critics, especially the most anti-Zionist, undeniably invoke antisemitic tropes. Yet it is also both false and counterproductive to paint with a broad antisemitic brush liberal Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike, many of whom are staunch supporters of Israel with long records of alliances with Jews. In fact, the “troubled committed” hear the antisemitism argument as an attempt to stifle and censor discourse.

The “troubled committed,” like many liberals, are motivated not by antisemitic bias but by moral concern. It is neither true nor effective to brand the critiques as antisemitic. If we attempt to disqualify Israel’s critics instead of engaging with the content of their criticisms, we communicate fear: that we cannot defend ourselves in an open public sphere; that the “truth” we

are trying to hide will get out; that we know that we are in the wrong and can only prevail through *ad hominem* attacks.

Antisemitism, from multiple directions, once again poses a threat to our wellbeing. Many of Israel’s critics conceal their antisemitic impulses behind a veneer of moral discourse. But we must distinguish between actual antisemites and those who are patently not. We need to undermine the former and engage with the latter. Above all, we need to separate the identity of the critic from the content of the criticism. Our ability to maintain friends and engage liberal Americans and Jews depends on it.

Danger of Fatalism

Fatalism as the Last Line of Defense

These defenses were problematic for years, but their inadequacies have now reached a tipping point. Today, very few of the young “troubled committed” are open to even listening to the old arguments which purport to “justify” the occupation or explain why it is “complicated.” They are no longer interested in hearing the very “explanations” which have come to define much of the North American Zionist discourse.

False Explanations:

- [1] American Progressives
- [2] Fact Free Politically Bifurcated America
- [3] Social Media

Rather than reassess their arguments, increasing numbers of pro-Israel Jews are resorting to fatalism. Some argue that the problem is neither with Israel and its policies, nor with Israel education or discourse, but with America. Progressive opponents of Israel’s right to exist have declared war on America and nationalism and everything that they stand for; they will not be satisfied until Israel is dismantled. The delegitimization of Israel is just a byproduct of a larger progressive narrative, and unless this narrative is uprooted and defeated, support for Israel will come to an end.

Others argue that in a bifurcated America—where political affiliation is the dominant criteria for identity—arguments and truths no longer matter. As the Democratic party is being taken over by anti-Israel progressive forces, so the argument goes, nothing Israel or the pro-Israel community says or does will matter. Israel is simply on the wrong side of the political alignments of liberal North Americans and Jews.

Still others point to the destructive forces of social media, where victory and righteousness is assured to anyone who can encapsulate their arguments into a few sentences and who have the right “influencers” on their side. The “complicated” reality of Israel, and the facts which support it, can never prevail in this type of discourse.

There is much truth in all the above, but nothing to absolve us in the pro-Israel community of our failings, and our need to chart a new direction. For the fatalists, all is lost until forces far greater than us intervene. In the meantime, we must hunker down, circle the wagons, engage the “untroubled committed” who “get it,” and await another era, which will hopefully arrive before it is too late. In the meantime, Israel should ignore the criticisms of the liberal “troubled committed,” seek other allies, and simply do what it needs to do in order to survive.

Liberal Jews Need a Liberal Zionism

“Liberal Jews will not embrace Zionism unless it is a liberal Zionism, and will not embrace Israel unless Israel embraces liberal values.”

As a Jew and as a Zionist, I do not do fatalism. If I did, then I would have bought into the narrative of our demise two millennia ago. Jews have faced far more dire conditions and threats. If the story of the Jewish people stands for anything it is that ideas and values matter, and that a people committed to them can—and does—bend the arc of history. To be a Jew is to take responsibility for defining and indeed elevating reality, and this conviction itself is critical to achieving this end. Today, that responsibility means not giving up on the vast majority of American Jewry, not giving up on the Jewish people.

Liberal Zionist Agenda

Proposing a Liberal Zionist Agenda

Liberal Jews will be susceptible to the pull of arguments which criminalize Israel so long as the North American Israeli conversation fails to embrace liberal concerns. The association of Israel with apartheid policies is not the result of an analysis of the meaning of apartheid and a careful evaluation of Israel’s reality. Nor is it principally the biproduct of inadequate public relations. Rather, it results in no small measure from the atmosphere which Israel and its allies have created in which Israel is portrayed principally as *Start-Up Nation* and not *Values Nation*. Where one’s power as distinct from one’s values is one’s calling card, when one does not lead with clear moral commitments, one cannot be surprised that others buy into critiques of one’s moral standing.

Liberal Jews in North America will not embrace Zionism unless it is a liberal Zionism, and will not embrace Israel unless Israel embraces liberal values. That does not mean that Israel needs to mirror American liberal values, or that it needs to embody the best of these values. Given our distinct geo-political realities, there will always be differences in both ideology and policy between Israelis and North Americans. In addition, as most liberal Americans and Jews have come to experience, America itself does not always embody these values; for that matter, no country on earth fully does. Liberal Jews must believe, however, that there exists a core affinity between Zionism, Israel, and basic liberal aspirations.

