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RIPPED APART: THE QUANDARY FOR PROGRESSIVE JEWS

Ellen W. Kaplan

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Are progressive values and Zionist principles a contradiction in terms? How can we be both politically progressive and committed to Zionism? Can we support self-determination for Jews (which *is* Zionism), and not for Palestinians? Can we stand for a Jewish *and* democratic homeland? And, how do we navigate this grotesque moment in our history?

Moral outrage at the bloodshed, and at the intransigence of both “sides,” leaves me anguished, angry, heart-broken and afraid. A wrenching fissure between “heart” and “head” exacerbates the isolation I feel as a progressive American Jew. When assassins are assassinated, my heart cheers, but I discern no strategy, no enduring gain, no long-term solution. Only negative outcomes, and a looming World War.

Why should *my* political discomfort as a diaspora Jew matter? Because I too have ‘skin in the game.’ Our Jewish communities are fractured; divergent perspectives become toxic, and leave little room for discussion and debate. My own belief is that a Jewish state is necessary as a refuge in a world where I do not feel safe. That said, I am committed to a Jewish state that values life and human rights; I reject the theocratic, authoritarian, ethnonational state promulgated by the regressive ultra-right, and by Hamas; I want an inclusive society with opportunity, security and dignity for all.

I am a belated Zionist. In 1967, as a 14-year-old non-practicing, marginally “cultural” Jew, I was glued to my transistor radio for 6 days, rooting for the underdog: Israel! But Jewish sovereignty held no interest for me; the US war in Vietnam was the object of my concern and active protest. Growing up in NY made being Jewish normal, of no consequence. I had zero Jewish education, never been in a synagogue, was never exposed to overt antisemitism, though I laughed at a weird request to show my “horns,” to an elderly gentleman in Albuquerque. I knew almost nothing about the Holocaust.

My maternal grandmother fled Russian pogroms, my Russian grandfather escaped the Russian army after he killed a Cossack; in the US he became a Communist and was investigated by the FBI. My husband’s father saw his family murdered in Poland when he was twelve. He spent 5 years in Nazi labor camps and two more in DP camps after the war. Years later, I wrote *Cast No Shadow*, a play about the Shoah and intergenerational trauma, before I was aware of the term. I see the shadow in my sons.

I first visited Israel in 1999, when I directed a play at Hebrew University. We spent the following summer in Jerusalem, when a genuine peace accord was on the table. Arab Israelis, Palestinians, Jewish peace activists, were celebrating a new era. Israel seemed a vibrant, welcoming place on the precipice of peace. I hoped to contribute to Peace and Reconciliation efforts during my 2001-2002 sabbatical. For thirteen months we lived in Jerusalem, arriving just before 9/11 and living through the bloodiest year of the 2nd intifada. Trying to work on both sides of the Green Line, and meeting only resistance, hatred and despair, I *then* became a Zionist.

In Jerusalem, my husband studied full-time at yeshiva. We planned to make Aliyah. My older son joined the IDF. My younger son found Israeli society too aggressive, too violent. Both boys have strong Jewish educations, both know Israel well. Today they are outraged and disgusted by this war, which they blame primarily on Israel. Hamas, they say, won't stand down, so we must. My husband, and many friends, support Israel and blame Hamas. I am ripped apart.

For decades, I have researched, interviewed, taught, made theatre with and written extensively about vulnerable people: in prisons; in Bosnia; in Afghanistan; with Roma in Eastern Europe and Kurds and Yezidi in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. Minority communities are subject to murderous aggression fueled by territorial, economic, political and religious claims that aim to wipe out the "other." Closeup exposure to the depredations of Hamas, the Taliban and IS, has led me to understand that fanatics and fundamentalists brutalize all sides. How do you combat maximalist demands which refuse compromise and remain unaccountable to one's people? For all of Israel's manifest failures, the Palestinian leadership is equally bankrupt.

Two indigenous peoples occupy one land. Israel's right to exist and Palestinian self-determination are equally justified. The Jewish people are a nation with a common language, culture, history, tradition of religious practice, and 3000 year of ties to the land. One claim cannot and must not preclude the other. Neither can be justified by murderous ideologies.

