

**Rabbi Kenneth Chasen**

**“Us, Not They”**

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It’s a brave new world when it comes to communication – and in that world, some rabbis are driving the bus, and some rabbis are doing their best just to hang on for the ride. I am decidedly in the latter group. In fact, sometimes, I have attempted to stand in the way of the bus – but we know what happens to people who stand in front of buses.

I have a Facebook account that I check at least once every three weeks. I do not yet tweet. I was the last person I know to get a cell phone – resisted it for as long as I could. And then there is email. A lovely invention. Designed to lighten the workload by simplifying communication, email is the one thing to unite rabbis of every stripe, in every movement, and on every continent. We all hate it. And why? Among many reasons, email has encouraged a whole new brand of contact with your rabbi. It goes something like this: “Rabbi, I am attaching a fascinating article that I thought you’d like to read. It’s a little long – 63 pages – but excellently written. Please send me your thoughts about it. And no need to rush... anytime today would be fine.”

My email includes daily homework assignments sent to me by 700 families. And I love to read, but I must confess that it’s hard to keep up. Still, I can learn very speedily what’s on my congregation’s mind by noting the articles you all send me – especially when you’re all sending me the same article.

This past June, an unprecedented number of Leo Baeckers sent me an article from the New York Review of Books written by Peter Beinart, the 39-year-old former editor of the New Republic, one of America’s most accomplished journalists and authors, and an active synagogue Jew. Entitled “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” the article offers what I consider to be the most forceful and credible critique ever of the Jewish community’s effort to inculcate an attachment to Israel among American Jews Beinart’s age and younger – those in their 20’s and 30’s.

The Jewish establishment has long lamented the lack of loyalty to Israel among Generations X and Y – and Beinart offers a damning rationale for that disloyalty. His central contention,

based skillfully on the research of American Judaism's own demographers, is that our community teaches its young people to think like liberals – to question authority, to see the power of military force as limited, to defend human rights. But then, when it comes to Israel, Beinart writes, “the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead.”

Beinart went directly at the main engines of American Zionism. He wrote: “If the leaders of groups like AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations do not change course, they will wake up one day to find a younger, Orthodox-dominated, Zionist leadership whose naked hostility to Arabs and Palestinians scares even them, and a mass of secular American Jews who range from apathetic to appalled.” Asserted Beinart, “Saving liberal Zionism in the United States – so that American Jews can help save liberal Zionism in Israel – is the great American Jewish challenge of our age.”

These words sent shock waves through Jewish America. I attended a speech by Beinart at a local synagogue not two weeks after publication of his article. Hundreds of local Jewish leaders of every ideological persuasion were there – and the facilitator nearly had to remove the most uncontrollable objectors from the room. They were threatened. One of the American Jewish community's best – a young, broadly published journalist... an ardent supporter of Israel... a Jew who loves going to his Orthodox synagogue and standing for causes Jews embrace – used his platform of credibility to call out the very institutions that had, in some significant part, produced him.

I am here tonight to tell you – Beinart's not wrong. For the past decade, the American Jewish community has bemoaned the disinterest of young Jews in defending Israel on college campuses. To be sure, the research is clear. Here's just one example of many: in 2003, Republican pollster Frank Luntz was hired by a group of leading Jewish philanthropists to meet with young Jews and explore their predispositions to Zionism. Wrote Luntz, “Six times we have brought Jewish youth together... to talk about their Jewishness and connection to Israel. Six times the topic of Israel did not come up until it was prompted. Six times these Jewish youth used the word ‘they’ rather than ‘us’ to describe the situation.” Indeed, the only group of young American Jews who seem, statistically, to care about Israel as their parents and grandparents did is the Orthodox – the ones whose theology and ideology don't war with the realities they see in the modern Jewish state. Left unchecked, this trend would seem to lead right into the abyss that Beinart described.

