

## Pillar 1: Complexity

### Three typical students

When I think about the challenges of developing a complicated-but-loving relationship with Israel, I often think about three young American Jews. I'll call them Alyssa, Todd, and Rachel; they were students of mine.

#### *Alyssa*

Alyssa is a poster child for Jewish education in almost all respects. She was very involved in USY (the Conservative Movement's youth group), she teaches in her local synagogue school, and she is now a master's student in Jewish education at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. She's checked off all the boxes we set up for young American Jews.

But she isn't interested in Israel.

"I just don't need Israel," Alyssa tells me. "I have a rich Jewish life in every respect. I love Shabbat, I love my community, I have a great Jewish social life, and many Jewish and non-Jewish friends. I enjoy studying Jewish texts and find meaning in many of the ritual elements of Jewish life. It's not that I have anything against Israel — I just don't need it. I have a perfectly rich Jewish life without it."

#### *Todd*

Todd is a rabbinical student, studying in Israel for the year as part of his pluralist rabbinical school's training program. He is taking classes in an Israeli college and, while he enjoys the studying, he doesn't seem to talk much with his Israeli classmates.

One day, I ask him, out of interest: "Todd, whom do you feel you have more in common with — these Israelis in your class — who are, after all, fellow Jews, also studying Jewish studies — or a group of typical liberal non-Jewish Americans?" Todd looks at me as if I've come from Mars. It's

an absurd question. "The American non-Jews, of course," Todd says. "I have nothing in common with these Israelis."

*Rachel*

Rachel is a young woman who, like Alyssa, is working towards a master's degree in Jewish education. She's a smart, thoughtful, dynamic Jewish educator-to-be. Part of her program is a three-week seminar in Israel. In an orientation session before the trip, we go over packing lists: what to bring, how many pairs of pants, and so on.

Rachel quiets down the group for an important announcement. "We shouldn't just take our own stuff. We need to take something with us from America to give to Israelis. I think we should all go and buy a few pairs of socks, and when we get to Israel, we'll give them to an organization there that gives out clothes to the poor."

I got to know Rachel, Todd and Alyssa because for many years now, as a professor of Israel education, it's been my job to help Jewish educators, rabbinical students, and future communal leaders think about their own relationship with Israel: What role is Israel going to play in your future educational, rabbinic, or communal work? What role is Israel going to play in your life?

For many young American Jews, the answer to this question is either peripheral (Alyssa), negative (Todd), or out-dated (Rachel). What's most interesting is that I'm pretty sure that all of them, if asked the standard survey question "Do you see yourself as pro-Israel?" would answer "yes." Social science statistics can hide the complexity of what's really going on.

Some recent research points to a "Birthright bump," suggesting that the increasing numbers of young Jews who have visited Israel on Birthright are leading to stronger rates of connection. If this is true, the need for a new educational approach is even more urgent. Young American Jews who go on Birthright and become enamored with Israel are not, in the medium term, going to discard their critical faculties, or stop reading the *New York Times*. The "Birthright bump" gives us a window of opportunity to work with people and help them develop a complicated love

for Israel. Otherwise, at some point, they'll end up back at the either-or choice that I mentioned in the previous chapter.

Let's now start to think about what that complicated love might look like.

## Baby love and adolescent love

If you have ever had a baby, you know what simple love is. Your relationship with your baby is simple. You love her and provide for her. Period.

Your relationship with your adolescent child is much more complicated. You still love him, but you sometimes disagree with him — and he with you. You try to find ways to have these disagreements become educative and nurturing, rather than debilitating and alienating. You can collaborate with him and build ideas together. You can sometimes find each other infuriating and frustrating, yet you still try to remain in loving dialogue. It's a much more complicated kind of love — and probably a much richer kind of love.

This metaphor is suggestive of many aspects of the relationship between American Jews and Israel.

Last chapter, I told the story of Rachel, who felt compelled to pack spare socks for the impoverished children of Israel.

Would she have done the same if she were traveling to Paris or London or New York City, all of which also have pockets of poverty?

Rachel's equation of Israel with charity reflects the sad fact that too often the story we tell of Israel and Zionism is simplistic, incomplete, and out of date.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, the American Jewish connection to the state of Israel was one of philanthropic and political support for a fledgling, struggling state-in-the-making; a despised but heroic David surrounded by a series of genocidal Goliaths; a refuge for the Jews ejected from the third world; a country struggling with enormous economic problems and in need of every penny from abroad that it could muster.

Social scientists Steven M. Cohen and Charles Liebman have called this the “mobilization” narrative. It was the *raison d'être* for American Zionism and Israel engagement. In many Israel education contexts, it still is. We're trying to get young American Jews to love Israel with simplistic “baby love.”

But the mobilization narrative is no longer accurate. Today, despite its problems, Israel has one of the most impressive and modern armies

in the world, its streets ring out with more cellphones per capita than America, and its shekel is one of the world's strongest currencies. Israel today faces problems, to be sure, but these are very different problems: how a Jewish capitalist country deals with increasing gaps between rich and poor, how a Jewish democratic state integrates non-Jews in its midst; how an Israeli Judaism battered by decades of secular-religious divide might recover to become an inclusive and pluralist civil religion; and how Israel, in conjunction with its neighbors, can solve the pressing ecological pitfalls faced by this highly-populated, polluted, waterless region. Most pressing of all, of course, is the conflict with the Palestinians, and any contemporary narrative of Zionism and Israel engagement must set forth a complex, clear-headed, nuanced, and non-manipulative understanding of that conflict.

