

What We Talk About When We Talk About Israel  
Delivered by Rabbi David Novak  
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What is it we are talking about when we talk about Israel?

Are we talking about the dream of a Jewish state--anywhere in the world--first articulated by Theodore Herzl in 1897?

Are we talking about Ahad Ha'am who championed revitalizing Jewish culture in all of its manifestations in a Jewish state?

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 narratives when the British punted on its responsibility for its mandate to the United Nations when, on November 29, 1947, the UN members voted to partition the area to create a Jewish and Arab entity out of the same space, with an internationalized Jerusalem?

Or are we talking about the War of Independence that was launched immediately after Ben Gurion declared the state on May 14, 1948 that Israel ultimately won at a high cost--to Israel, but we have learned recently from a group called the "new historians" came at a cost to some of inhabitants of the land before the war. For example Ben Gurion ordered the new state's army to expel the Arab population from Lydda, near where the international airport is located.

Or how from 1948 to 1967 Jordan gained possession of the West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem and in September 1971, a time known as "Black September" when more than 15,000 Palestinian militants were killed and between 50 and 100,000 Palestinians were left homeless?

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

In Yossi Klein Halevi's wonderful book, *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.

Or 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 certainly shattered the dream-like quality that the Israeli populace had been living under from 1967 and the talk of divine miracle.

Or was it when, in 1977, the Likud took hold of political power from the founding Labor Party, the Eastern Europeans who imported their idea for a democracy from non-democratic states in Europe to the Middle East but still looked down on Jewish immigrants from Africa, and the Arab countries as being "other"?

Maybe it's 1982 when General Sharon allowed Lebanese Christian militias to take revenge on the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps--a time when Israelis found out for the first time in the state's modern existence that Israel was not only acting 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?

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.

Over the past three days in New York City I attended a seminar that discussed competing narratives about Israel and how we, as Jews, interpret them. One thing I learned immediately is that we are not monolithic about what we see happening in the region.

One exercise we did to understand the point-of-view of Palestinian historians was to read a narrative that had been factually vetted by an organization called Resetting the Table.

The narrative described the same events of the Israel narrative, but was a narrative of utter and complete victimization. Absent from the Palestinian narrative of the period before the British mandate until 1948 was 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.

Like all narratives designed to sound like “history” there were liberties taken with what may have happened.

Unfortunately we are and remain entrenched in a complex situation where even the underlying key moments are 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.

After three days of listening, questioning and speaking with the other participants, I left with these preliminary understandings:

1. History alone will not change the situation as it exists 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.
2. People’s real life narratives matter. When a situation is presentation through a lens of a family story (e.g. when Yuval spoke of his family’s life in Dimona growing up) it allows for greater openness to questioning, rather than remaining glued to political dogmas. It makes the fact that real people live in the area real.

3. Having a personal experience visiting Israel and Judea/Samaria (also known as the West Bank) is irreplaceable for understanding the lives of the people who live there. And by the way--of the four percent of the Israeli population who live in the occupied areas, most are doing it for economic reasons, not ideological reasons.
4. Talking with people leads to greater understandings even when you disagree with the other person.

Please be reassured: even though I have chosen to make my home here in the United States, I will always be an advocate for a healthy state of Israel being in the world and my caring for Israel 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.