This past October, I participated on the much-publicized Los Angeles Rabbi Mission to Israel. Eighteen of LA's leading rabbis, from all religious movements, traveling together, meeting with top-level officials and demonstrating, despite our differences, that we share a deep bond with the land and people of Israel. And there was plenty of solidarity demonstrated, but that

doesn't mean that our differences were invisible. The most memorable exchange took place on the bus, as another young rabbi and I conversed with Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, about whether the emergence of J Street as a new, progressive Israel lobby in the U.S. was a good or bad thing. Rabbi Hier, as you might imagine, is not on the J Street Rabbinic Cabinet. So I argued, "Whether you agree with J Street or not, how can thousands of young Jews suddenly showing passion about Israel's fate be a bad thing? Before J Street, they couldn't have cared less about Israel. Now, at least, they are in the conversation." Rabbi Hier shook his head and counseled his younger colleagues: "With AIPAC," he reasoned, "senators and representatives know where to go to find out how to support Israel. What happens when a senator from Wisconsin is visited by an AIPAC lobbyist telling him to do one thing, and then an hour later, a J Street lobbyist tells him to do something else?" Said Rabbi Hier, "This division will end America's longstanding support for Israel."

So I asked him whether AIPAC might consider incorporating the most worthy advocacy points of J Street in order to win young Jews and perhaps make peace in the process. Rabbi Hier said that AIPAC's mission is only to advocate for what the current government of Israel seeks, regardless of that government's politics or objectives. The goal is to get the American government to stand behind the Israeli government.

I suppose I'm still young enough to be tweaked by that kind of thinking. The American Jewish community taught me, growing up, that I should never support any government's behavior that indiscriminately. I was certainly taught in religious school not to support America's government in such a lockstep fashion. Why would supporting Israel's government that way make any more sense?

I'm a bit old for Beinart's focus group, but not too old to get what he means when he writes: "The heads of AIPAC and the Presidents' Conference should ask themselves what Israel's leaders would have to do or say to make them scream 'no.'... If the line has not yet been crossed, where is the line?" Is there a line at all?

Today's young American Jews aren't going to wait for organized Judaism's answer. For them, there is a line, wherever each of us may draw it. There always needs to be a line. So if the establishment plans to continue to define "support for Israel" as "support for Israel no matter what," the young Jews are not getting on that bus. And in a few years' time, a bus filled almost exclusively with Orthodox devotees will speak for Israel in this country.

So Beinart is not wrong. But I am also here tonight to say – neither is Beinart entirely right. He concludes his article by hoping that today's Jewish youth will fashion "an uncomfortable Zionism, a Zionism angry at what Israel risks becoming, and in love with what it still could be." A fine aspiration. But then, in his final sentence, he adds: "Let's hope they care enough to try." An ironic conclusion – since his article proposes nothing about what actually might *make*

them care about Israel enough to try. I'm not quite sure where Beinart sees that love of Israel coming from. Does he expect that institutional support for the critique of Israel will, by itself, inspire the critics to fall in love with the country they're criticizing?

Perhaps this is where Beinart is himself already too invested in Israel to get it. He's a Jewish insider... an Orthodox synagogue-goer who loves Israel deeply, and his criticism is drawn from that love. But the young people he's afraid we're losing possess no such love. To them, Israel is "they," not "us." And Israelis know it – which is why they're not so interested in listening.

This is the failure of the American Jewish left. Somewhere along the line, Israel's harshest Jewish critics in the U.S. stopped measuring their success by counting how many minds they had changed or how much closer to peace they had actually emboldened the Israeli people to venture. It was enough simply to decry Israel's failures, and to do so without any demonstration of concern for the Israeli Jews living each day with dangers to their lives and property that most of us would not tolerate for even a single day.

You may remember that I visited Israel immediately following the Second Lebanon War in 2006. While driving through the north of Israel, seeing scores of bombed-out buildings and the residue of Hezbollah rockets in hospitals and schools and people's backyards, we stopped to pick up a Joint Distribution Committee relief worker on the street. He needed a ride to provide care to another bombing victim along our route. I looked, and I saw the eyes of an old friend. Gideon was a fellow song leader at a Reform Jewish summer camp many years ago. Grew up right here in LA. Learned his Jewish values at a Reform Sunday School, just like me. And then he moved about thirteen years ago to Israel. I hadn't seen him in all that time, and now here we were, sitting on a bus together in Israel in the aftermath of a bloody war.

