Makōm מקום
Renewing Israel Engagement
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Should we hug or wrestle with Israel?

Robbie Gringras

"Israel is in our veins, like oxygen, like a virus, like an antibody."

Our relationship with Israel is healthy only when it is complex.

Understandings of Israel within the Jewish world have recently begun to suggest a stifling dichotomy: Either we are for Israel, or against Israel. Either we must passionately support Israel's every actions, or we must critique and attack and complain. Both sides of the split view the other as either culpably naïve or maliciously destructive. They are both equally mistaken.

Our mistake is to assume that Israel can be approached through only one prism of understanding. In this relationship built on inheritance and choice, on closeness and distance, and on mutually shared misunderstandings, we must search for varied and multi-faceted ways of exploring and developing our relationship with Israel.

Only hugging Israel is not enough. We hug an infant who desires comfort, we hug a long-lost friend, but we can't symbolically hug the President of the State of Israel who, while himself accused of sexual harassment, declares that Reform Rabbis are not worthy of the title. Yet at the same time, wrestling is not always appropriate, or sufficient. However many caveats one may have had at the exchange with Hizbollah last summer, when Israel handed over a gloating child-killer in return for soldiers' corpses, at the moment when the coffins were laid out one had to hold one's tongue and lend a shoulder to Israel and Israelis. There is a time for hugging and a time for wrestling, and all the rest of the time should be given over to a combination between the

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As President of ARZA, the Reform movement's Zionist organization dedicated to connecting Reform Jews to Israel, I spend much of my time advocating on behalf of Israel. I believe with all my heart that the Jewish state is inseparable from my life as an active and believing Jew. I view Israel as a grand and unique experiment in which I am a part. That is, can a state be established and governed on the basis of core Jewish values?

Yes, being a Reform Zionist means being part of this great experiment, the results of which are yet unknown. Zionism demands that I take an active role in determining what the results of this experiment will be. Being a Reform Zionist means that I actively participate in the struggles that are so much a part of defining what Israel will be in the days and years to come. To be a Zionist means to both hug and wrestle with Israel.

If, indeed, Israel is an experiment, at times success seems very much in doubt. The Jewish people, the people with the world's highest moral aspirations, have put themselves in a hostile and dangerous part of the world, on land with no natural resources except the ingenuity and energy of its inhabitants, a land without a drop of oil. Then, the people living in this difficult place have welcomed with open arms millions of people from 160 nations who speak many different languages and who bear the wounds that come from living in places where they were persecuted and oppressed. What are the odds of a successful conclusion to this unique experiment?

As we observe the 60th anniversary year of Israel's independence, we must wrestle with the failures. There are many of them, but too many of us hate to speak of them

two.

While being overwhelmed by the experience of watching Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*, our connection with Israel moves through many stances. From awe and respect at the film's virtuosity, to deep empathy at the trauma an entire Israeli generation suffered, to horror at the evils Israel's leaders permitted, to unease at the way a country examines its mistakes but rarely learns from them, through to fear at how this naïve exposition of Israel's faults might affect American attitudes to Jews at home. This is the kind of relationship we need to build with Israel. Made up of both hugging and wrestling, and fired by the heart.

There are those who might fear that complexity might not lead to identification, that such a seemingly ambivalent message will not 'turn on' the youth. Worse: that Israel ambivalence on the part of the educator or parent in an increasingly hostile environment, might as well be a surrender to the forces of anti-Zionism in the world.

These are legitimate and important concerns: the fear of irrelevance on the one hand, and educational suicide on the other. First, we must be careful of valuing our own rhetoric too much. When we argue against a black-and-white approach, it does not follow that we are promoting shades of dull grey. Hugging and wrestling is not a middle-of-the-road compromise, it is a spark-flying technicolor ongoing interchange of ideas and passion.

Second, while we must be forever aware and wary of anti-Zionist agenda in the world, we need not allow such agenda to dictate ours. If the establishment of the State of Israel meant anything, it meant that the Jewish people would no longer allow Anti-Semites to dictate the course of our destiny. We should remember this before stifling healthy, commitment encouraging debate within our communities for fear of offering 'ammunition for our enemies'. As a swift look at any online Israeli newspaper will show, enemies of Israel need no longer listen in on local Jewish conversations to find their 'ammunition': it's splayed out lest Israel's enemies overhear. However, we must speak of them. We must acknowledge the sad fact that according to *Ha'aretz* 28% of Israel's population lives in poverty, that 400,000 families experience hunger on a daily basis. At the same time, a growing number of Israelis are becoming millionaires, causing the gap between rich and poor to widen with every passing year.

We are well aware of the polarization between religious and secular Israel. The examples are many and are causing many young Israelis to turn against Judaism all together. Twenty percent of Israelis are Arabs and, despite a stated commitment of equality by the Israeli government, there is blatant discrimination. Avigdor Lieberman and his racist policies reflect the growing rift between these two segments of Israeli society.

Yes, Israel has failures—many of them. However, we don't teach love of Israel by refusing to wrestle with them or by excusing them. Rather, we must acknowledge the failures and work toward fixing them. Only then will we be able to truly see the soul of this place. Only then will we be able to fully embrace Israel and her people in an honest and mature way.

There is every reason for the embrace. A few examples: In 2007, 2,800 refugees from Sudan and Ethiopia managed to trek across Egypt, through the Sinai Desert and into Israel. The debate about what to do with these refugees raged all summer. The debate was really not about refugees at all. It was about what it means to be a Jewish state. In the end, all of them were integrated into Israeli society. The reason? Jewish values demand nothing less.

After the war in Lebanon two summers ago, the bodies of Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser were returned to Israel by Hezbollah in exchange for Samir Kuntar who had been jailed in Israel after killing a four year-old girl in front of her father. This murderer was greeted in Lebanon as a national hero, while in Israel the entire nation watched as the bodies of their dead were driven into Israel, down roads lined with thousands of weeping Israelis. The Lebanese cheered and we wept. Where

online for all to see!

Finally, the more we approach Israel from varied angles, the more we assess and embrace, smile and grapple, the more responsibility we will find ourselves taking for our relationship with Israel. When our relationship with Israel becomes a dynamic experience, one that we own and whose volatility no longer frightens us, then our relationship will move from an awkward inheritance to a living choice.

would I rather live? There is no contest.

Come to think of it, this is what it means to be part of a family. I can rail against what someone I love does, but an hour later we can embrace one another. My relationship with Israel is like that. I would have it no other way.