

**What We Talk About When We Talk About Israel**  
**Delivered by Rabbi David Novak**  
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Four main subjects come to mind in looking at Israel over the past year:

1) On Sunday we saw the latest of ongoing killings of innocent Israelis with the death of two Israelis near the Ammunition Hill in Jerusalem light rail stop. Over the past 12 months, in addition to the random missiles being shot into Israel from Hamas-controlled Gaza, there has been a war in the streets that attacks innocents, including an American who was on a study trip to Israel on the country's startup economy. These attacks have weaponized knives, trucks, and automobiles. The separation fence has been successful in keeping homicide bombers out of the country and Israel is building defenses against tunnels from Gaza. Taken with the American-funded and manufactured Patriot Missiles Israel is doing everything it can to protect her people.

2) On Friday before entering Rosh Hashanah President Shimon Peres was laid to rest on Mt. Herzl, the last of the founding generation to die. He was 93. He was responsible for Israel having a nuclear deterrent capability, a strong military, and many of innovations that define Israeli society today. In his later life, he became a beloved figure to Israeli society, even though his active years in politics he was always controversial, like so many Israeli politicians who were working to build the Jewish state. As a side note, Israel may have 20 nuclear weapons pointed at Iran. Whether true or not, it demonstrates that Peres was prescient in developing Israel's nuclear program.

3) The United States and Israel recently concluded a ten year memorandum of understanding for military aid worth \$38 billion. Under the new MOU with Israel, this administration has made the largest single pledge of military assistance in U.S. history. It will succeed the current \$30 billion MOU signed in 2007.

This amount will enable Israel to acquire additional advanced military capabilities from the United States.

It includes \$33 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds and \$5 billion commitment in missile defense assistance.

This package will permit Israel to update much of its fighter aircraft fleet - including through the acquisition of additional F-35s - as well as increasing its missile defense, and acquiring other defense capabilities needed to meet its needs.

Israel remains the leading recipient worldwide of U.S. foreign military funding. This new package continues a long time practice of the United States in providing massive financial support to Israel.

4) Much to the chagrin of Israel's Prime Minister and many who consider Iran an existential threat, the United States went ahead with the international community and concluded a deal that removes Iran's ability to create nuclear weapons. The pro-Israel American community was split on whether it would be "good for Israel."

The agreement remains focused on one issue: remove the existential threat of a possible Iran nuclear weapons program.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has been given unprecedented tools for looking at the Iranian nuclear program in its reduced form. That means they have continued access to key facilities, remaining centrifuge operations, key access to uranium supply chain.

Before the deal was implemented in January, the Iranians had to scale back their inventory of enriched uranium by about 98%. For 50 years they may only have no more than 300 kg of enriched uranium, enriched to no more than 3.67%. They had to take out roughly 2/3 of their centrifuges and operate over a decade only the most simple original centrifuges.

They had to dismantle the core of a reactor that could produce plutonium and fill it with cement.

These are steps that preclude any pathways to turn uranium into a nuclear weapon.

We will see how this plays out for the world community and for Israel.

Those are some of the highlights of the past year in the eventful life of this dynamic young country.

Israel, aged 68, is proving again how resilient her people are in an existentially challenging neighborhood.

As you know, I am passionate about Israel and her wellbeing. I am always interested in learning more about how to think and speak about Israel, given how contentious it is in some circles.

In June, I attended a conference in New York City about speaking about Israel and Israel education in the Jewish environment.

It was eye opening.

Many of the people there were millennial students studying to be rabbis.

They care about Israel.

Yet they were also sympathetic to Palestinian narratives.

Even with the alternative organizations like J Street and Open Hillel, some of these future leaders of our people agreed with the statement that land in the West Bank for peace is a fair exchange.

We saw what happened in Gaza.

This idea that land for peace will work is naive.

Still some of the attendees expressed this position, in my mind, a simplistic solution to deeply entrenched problems.

Like so many of us who care about Israel, I went to this conference to further explore how to love Israel and work to her constant improvement.

It is often not easy to love Israel when one personally disagrees with what the government does.

Still.

As a Jew of a certain age, I marvel what Israel does in the world for good.

At the same time I abhor the virulent anti-Israel duplicity with which so much of the world treats Israel.

Despite the millennial sympathies, one thing that this conference gave me was an opportunity to reflect on the question:

What is it we are talking about when we talk about Israel?

There are many suggested answers to this important question.

Are we talking about the dream of a Jewish state--to exist anywhere in the world--first articulated by Theodore Herzl in 1897 in response to late 19th century European pogroms that preceded the Shoah?

Are we talking about Ahad Ha'am who championed revitalizing Jewish culture art-literature-newspapers-society --Jewish police arresting Jewish people being tried in Jewish courts?

Are we talking about Eliezer Ben Yehudah who strong-armed modern Hebrew back into existence as the *lingua franca* of Israel?

Or are we talking about the early settlers of the Yishuv who paid to purchase arid land from Arab owners turning them into vineyards for grapes and blooming citrus?

Are we talking about the narrative how the British badly bungled its mandate, leaving before its self-imposed deadline after violent acts by the Jewish underground?

Are we talking about how, after the United Nations when, on November 29, 1947, UN members voted to partition the British Mandate to create a Jewish and Arab entity out of, with an internationalized Jerusalem, a vote that led the Jews to rejoice and horrified the Arabs?