I told him how things were back home in LA. He told me about the hardship of the Israelis he was rescuing in the north. And I felt compelled to share the unhappiness about the war that was spreading through the progressive community in the states. And Gideon just shook his head, and said, "You know, I can't even bother listening to that. I've got kids with post-traumatic stress to deal with – kids who survived a Hezbollah bomb landing in their living room. This situation may look simple from Bel Air, but it's a little more complicated from up close. Please bring your congregants to come see us," he urged. "We're always ready to listen, but we need to know first that the person doing the talking cares whether we live or die."

Now, this is not some hardened ultra-Orthodox ideologue living on a settlement in Kiryat Arba. This is a young man who taught peace songs to our temple kids at Jewish summer camp... who made *aliyah* to help create the Israel of our highest ideals. If he's not listening to a critique from the left, then nobody's listening to critiques from the left – and given the importance of those critiques in ensuring Israel's future, that is a failure the left must own and transcend.

It can only be done by once again making Israel “us” and not “them.” It’s what any human receiving criticism needs in order to hear and accept the critique. Nobody has said it more cogently than New York Times columnist Tom Friedman did exactly one month ago. He described a new Israeli documentary entitled, “Precious Life.” It’s the story of four-month-old Mohammed from Gaza, who suffers from a rare immune deficiency. The Israeli filmmaker documents the effort which brings the infant from Gaza to an Israeli hospital for a lifesaving \$55,000 operation, which is funded singlehandedly by an Israeli Jew whose own son was killed while serving in the army.

A moving story. And it becomes unexpectedly more moving when the baby’s Palestinian mother blurts out her hope that her son, now saved, will grow up to be a suicide bomber. The filmmaker is so devastated by this revelation that he temporarily stops making the movie – a film which was intentionally convoluted, in deference to the convolution of the conflict itself is. Indeed, the very doctor who saved the baby’s life was called for military reserve duty in Gaza in the middle of the movie.

So maybe the situation in Israel is a little more complicated than we like to think it is from where we sit in this sanctuary. Tom Friedman reasons, “There are two kinds of criticism. Constructive criticism,” he writes, “starts by making clear: ‘I know what world you are living in.’ I know the Middle East is a place where Sunnis massacre Shiites in Iraq, Iran kills its own voters, Syria allegedly kills the Prime Minister next door, Turkey hammers the Kurds, and Hamas engages in indiscriminate shelling... I know all of that. But Israel’s behavior, at times, makes matters worse – for Palestinians and Israelis.” Says Friedman, “If you convey to Israelis that you understand the world they’re living in, and then criticize, they’ll listen.”

But, Friedman continues, “Destructive criticism closes Israeli ears. It says to Israelis: There is no context that could explain your behavior, and your wrongs are so uniquely wrong that they overshadow all others. Destructive critics,” he argues, “dismiss Gaza as an Israeli prison, without ever mentioning that had Hamas decided – after Israel unilaterally left Gaza – to turn it into Dubai rather than Tehran, Israel would have behaved differently, too. Destructive criticism only empowers the most destructive elements in Israel to argue that nothing Israel does matters, so why change?”

Friedman concludes by challenging us: “How about everybody take a deep breath, pop a copy of ‘Precious Life’ into your DVD players, watch this documentary about the real Middle East, and if you still want to be a critic (as I do), be a constructive one. A lot more Israelis and Palestinians will listen to you.”

