



Should we hug or wrestle with Israel

Robbie Gringras

Dear Rabbi Orkand:

It was a pleasure to read your piece. As you can imagine, I have little about which I might disagree with you! I would like instead to share with you a dilemma I have been grappling with recently.

Two institutions I respect very much came under fire last week. *Haaretz* newspaper was accused of spreading “blood libels”, when it published [a story about Israeli soldiers' questionable ethics](#) when fighting in Gaza. At roughly the same time Theater J, the leading Jewish theatre in North America (if not the world), chose to give its stage over to a short play by Caryl Churchill *Seven Jewish Children*, that had also been honoured with the epithet “blood libel” (by the same journalist!).

Both were accused of damaging Israel, and damaging Jews. Both defended themselves by saying they were doing their job. The job of a newspaper is to be the watchdog of democracy, to investigate and to reveal that which the government of the day would rather not investigate or reveal. It may well be that the paper did more revealing than investigating, but this also is the prerogative of a newspaper. Similarly, the job of a theatre that respects itself and its art is to present plays that stimulate and push tough issues. From their point of view, how could a Jewish theatre possibly ignore a powerfully anti-Israel play by the leading playwright of her generation being performed everywhere across the world?

On the face of it, these two institutions

Rabbi Robert Orkand

Dear Robbie:

I appreciate your latest posting and the timeliness of it. With the installation of a new government in Israel we are, I believe, entering a troubling new phase that may test the degree to which we both hug Israel and wrestle with her—at least with her government.

I am deeply troubled by the increased influence of the right wing of Israeli politics in particular and the appointment of Avigdor Lieberman as Foreign Minister in particular. I am also concerned that the seeming disavowal of a two-state solution by Prime Minister Netanyahu may lead to further destabilization of the region. I believe that we in the liberal Jewish community may find ourselves members of the “loyal opposition.”

The challenge, of course, is how to speak out without encouraging those who cannot wait to jump on any seeming disagreement within the Jewish community. The challenge is not to unwittingly provide ammunition to those who look for every opportunity to unfairly criticize Israel or hold her to a double standard that is grossly unfair. For example, many were very quick to jump on the *Haaretz* story that questioned the ethics and actions of Israeli soldiers. Many, including many Jews in the United States, had no trouble believing that report. In recent days, the Israel Defense Forces declared that story to be untrue and based on rumor rather than eyewitness accounts. The IDF response, if reported at all, was to be found in the inner pages of the newspaper and didn't make its way to the broadcast news channels. Was *Haaretz* wrong in

are absolutely right, and entirely in line with our agreed vision of hugging and wrestling with Israel. We need to be able to honestly address areas of moral concern in order to know Israel, and in order to influence her. Theater J artistic director Ari Roth did not simply hand the Churchill play a stage. He ensured the 10-minute play was read by actors, and then discussed by the audience and a panel. Then they read another 10-minute play written in the same style and discussed that. Then they read a [short piece](#) I myself had written in critique of the original Churchill piece. In short, Ari Roth's treatment of this play and the issues it raised was sensitive, intelligent, and critical. The problems arise, however, when we begin to look at how honest, loving critique of Israel is interpreted by others who love less.

The concern is that every other theatre in North America will follow Ari's lead, but only partially. They will follow Ari's lead in giving legitimacy to a play that can be interpreted as anti-Semitic and anti-Israel (personally I don't think that it's anti-Semitic, but that it is, as [Jeffrey Goldberg](#) put it, a "drive-by shooting" of a play that attacks Israel), but I fear they will **not** follow his lead in presenting the play as the stimulus for discussion. I fear they will present this piece of propaganda as the sole voice in the discourse. Likewise, I know that *Haaretz* newspaper takes no joy in criticizing Israeli policies. We all wish that we were white as snow. But whereas *Haaretz* criticizes through its desire for the well-being of Israel's soul, many news sources around the world desire nothing of the kind. And they lapped up the *Haaretz* story of military brutality.

In Makom's website we ran with the [Haaretz story](#), yet I wrote an op-ed chastising Theater J. I'm still not sure I did the right thing in either case. In both cases I had no problem with the wrestling, I just feared the consequences of such painful wrestling

reporting the original story? No. Did we do enough to insist that the rebuttal be more widely circulated? No.

The Churchill play raises even more troubling questions because the controversy surrounding it speaks to cherished American values on one hand and our sensitivity concerning criticism of Israel on the other. Given our history, we Jews appreciate the First Amendment and have been staunch supporters of freedom of expression. At the same time, we are rightly troubled by anything that smacks of anti-Semitism and/or unfair Israel-bashing. How do we know when something crosses the line from legitimate criticism of Israel to what is widely seen as a new form of anti-Semitism? For me, the answer to that question comes from Natan Sharansky. He speaks of the three "Ds." The first "D" is the test of demonization. When the Jewish state is being demonized; when Israel's actions are blown out of all sensible proportion; when comparisons are made between Israelis and Nazis and between Palestinian refugee camps and Auschwitz - this is anti-Semitism, not legitimate criticism of Israel.

The second "D" is the test of double standards. When criticism of Israel is applied selectively; when Israel is singled out by the United Nations for human rights abuses while the behavior of known and major abusers, such as China, Iran, Cuba, and Syria, is ignored; when Israel's *Magen David Adom*, alone among the world's ambulance services, was denied admission to the International Red Cross - this is anti-Semitism.

The third "D" is the test of de-legitimization: when Israel's fundamental right to exist is denied - alone among all peoples in the world - this too is anti-Semitism.

Do producers have a right to present Churchill's play? Yes. Should they? Well, that depends on intent. If the goal is to generate discussion, which

in such a public arena.

In short, I went chicken...

Now I'm left asking: Didn't we Jews create our own State so we might finally dictate our own agenda, and not allow ourselves to become victims of the agenda of those who wish us ill? If we believe that Israel should be special, then shouldn't we feel free to argue for holding ourselves up to special standards – irrespective and in defiance of what the rest of the world may say?

Warm wishes,

Robbie Gringras

apparently motivated Ari Roth, then I am all for that. If the goal is to simply attack Israel without benefit of response, then it is our obligation to use every means at our disposal to alert the community to the falsehoods that the play presents. Urging people not to see something never works. Education is the best weapon we have at our disposal.

And so, we must, as you suggest, Robbie, hold ourselves up to special standards. We do that by using our powerful voice to insist that Israel be the Jewish state it was meant to be. At the same time, we must be united in our public support of Israel, for if we don't, no one will.

Rabbi Robert Orkand