

## **Dear Rabbi,**

With everything in Israel and Gaza recently, I'm having a hard time talking to certain friends. I used to think most Americans understood that Israel was one of the Good Guys : the scrappy little Jewish nation in the Middle East that was constantly standing up to bullies and doing something every Jew could take pride in, no matter where they lived.

Now I hear people trying to tell me that Israel is a bully, or that Americans shouldn't feel so much love for a country halfway across the world.

So how should I talk about Israel in times like these? I know what I feel, and I don't want the haters to control this conversation, but it's hard finding the right words.

*- Distressed in the Diaspora*

## **Dear Distressed,**

There's a famous opening line in a poem by the medieval poet Yehuda Halevi: "My heart is in the East, and I -- I am at the edge of the West."

The challenge of having a great love for Zion while being distant from it is one many American Jews know well, but today that distance is complicated.

Some of us have spent time in Israel but choose not to live there ourselves. Some of us would love to travel to Israel some day, but have not managed to do so yet. Some of us identify strongly with almost everything about Israel, but we find the language barrier of Hebrew to be alienating or intimidating.

And some of us feel separated from Israel because of feelings or opinions we have about Arab-Israeli relations, or about Israel's government.

I will not tell you that there is a right way to relate to Israel. It sounds as though you love Israel in some sense of the word, and so I'd urge you to keep this in mind when you speak to your friends: love isn't always rational.

You could try to win arguments by explaining just how many private Israeli citizens (of all religions and backgrounds, you would add) are victimized when Hamas indiscriminately fires rockets from Gaza. And you could tell your friends about the effectiveness of the Iron Dome at preventing casualties in Israel.

But that wouldn't convey your love. And it probably wouldn't do much to win them over, either.

Your friends who are critical of Israel probably have their own illogical feelings that make that criticism feel right or justified. If you find yourself locked in a dispute with them about Israel's virtues and flaws, ask yourself a question: Is this person really my friend, or just someone I know casually? If it's a relationship you aren't invested in, then you don't really have to do much.

(Though ranting and raving in response probably won't lead anyone to believe that your position is one worth trying to understand.) If it's a closer friendship, you have an opportunity to bring your friends a novel perspective -- not about policies, but about people.

Talk about people you know or have known personally: Jewish Israelis, and maybe non-Jewish Israelis or Palestinians as well. Remind them that Israel is a diverse country and that the dynamics between Israelis and Palestinians are more complicated than many people in America realize.

Make a real effort as well to listen. Show that you are willing to hear things you disagree with, without getting defensive or going on the attack.

Urge them to visit Israel, and to travel to Palestinian communities in the West Bank as well. People should be educated on subjects about which they feel passionate, and direct experience is a powerful teacher.

And in like measure, do what you can to grow your own knowledge and experience as well. Try to find a diversity of sources and perspectives. Read up on the history of Israel, the pre-State period, and early Zionism.

Visit. Or chat with friends in Israel. Or both.

Lastly, be prepared to say: "I want to give you the benefit of the doubt, but what you just said sounds biased to me," or: "...feels hurtful to me," or even: "...sounds antisemitic to me." There can be a lot of reasons for saying such things, but the most obvious is a criticism of Israel that someone refuses to make of other nations -- such as even questioning its basic right to exist.

Getting to this place may mean you and your friend have to put the conversation on pause or change topics. But it can also help your friend to understand that you want to hear them out and that you want to do that from a perspective that treats all parties fairly. If you run out of common ground and shared goals for the conversation, you won't really be able to continue in a fruitful direction.

This kind of a break invites you both to do what you can to reflect and learn before you try to get back to talking about Israel again on more solid ground -- which can only be a good thing for you, for your friend, and for Israel.

*- Rabbi Noah S. Ferro*