6 Components of North American Liberal Zionist Agenda

- 1. Accept right and need of the Jewish people to a Jewish state in the land of Israel**
- 2. Embrace Israel's mission to be**
 - [a] a safe homeland for the Jewish people &**
 - [b] a liberal democratic state**
- 3. Peaceful resolution of conflict between Palestinian and Israeli people which guarantees their basic human rights to live in freedom, dignity, peace & security**
- 4. Open discourse about Israel beyond defense of Israel to our moral expectations of Israel**
- 5. Open dialogue about Israel that promotes critical thinking on all issues pertaining to Israel's political, social, economic and moral well-being**
- 6. Allow for a discussion of power and how it should and should not be employed**

As a result, a North American liberal Zionist agenda needs to embrace six components:

1. As liberal Zionists, we need to first of all embrace Zionism and support the right and need of the Jewish people to a Jewish state in the land of Israel. Alongside envisioning Israel as it should be, we must recognize the moral challenges of life in the Middle East and the history of the conflict. Expecting Israel to aspire to the moral high ground does not require that the country embrace policies that undermine its right to self-defense.
2. We embrace Israel's mission to act as a strong, safe, and vibrant homeland for the Jewish people, and at the same time function as a democratic state committed to equal rights, freedom, and dignity of all citizens regardless of national or religious identity, Jew and Arab alike. As a Jewish democratic state, Israel must also be committed to a religiously diverse public sphere which guarantees citizens' right to make independent choices in accordance with their beliefs and conscience.
3. We must commit to a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian conflict in a way that enables the Palestinian and Israeli peoples to fulfill their inalienable human rights and live in freedom, dignity, peace and security; and to correcting the moral shortcomings of the Occupation as long as it continues. Only a constant pursuit of a political resolution, a dramatic shrinking of the immoral footprint of the occupation, a relentless concern for the human rights of Palestinians, and the implementation of a comprehensive policy which lays foundations on the ground for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, will justify viewing the occupation as a temporary condition. A failure to validate this classification endangers the very essence of Zionism and the legitimacy of Israel.
4. The discourse around Israel must shift its basic premise: we must focus not only on a defense of Israel but also on our moral expectations from Israel. Rather than being seen as problems that need to be answered, moral criticisms of Israel's policies and actions need to demand attention and concern. That is not to say that we must adopt every criticism, no matter how misconstrued, but that the default position is not to reject

criticism as false or antisemitic. The core of the Zionist discourse must envision Israel as it should be rather than defend Israel as it is and to see moral debate as an essential aspect of a commitment to Israel.

5. We must relax the manifold rules that govern what Israel discourse is allowed and what not; when and where one is allowed to express one’s opinions; who one can talk with and who not; who is in and who out. We must likewise get over the debate regarding the right of North Americans to “tell” Israelis what to do. Criticism does not entail telling others what to do but telling others what you think, and challenging others to recalibrate and reconsider. Telling others what you think is also not the same as coercing them. It is about challenging *them* to rethink *their* decisions. Criticism which does not entail coercion is a core expression of engagement with Israel and commitment to Jewish peoplehood. The moment it stops, the result is not greater loyalty but greater alienation.
6. We must articulate a new narrative of power that seriously engages both with power’s useful purposes and with its potential and actual abuses. A liberal Jewish narrative of power rejects the vilification of power *per se*, and instead embraces it as an essential aspect of our humanity. Our purpose as human beings, as articulated in the Book of Genesis, is to rule the world and master it, to preserve and build it, and to bring about *tikkun olam*. To that end, God endowed us with the ability to marshal power for the good of the world and all its inhabitants. Yet as Abraham models in the story of Sodom, power—even divine power—must be subjected to the principles of justice. “Shall the judge of all the earth not deal justly?” (Genesis 18:25). As Jews, it is our task to emulate Abraham and constantly serve as critics of power and the powerful. A liberal narrative of power celebrates power as a gift that enabled the founding and ongoing survival of Israel, but at the same time takes great care to avoid succumbing to the intoxications of power.

A Jewish narrative of power embraces the rabbinic teaching of Ben Zoma who said: “Who is wise? One who learns from every person. ... Who is powerful? One who is able to control their inclinations. Who is wealthy? One who is satisfied with what they own. ... Who is honorable? One who honors other human beings.” (Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1)

A Question of Time

We are the sum of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. We the “troubled committed” need a story of Zionism and Israel that can engage and inspire us. Liberal Zionism will not be sustained on the study of the history of Israel, nor even on experiencing Israel first-hand, and certainly not by the factual narratives put forward by the “troubled committed” and the “untroubled committed.” For the “troubled committed,” the story of Zionism must be a fundamentally liberal Jewish story.

Conclusion:

[1] Israel is a real place but we can envision a future better than the current reality

[2] Liberal Zionism needs a way to talk about and work for a liberal Israel

[3] An il-liberal Israel will lose the support of liberal Zionists – the majority of North American Jews

[4] Cultural battle over (1) identity of Zionism. (2) future character of Israel, (3) nature of Jewish peoplehood

Israel is not a dream or a story, of course; it is a reality. The country's reality will in the end determine the content of the story we tell about it. In the long run, liberal Zionism cannot persevere with its liberal story if Israel does not aspire to be a liberal Jewish state and does not itself embrace the basic liberal Zionist policies outlined above. Liberal Zionists in Israel and North America, fellow “troubled committed,” are waging a cultural battle not merely over the identity of Zionism but over the future character of Israel. North American Jews need to develop a sophisticated and effective strategy of engagement and involvement in shaping the future of Israel, the parameters of which requires an essay of its own. Minimally, North American Jews need to engage and develop Israeli partners and together, persuade “untroubled committed” Israelis to join (or rejoin) the “troubled committed” camp. This is a battle that we cannot afford to lose. Winning this battle, however, will take time.

How long can we continue to tell a liberal Zionist story which is at odds with the reality of Israel? Is it too late to construct a viable and compelling space for engagement with liberal Zionism in North America despite Israel's current policies?

Our commitment to Jewish peoplehood demands that we take a leap of faith and strive under the assumption that it is not too late. We cannot afford the luxury of pessimism. If we embrace liberal Zionism with a clear and consistent voice, I choose to believe that we still have time.

Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas is a print and digital journal published by the [Shalom Hartman Institute](#) that promotes informed conversations and thoughtful disagreement about issues that matter to the Jewish community.

