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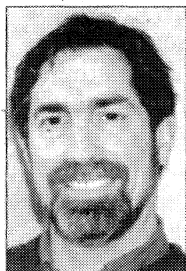
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Let's Put Our Cards on the Table When It Comes to Israel

ALAN GARFIELD

How should American Jews talk about events in Israel that disturb them? What should we do, for instance, when we read, as many of us did this month, that prominent rabbis in Israel decreed that Jews should not rent property to gentiles?



Should we openly show our criticism? Or does ever-besieged Israel need our unqualified support?

I understand both of these impulses. They come from two worthy, but at times competing, values.

On one hand, most Jews are fervently committed to opposing all forms of invidious discrimination. Jews, after all, bore the brunt of discrimination for so long that we are acutely aware of its sinister nature. That's why American Jews are so grateful to live in a country that is committed to equality.

Given this commitment, we find it extremely distressing to read of Israeli leaders advocating discrimination against non-Jews.

While this is undeniably a small group, it's naive to think that there is not a sizable number of Israelis who sympathize with their position.

On the other hand, we feel compelled to defend Israel when the world condemns it as "racist," especially when the world ignores the flagrant human-rights abuses of Israel's neighbors. In the back of our minds, we know that wrongful behavior in other countries does not justify similar behavior in Israel. But the fact that the world harshly criticizes Israel while turning a blind eye to other countries' faults makes us suspect age-old anti-Semitism at work.

And when this realization combines with our knowledge that Israel has been under siege since the day it was born, we feel a powerful impulse to defend Israel against any attacks, even if they have a kernel of truth.

So what to do?

Personally, my instincts tell me that we should try to stay true to all of our values, even while recognizing that in this complex world that our values sometimes collide. We should continue to fight discrimination everywhere, including in Israel. Certainly, we should speak out when we see signs of growing discrimination within Israel, and we should lend our support to the multitude of tolerant people within Israel (both Jewish and non-Jewish) who are committed to creating a society founded upon justice and equality.

At the same time, we should also defend Israel when the rest of the world tries to make it a pariah. We must point out the hypocrisy of subjecting Israel to a double-standard and to remind people of the many ways in which Israel has stayed true to its liberal ideals.

But our defense of Israel need not be absolute. Reasonable people can and do disagree about what is the best path to make Israel safe and just.

Indeed, Israelis themselves remain equally divided over how to achieve that goal. And while we may not be foreign-policy or defense experts, we have no choice but to rely on our own informed judgments of what's best for the Jewish

state when choosing which groups to support there, socially and politically, and which candidates to support right here in American elections.

We will never all agree on what's best for Israel. But I hope that our community cares enough to keep the debate alive, and I hope we can all recognize that creating a safe space for discussion makes us better advocates for Israel. For the best advocates are not only familiar with their own arguments, but also with those with whom they disagree. They are also willing to acknowledge when their opponents make a valid point.

The Jewish community needs Isaiahs to remind us to stay true to our values of justice and equality. And it needs Maccabees to remind us to defend Jews and to fight for the right of our people to exist. But it doesn't need advocates for discrimination, and it shouldn't be afraid to criticize their actions.

I don't know what the best path is for making Israel both secure and democratic. But I do know that open and honest dialogue will help all Jews make better choices in how we pursue that goal. ♦

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