I doubt that Peter Beinart expects the next generation of American Jews will fall in love with what Israel still could be unless Israel actually becomes what it still could be. And therein lies

the hole in his argument. In order for Beinart's vision of an uncomfortable Zionism, responsive to critical voices, to inculcate a love of Israel in young American Jews, the critique actually has to work. It has to contribute to creating an Israel the young people will be ready to love – a transformed Israel, living in peace with its Palestinian neighbors. But the critique can't work unless Israelis are able to hear it. They have to trust that it comes from someone who sees them as "us," not some loathsome "they."

It's the difference between talking peace and bringing peace – between saying what you think is right and saying what you think will work – and fortunately, our Jewish tradition teaches us how to do it. It is the ancient rabbinic principle of *mipnei darkhei shalom* – that there are specific actions that we should take not because they are necessarily "right"... we do them strictly because they foster peace.

An example... at a time when Jews mostly resented non-Jews due to their brutal persecution, the *Mishnah* still instructed Jews to care for the non-Jewish sick and to provide *tzedakah* for the non-Jewish hungry. Why? *Mipnei darkhei shalom* – because doing so acknowledges the other guy's need, which promotes peace and mutual understanding.

Another example... have you ever wondered why a *kohein*, a descendent of the ancient priests, is given the first *aliyah* at a traditional shul, ahead of all others? We assume it's because Judaism assigns the *kohein* superior status, but no. The reason is *mipnei darkhei shalom* – the priest feels entitled to the preferential treatment, and since it was determined not to cost the community anything important, for the sake of maintaining peace, it was given to him.

The general principle: If someone has an expectation of a particular honor or deference or demonstration of respect, and there is no overarching reason not to extend it to him, you do it *mipnei darkhei shalom*... because that's how peace is made.

I'm not sure when exactly it was that the Jewish guidebook on peacemaking disappeared from the Jewish discourse on peacemaking. But that disappearance goes a long way toward explaining the failure of both left and right to incorporate the other's truth where Israel is concerned into an advocacy that actually holds any hope of changing minds – and subsequently changing Israel's future.

The right is so determined to uphold the status quo that it ignores all those young Jews that Beinart describes – in fact, it ignores the overwhelming majority of non-Orthodox American Jews of any age, who know that Israel can't survive indefinitely without taking some huge chances to separate from the Palestinians. *Mipnei darkhei shalom* – to foster understanding and respect between the Jews of the world, and to guide Israel's Jews toward courageous action – it is time for the right to choose productivity over ideological purity.

The left has its own stubbornness to shed. By choosing a voice of advocacy that ignores the complexity of life – and death – in Israel, the progressive world has ended up locked in a cage of irrelevancy, helpless to change the very minds both in Israel and in America that would otherwise be open to changing. It has treated empathy for Israelis as some sort of sign of moral weakness, as opposed to a humane tool for opening minds and hearts. So the left continues to talk amongst itself, while the beat goes on, uninterrupted. *Mipnei darkhei shalom* – if you have something important to say, and you believe passionately that it can save lives, how do you justify saying it in a way that guarantees it will be routinely dismissed? Does honoring the listener’s truth figure in your strategy for getting heard?

We gather to greet this new year at a time of noteworthy promise in the Middle East. At last, Israeli and Palestinian leaders are talking to each other again – only this time, the level of readiness for a Palestinian state is truly without precedent. Most of you already know about my recent trip to Ramallah, where I met with Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, the man chiefly responsible for creating a successful de facto Palestine in the West Bank. I wrote about my meeting – and the urgency of backing Prime Minister Fayyad’s efforts – in the Los Angeles Times a couple of weeks ago. I welcomed the opportunity to raise public consciousness on such a broad level. And it was really something to go to the LA Times website and check out the list of most viewed articles. And there it was, #1 most viewed that day: “Tiger Woods Admits Emotional Toll from Divorce.”

I guess we still have some work to do to raise public consciousness. But from where I sit... as a rabbi, not as a policy analyst... let me say simply that no matter how long the odds against this peace process may be – and make no mistake, they’re long, as they always are in this conflict – we have never seen an opportunity the likes of this one. Israelis across the political spectrum celebrate Fayyad. President Shimon Peres has spoken of him as the David Ben Gurion of the Palestinians. So this is not the year 2000 all over again. The preparation for statehood in the West Bank is like nothing Yasser Arafat ever attempted to create. Suddenly, Palestine requires no imagination. It’s there before our eyes, just awaiting a peace treaty.