Fanaticism fuels the fire. Calling Israel "a fascist settler-colonial state" (as my colleagues do) perverts history and distorts meaning: Israel was established by Jews forced to leave the horrors of Europe and, later, of the Arab states that expelled them. Jews went into exile, when they could, to escape extermination.

The far-left and the far-right either perpetuate antisemitism or fail to confront it. Neither validate Jews' deep-seated, historically justified fear.

For 40 years I've taught on college campuses. Protest is essential speech. Students are congenitally idealistic, as they should and must be. The problem arises not from their activism (which I applaud) but from ideologically driven faculty. One example of many: At the 2017 MLA convention, where support for BDS was being debated, I invited a colleague to work with me to present a campus forum that would look at all sides. He angrily refused any conversation that didn't cast Israel as the unalloyed villain. Polarization is not helpful, but it is the norm, in the classroom and on the streets. Too often we find the sanctimonious reiteration of simplistic, uninflected thinking devoid of historical perspective, with no vision for possible futures.

Campus discourse is characterized by lack of context or complexity. Students hear about disproportionality. They do not hear about Hamas' charter, nor its share of responsibility for the deaths of Gazans and Jews, nor that Hamas could end the war today by standing down and returning the hostages. They will not hear that Hamas and the Palestinian people are not equivalent, nor that demands for Israel's annihilation empowers the likes of Smotrich and Ben G'vir. Israel has created unspeakable misery in Gaza. Hamas, too, has much to answer for.

Sinwar and Bibi are fully responsible for this deplorable war. Make no mistake: They benefit in different ways, from the cycles of revenge, rage and aspiration that fuel it. Leaders live in safety and luxury; Hamas has no interest in rapprochement or compromise; the group spends hundreds of millions of dollars in aid on underground tunnels, while Gazans are impoverished. Sinwar explicitly celebrates the loss of Palestinian lives, as it fuels international outrage at Israel.

Bibi needs to stay in power to ensure he stays out of jail. No peace is possible without the removal of Sinwar, Hamas militants, Netanyahu and his right-wing henchmen. They are all culpable. Each side makes unacceptable demands for total surrender. Meanwhile, the carnage continues.

How does Israel fight an enemy entrenched in hundreds of miles of tunnels, beneath homes, mosques, hospitals and schools? Ordinary Gazans are used as human shields, for military ends. Hamas hides its war machines among civilians, who live without food, aid or protection.

On October 7th; we felt fear in our bones. The warmth of synagogue that Shabbos was a reminder that as our small group gathered, we were doing what Jewish communities have done for centuries, all over the world.

We face an existential crisis. As world opinion condemns us, as Iran and its proxies try to put Israel in a death grip, the most extreme coalition in Israel's history, is leading the country on a path to national suicide. Israel will and must defend itself vigorously. Perhaps, if the hostages were released, and an international force deployed and a functioning transitional government installed in Gaza, committed to demilitarization and reconstruction, a peace process could begin. In spite of Israel's present intransigence, any possible future includes a Palestinian state; both peoples must expel fanatics from power, or contain them. There must be a plan for prosperous, peaceful future for all.

The death toll in Gaza has exceeded 30K, cities are reduced to rubble, most of the population displaced. This is unacceptable. There are other paths. But this is a regional problem; the only solution is a regional agreement that ensures

territorial compromise, economic development, and two flourishing states. Given the climate challenges we face, Arabs and Jews need to develop an overarching narrative that links the futures of two peoples in an arid, unforgiving environment. Only concerted cooperation can begin to face the shortage of water, the need for clean energy. Animosity predate 1967, 1948, Jewish emigrations since the turn of the 20th century; they will not easily be wiped away. But a technocratic, professional leadership that reconstructs Gaza, as it monitors development, works to prevent corruption and aggression, and creates opportunities for creative, respectful collaboration could lead the way. Being a Jew is part of who I am, and for me, Israel is central for Jews, for many it is our chosen home. But rootedness, heritage, land, family, constitute “home” for all peoples. My progressive politics commit me to self-determination and communal rights for everyone. It means eschewing the doctrinaire, the inflexible, the self-righteous positions that flatten out thought.

Where do I stand? In no single, uncomplicated place. Nothing any of us think we “know” is true. But in these urgent times, we cannot be silent or stand aside.

We are writing tomorrow’s history, and it looks bleak. What now?