



Should we hug or wrestle with Israel?

Rabbi Orkand states that the Jewish people have the "worlds highest moral aspirations". What is the basis for this allegation? Does not an attitude of moral superiority immediately engender perverse attitudes and actions that can prevent peaceful solutions in disagreements with our neighbors?

*Philip Kotch
United Jewish Center -- Danbury, Connecticut*

Lest we forget, "Yisro-El" means "to wrestle with the divine."

My parents, z'l, loved me absolutely, and were swift, consistent, and resolute whenever my behaviors were out of alignment with Jewish teachings.

Judaism teaches us to love individuals and to rebuke profane behaviors. Israel, as a land of human beings, occasionally messes up.

Silence at those times is not love. Abandonment at those times is not tolerant or progressive or congruent.

*David Altschul
Congregation Beth El -- Berkeley, CA*

When we talk about whether we should hug or wrestle with Israel, why do we automatically assume that the topic is about Israel's relationship with the Arabs? Where is the concern for the mistreatment of liberal Judaism in Israel? What did Rabbi Hillel mean when he said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" before he said, "If I am not for others, what am I?"

Are Jews supposed to be only concerned with non-Jews and not with themselves? What does the Torah mean when it says, "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue?" Does it mean justice for others? What kind of Judaism is that? We should be ashamed of ourselves for sitting idly by.

*Dave Mollen
Temple Sha'arey Shalom -- Springfield, NJ*

Robbie Gringras

Dear David Altschul

You are right that Israel sometimes

Rabbi Robert Orkand

I am responding to both Philip Kotch and Dave Mollen as they help focus our conversation about our relationship

messes up. And of course, so does Diaspora Jewry...

We do indeed need to develop more honest ways to communicate our mutual critique. Yet I fear that referring to the teachings of Judaism may not necessarily help.

It's a funny thing, but the more I observe life in Israel in particular, the more I've come to feel that Judaism doesn't teach. Judaism is full of many different, sometimes contradictory teachings, and the learning is dependent on the listener.

A trivial example: you write that Judaism teaches us that behavior can be rebuked, yet we can also note how the sages recommend not rebuking someone for behavior s/he is unlikely to change. In a more significant example of where Judaism's lessons can contradict, I note how many Jews in the Reform movement find Jewish sacred text crammed with liberalism and pluralism, whereas many people I come across in Israel fluently cite ethnically specific and totalitarian aspects of Jewish teaching.

In short, I think we need to embrace and argue with all Jews around the world, while understanding and appreciating that while *Torat Yisrael* may give us a shared arena of debate, it may not necessarily offer us a shared value system.

Robbie

Dear Dave Mollen

You are quite right that Israel's issues are not only with non-Jews: Israel is also grappling with Jews. As you read in my opening piece, the first example of the need for wrestling, referred to the way in which Israel's President could not bring himself to call Eric Yoffie, a rabbi.

Having said that, while I support very

with Israel.

Let me begin with Philip's reaction to my contention that the Jewish people "the world's highest moral aspirations."

I certainly did not mean to suggest that Jews in any way feel morally superior to others, though anti-Semites throughout the centuries have accused us of feeling this way. No, what I meant is that what has bound Jews to each other throughout the centuries has been the idea that being part of a covenantal relationship with God demands that we Jews be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," that we not simply be like everyone else, that we be, as Isaiah said, "a light unto the nations." The prophets railed against their fellow Jews for forgetting that rituals and worship only matter if they lead us to a moral and ethical life. The challenge for Israel has been the creation of a state that can govern through the application of moral principles. For me, that is what it means to be a "Jewish state" as opposed to a "state of Jews." When the Israel Defense Forces rewrote its code of conduct, the integration of Jewish values into that code was deliberate and unique.

I would suggest, Philip-- to paraphrase a well-known food commercial—that the Jewish state does see itself as answering to a higher authority. Therefore, our obligation is to call the Israeli government to task when it does not operate in a way that is consistent with the oft-repeated Jewish values that are espoused by Israel's leaders.

As for Dave's comment, I don't for a minute assume that hugging or wrestling with Israel is only about a relationship with the Arabs. I believe that first and foremost that both the hugging and wrestling are about Israel's relationship with her own citizens. The list of issues is growing ever longer: treatment of Arab citizens, treatment of women, religious pluralism, environmental issues, etc., etc. However, in the case of Israel it is never "either/or." It is impossible to

little of the way in which the non-Orthodox are disrespected in Israel, I do think the Diaspora's outrage on this issue is a bit funny. Are we really trying to say that only in Israel do Ultra-Orthodox Jews reject Reform Jews? Can we really kid ourselves that the problems between Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, and non-Orthodox Jewry are only Israeli-made? I sometimes wonder what might happen to North American Jewry were the government to hand over management of all Jewish denominations to some overarching Jewish organization – would there be fewer conflicts? I'm not sure...

I do agree with you though, that we should be pursuing justice, and that Israel allows us the enormous possibility and responsibility of doing so as a sovereign Jewish collective. From collecting the garbage, to health care, to defense – how can we Jews be doing it better as Jews?

Whether our response to 'sitting idly by' should be one of shame, I'm don't know. The wonderful principal of the Jewish-Arab school at *Neve Shalom* once taught me that one should not feel guilty, one must feel responsible. The former invites barren introspection, the latter requires action.

Robbie

separate the external from the internal. Israel does not have the luxury of concentrating on one or the other; it must always be "and/and." And, so, Dave our task as North American Reform Jews is to remind members of our own community of the obligation to speak truth to power, to never retreat to a position of victimhood. No, our sacred task is to never give up on Israel while, at the same time, we remind her of what it means to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Rabbi Robert Orkand