So what is our part in sealing that deal? It is time for us to take a page out of a very old book... the first rabbinic book ever, the *Mishnah*. *Mipnei darkhei shalom* – for the sake of fostering peace, we must speak a new language of peace, one which models what the peacemakers will have to do. We don’t have the luxury of talking to ourselves any longer – and convincing nobody. Now is the time for persuasion, which means bringing Peter Beinart’s “uncomfortable Zionism” to life in a voice that Israelis might be willing to risk their lives to trust. They must hear us say: “We know what world you’re living in. And we care. And that’s why we’re begging you... take this chance on peace.”

That voice is found only through engagement with Israel. You can’t cultivate it by emailing a

petition or reading *The New Yorker* or watching CNN. If Israelis are to trust in what we want for them, they have to see that they matter to us. So here at the temple, we will be launching our “Israel Matters” initiative. Our goal will be to deepen our understanding of the people, our appreciation of the disparate voices, and our opportunities to speak in a voice that Israelis can actually hear.

The first part is my job, which is to take this new relationship with Prime Minister Fayyad and share it with Jewish leaders across America. With the help of Felice and Michael Friedson of The Media Line, who arranged my meeting with the Prime Minister, I will be assembling a group of American rabbis – left, center and right... but all invested in a two-state solution – to bring with me back to Mr. Fayyad in Ramallah. We need more communities in America to hear from their rabbis why this moment of opportunity is so unique that it demands a discourse driven only by results.

So that part is mine to do. But the other parts are for us all to do. And as always, it starts with bringing our eyes and hearts and bodies to Israel, for nothing says “you matter” like being there. This past summer, our fifth temple group in six years traveled to Israel – saw the wondrous history, breathed in the culture, met the people in their homes and on the streets, and explored the hard issues from an eyewitness vantage point. A couple hundred travelers have now participated on our trips, and you can ask any one of them, and they’ll tell you that it changed their relationship with Israel for good. I continue to receive requests for an “Israel 201” sort of trip – something beyond the introductory level, both in terms of sightseeing and engagement with the people and the issues. So we’re going to do it – one year from this fall – and then another family trip will follow soon thereafter. Join us for one or the other, and be a part of the solution.

For our Religious School students, there will be further opportunities to connect with Israel person-to-person, as LBT is now twinned with the Lady Davis School in Tel Aviv via the Federation’s Tel Aviv-Los Angeles Partnership. This new relationship will include distance interactions between our students and Lady Davis’, and it will also offer our learners exchange opportunities, both to travel there and to host here. We look forward to raising up a generation of young Jews who *do* care enough to practice an “uncomfortable Zionism” in relation with new Israeli friends.

Our Peacebuilding Week this November will feature guests from OneVoice, an international grassroots movement empowering mainstream Israelis and Palestinians to embolden their governments to support two states. And once the visit is over, a newly formed team of senior temple volunteers, including numerous LBT presidents, will take the lead in shaping an ongoing, congregation-wide conversation about how we can be a part of advancing the cause of peace.

There will surely be more. But this is a good start – a step in the right direction toward acquiring a language of peace.

Following his failed attempt to make peace with the Arab world in the 1970's, Israeli statesman Abba Eban famously quipped: "The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." When the history books recount this moment, will Eban's words more accurately describe the entire Western world? The demographic clock ticks loudly toward the day when the growing population of non-Jews in Israel and the territories it controls will force Israel to choose between being a democracy or being Jewish. Meanwhile, the Palestinians are deciding who to trust – Salam Fayyad and his new-look Palestine or Hamas and its funders in Iran. What will we make of this opportunity?

*Mipnei darkhei shalom* – for the sake of fostering peace – may we look back on the choices we will make in this moment... and the results they will produce... without the agony of regret.