Are we talking about the War of Independence launched immediately after Ben Gurion declared the state on May 14, 1948 that Israel ultimately won at a high cost--to Israel?

Or as we have learned recently from a group called the "new historians" with newly-opened access to Israel's archives that Ben Gurion ordered the new state's army to expel the Arab population from Lydda, near where the international airport is located, knowing that a new state could never survive with an Arab population so close to the airport?

Or how from 1948 to 1967 Jordan gained possession of the West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem, and for that period the border with a hostile

country was in the backyard of the King David Hotel with snipers facing Israel on the Old City's walls?

Perhaps we are talking about Israel's victory in 1967 when the state was only 19 years old after Egypt's pan-Arabist Gamal Nasser launched a war against Israel, joined in by the other Arab states. Over a brief six days, Israel won--and took possession of the Old City and the Kotel, the Western Wall, the West Bank from Jordan, and the Sinai desert from Egypt.

In Yossi Klein Halevi's wonderful book, which we have in our library, *Like Dreamers*, the six soldiers pictured famously sounding the shofar at the Western Wall's liberation thought their utopian dreams were finally being realized. Yet nearly 50 years after this war's end, each is described in the book as having their then utopian dreams dashed by reality. You might want to read it.

Or how in September 1971, known as "Black September" more than 15,000 Palestinian militants were killed on order of the Jordanian monarch and between 50 and 100,000 Palestinians were left homeless?

Are we talking about 1973 when Israel existence nearly ended when attacked, again led by Egypt, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. This war shattered the dream-like quality that Israelis had been living under from 1967 with the talk of "divine miracle", survived only from a massive infusion of materiel from the United States late in the war.

Or was it when, in 1977, the Likud took hold of political power from the founding Labor Party, the Eastern Europeans who imported their socialist ideas for a democracy from Europe to the Middle East but still looked down on Jewish immigrants from Africa, and the Arab countries as being "other" using derogatory names to make fun of them and creating a second class group of Jews?

Maybe it was in 1982 when General Ariel Sharon allowed Lebanese Christian militias to take revenge on the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps--when Israelis found out for the first time in the state's modern existence that Israel did not only use the Israel Defense Forces defensively.

Or was it in 1995 when a Jewish citizen of Israel assassinated its democratically chosen leader after heated rhetoric that led the assassin to understand that it was religiously sanctioned?

Was it in the early aughts when Ariel Sharon took a walk on the Temple Mount, leading him to power and ultimately to pulling out unilaterally from Gaza?

Or is it the narrative of the intifadah that were particularly violent in the early aughts, where civilians were losing their lives in streets, restaurants, hotels, and on public busses that ultimately led to the creation of the separation barrier that bifurcates Israel from the West Bank?

Or is it the summer of 2014 when Hamas relentlessly assaulted Israelis from civilian neighborhoods in Gaza--Jewish and Arab---with missiles launched from within dense population?

Or is it the last two weeks when Shimon Peres left life.

Indeed: what do we speak about when we speak about Israel?

There are many narratives with which to look at the complexity of the lives of Israelis, Jewish and Arab, and the Palestinians who live in the West Bank and Gaza.

In one exercise we did we read a Palestinian narrative of the same period that had been factually vetted by an organization called Resetting the Table.

This was a narrative of utter and complete victimization.

Absent a Palestinian narrative before the “nakba” what the Palestinians call the catastrophe of 1948 when the UN imposed separation was rejected, the Palestinian narrative neglect any mention of Ottoman Rule, or that when Jews began to settle in the land the Arab natives were compensated for their property.

Another sly trick, the Palestinian narrative quoted Chaim Weizmann, David Ben Gurion, and Golda Meir to reinforce its points. All leaders of Israel, using their own words to reinforce the Palestinian narrative of victimization.

Like all narratives designed to sound like “history” clearly there were liberties taken.

Unfortunately we are and remain entrenched in a complex situation where the narratives remain in dispute.

The seminar was designed to help Jewish educators and clergy to think more deeply about Israel, and incorporate Israel education into Jewish education. I came to these conclusions:

1. Reciting history alone will not change the situation today. Our understandings of our historical truth will ultimately have to be complemented by a mutual recognition of the contemporary experience of Israelis and Palestinians who are sharing an incredibly small piece of land, neither population going away.
2. Real life narratives matter. When a situation is discussed through the lens of family stories (like when Yuval spoke of his family's life in Dimona where he grew up) it allows for greater openness to questioning, rather than remaining glued to entrenched narrative. It reminds us that real people live there, not just politicians.
3. Having a personal experience visiting Israel and Judea/Samaria (also known as the West Bank) is vital to truly understand the lives of the people who live there. Everyone should visit Israel at least once in their lifetimes.

I will always be an advocate for a healthy state of Israel being in the world as this is part of how I understand being Jewish.

It is a blessing in my life--and I hope yours--that we are in a world where we are able to have conversations about the Israel that we care about in all the ways it works and in all the ways we will contribute to making Israel reflect Jewish values.

May all who call Israel home find abundant blessing in the new year and may we, the people of Israel Congregation, soon find ourselves visiting our brothers and sisters there.