

Is it okay to criticize Israel?

MAR 1, 2023 ALAN SILVERSTEIN

A myth persists that Diaspora Jews who are pro-Israel have always refrained from criticizing the Jewish State and, moreover, that it is somehow “forbidden” for them to do so.

Not true!

Some examples:

In the aftermath of the [June 1967 Six-Day War](#), numerous Jews on the Left spoke out in protest, calling for Israel to make territorial concessions and recognize the legitimacy of Palestinian national aspirations.

During the Oslo Peace Process of the 1990s, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin offered a “land-for-peace” deal to Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Jews on the Right insisted that the PLO could not be trusted.

Conservative and Reform Jews consistently have criticized the biased manner in which the Israeli government has funded — or failed to fund — the non-Orthodox Jewish denominational “streams” in Israel and often has denied the legitimacy of life-cycle ceremonies performed by any but Orthodox rabbis.

American *haredim* objected to the implementation of the 2016 Kotel Compromise — which called for the expansion of a non-Orthodox “mixed” prayer area in the southern part of the Kotel plaza — to Israeli courts being recognized in civil matters of Reform and Conservative converts, and to other steps toward legitimization of the liberal streams.

Other examples abound!

Why?

Israel is not merely the state of the Jewish religion; it is the state of the Jewish People worldwide.

“The Jews began as a family...,” said Israeli author, journalist, and activist Yossi Klein Halevi, and this identification as “family — a basic sense of belonging to a community of fate, regardless of your religious [or political] beliefs — has remained at the core of Jewish identity ever since.”

Some decisions made by the Israeli governing powers have direct implications for *Am HaYehudi*. In such instances, Diaspora Jews should feel free — even compelled — to voice their opinions.

As part of the global Jewish family, we must stay informed. We need to be engaged with Israel, mastering as much Hebrew as possible in the process. As “siblings” and “cousins,” we can disagree, even fight — but always mindful, despite the tensions, of the love we have for the Jewish people.

Educator Jonny Ariel, founding director of the Jewish Agency’s Makom partnership organization, spoke often about “Hugging and Wrestling” with Israel, meaning that Jews living abroad ought to preface disputes they have with Israel with a very pointed embrace of love for the country.

For me, “hugging” Israel involves acknowledging:

* I have relatives, friends, colleagues, and dear acquaintances who live in Israel.

* Israel’s birth and 75 years of incredible evolution are a miracle, never to be taken for granted. Israel’s security and survival will always be our highest priority.

* There are more Jews age 21 and under living in Israel than in the rest of the world combined. Our people’s destiny is there.

* Israel is the locale of the sacred events in the Hebrew Bible and of multiple milestones of Jewish history throughout the ages.

* Israel has nurtured the remarkable and unprecedented rebirth of our national language, Hebrew, and our national culture.

* Israel puts Jewish values into action by rescuing people all over the world — Jews and non-Jews alike — in dire emergencies like earthquakes, floods, terrorist attacks, and other disasters.

* Israel benefits humanity as a “start-up nation,” with technological, medical, and agricultural breakthroughs.

* Israel is a permanent place of refuge for Jews fleeing persecution and threatened with loss of life.

* Israel is a venue for unparalleled potential of Jewish spiritual/religious inspiration.

Israel is so much more than all of these.

Formulate your own personal reasons for “hugging” Israel — then proceed to “wrestle” with Israel, with these guidelines in mind:

* Criticizing specific policies of any Israeli government is okay, but criticizing Israel’s right to exist is beyond bounds.

* Our criticism ought not be based solely upon media accounts — from either the Left or Right — but upon the results of a sincere effort to grapple with the arguments posed by both sides. For example, the current upheaval in Israel regarding judicial reform includes complex details regarding appointments of High Court judges, judicial review, and the role of the attorney general and of legal advisers to government ministers. From a distance, without a full

understanding of the nuanced but legitimate concerns about the outcome, let's endorse President Herzog's effort to forge deep dialogue and meaningful compromise.

* Let's apply a "sandwich method" in delivering our criticism: A compliment, followed by an objection, then another compliment. We should open and conclude any challenge with words of support and affection. "I admire Israel's high voter turnout and universal acceptance of the results. I am concerned about certain proposed policies [e.g. impact upon checks and balances between the Judiciary and the Government/Knesset, implications for protecting human rights of diverse individual citizens, for the status of vulnerable minority groups and for religion and state issues]. Nevertheless, it is my unshakable commitment to Israel which leads me to raise my voice, a Jewish and democratic Medinat Yisrael is essential to my Jewish identity and values."

* We should keep in mind that in its vigorous democracy, lots of Israelis feel the same way as many of us feel (e.g., opposed to the current proposed judicial reforms, or opposed to the 2005 uprooting of Israelis from Gush Katif in Gaza). Look at the hundreds of thousands of protestors taking to the streets in recent weeks. Then remember the many folks who opposed the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Both instances of dissent are characteristic of a democracy, with impressive numbers of Israeli leaders frequently voicing alternative views. The question is not whether we should abandon Israel but rather how to strengthen the opposition camp with which we identify.

* Israel is never monolithic. Keep Israel's deep pluralism in mind. Educational thinker and writer Alex Sinclair said, "Israel is...truly a cacophony of conversations, and while some of its voices might repel me...others will attract me, move me, compel me, and enrich my identity." Dr. Sinclair urges Diaspora Jews to strive to "attain a deep understanding of the dilemmas and questions that Israelis themselves grapple with. Then they may be able to find the voice within Israel that resonates with their own."

Some might reject Diaspora Jews' input on divisive issues, saying that it merely reflects cultural biases not relevant to Israel. Not true! Israel has often benefitted by cross-cultural insight. Notably, both the Israeli Left and Right seek to validate their view of the judicial process based on comparisons to American or British law. Haredim study Torah in accord with Lithuanian methodology. Israel's contentious "religion and state" system is actually derived from the Ottoman millet (court of law) structure.

In sum, Diaspora Jews do have a role to play in Israeli affairs, especially now, as the new coalition appears to be all too indifferent toward concerns from world Jewry. Yes, it is permissible and inevitable that disagreements will arise in regard to certain Israeli policies. We are Zionists and have a stake in the outcome, lest it harm Israel as a Jewish and Democratic entity. Those on the Right have felt uncomfortable with coalitions led by leaders like Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Yair Lapid, and others. Those on the Left will find discomfort with coalitions led by Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Benjamin Netanyahu, etc.

But as we grapple with the notion of an Israel headed by those whose policies may at times be anathema to us, this "wrestling" should always be carried out with a fierce "hugging" of the one and only Jewish state. It is a miracle and a blessing and merits both our critical attention and our unwavering support. Most of all, let's prevent long-term damage to the global Jewish family!