Despite these problems, in the arenas of culture, economics, film, sport, thought, retail, food, wine, and more, Israel flourishes. Israel, therefore, is a society of stark contrasts, which bounces between elation and depression within the space of hours. It is a country which one minute bursts with pride and the next minute hides its face in shame. It is a country of incredible achievements and dramatic wonders, as well as frustrating failures, misguided decisions, and sometimes sheer stupidity.

Contemporary Israel contains many facets: some beautiful, some fascinating, some frustrating, some absurd, some brilliant, some awful, some funny, some inspiring, some depressing, some perplexing, some amazing, some terrible. Israel is flawed and fabulous, inspiring and infuriating, brilliant and backward.

Most of all, it's complicated.

Rather than simplify these complications, engagement with Israel must empower American Jews to understand and enter those exciting, compelling, infuriating, frustrating complications; to love Israel like one loves an adolescent child, not a baby.

Many efforts to promote Israel seek to flatten or ignore those complications.

For example, you may remember a viral email campaign some years ago, which seemed to find its way into my inbox with only slightly less

regularity than the adverts for Viagra and the letters from that nice man in Nigeria who wanted to give me a million dollars.

The email offered "good news about Israel" and listed about 20 fantastic things that Israel has done or currently does. Israel has more Nobel prize winners, computers, and books published per capita than any other country; it has leading R&D plants for Intel, Motorola, and other hi-tech companies; it puts out more patents and PhDs per capita than any other country; it can juggle while riding a unicycle; and it's basically the best thing you could ever imagine.

A recent PR campaign by a Canadian Israel advocacy group called *Size Doesn't Matter* took the same tack. The campaign gained infamy because of a sexually risqué web video clip that it produced and virally disseminated. Whatever you think of the video, though, the most striking thing about this campaign is its brazen effort to highlight only the good parts of Israel. Pictures on its website are of rock concerts, beaches, and Bar Refaeli, the Israeli model, wearing a swimsuit. It lists "factoids" containing information about Israeli society that, while not incorrect, thoroughly distort the complexity of the issues raised.

These factoids portray Israel as a liberal, tolerant, open and exciting society. It's a wonderful place to be gay (it prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and recognizes gay marriages conducted abroad); a wonderful place to be an Arab (an Arab woman has been "Miss Israel" and Israeli Arabs serve on the Supreme Court); and a wonderful place to be a woman (Golda Meir was Prime Minister; women represent 45% of the workforce, the same as in the US).

These facts about Israel are in themselves correct, but, because of the selective omission of complicating factors, they present a deeply skewed picture of Israel. Yes, there are pockets of Israel where gay people, Arabs, and women flourish. But there are also many sectors of Israeli society where these three minority groups face prejudice, hate, and official discrimination.

To present an image of Israel as perfect and without flaws — to deny, by omission, any of the problematic elements of Israeli society — is to set up a false dichotomy — an either-or choice — that can only work against Israel in the long run.

Israel engagement must become much, much more *complex*. It must treat the relationship with Israel as a complicated, rich, sometimes frustrating one, which requires hard work in order to keep it mutually nurturing.

In other words, it's time to grow up.

## Mutual responsibility

It takes two to tangle.

When a relationship grows stormy, all parties bear some of the blame. That's true when a marriage grows rough.

And it's true when the changing relationship between adolescents and their parents reaches a crisis point.

One response to the breakdown in the relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel is to simply blame Diaspora Jews for being insufficiently Zionist or Jewish — for not caring enough. Many people in the Israel engagement world appear to hold this view and assume that the way to solve the disconnect is to focus our efforts on convincing American Jews to love Israel more. American Jewry is where the problem is, and that's where education needs to make change. Rabbi Daniel Gordis is one of the most vocal proponents of that position. "Today's students need to learn love of peoplehood no less than they need to learn Talmud," he wrote in *Commentary* magazine in 2011.

I agree with Gordis that there's a problem in the relationship between American Jewry and Israel. We need to help Alyssa integrate Israel more centrally into her identity, to help Todd encounter Israelis with whom he feels connected, and to help Rachel relate to Israel in more sophisticated ways.

However, Gordis assumes — as do many Israel engagement programs — that the locus of the problem is entirely within the American Jewish context and its weakening particularism. But simply telling young American Jews that they "should" feel more connection with the Jewish people and Israel is unlikely to have much effect on their emotions.

I'm going to suggest that the best approach to the problem of Israel engagement in the Diaspora is to change the question from being a "single-location problem" to a "dual-location" or "dialogical" problem.

Let me explain.

Most Israel engagement programs are rooted in one core underlying assumption. They presume that American Jewish identity and life are in some way incomplete without, or at the very least can be enriched by, a relationship with Israel and Israelis. According to this assumption, *the*

*problem of Israel engagement is located entirely within the American Jewish context*, and it is there that the Jewish community's efforts have been focused in order to fix that problem. American Jews are brought to Israel in order to be inspired and become connected; Israelis are sent to the United States in order to educate and inspire young Americans at summer camps; and educational researchers probe the extent to which Americans do or don't feel connected to Israel.

I certainly agree — wholeheartedly! — that engagement with Israel and Israelis has the potential to enrich American Jewish identity. However, that is only half the story, and the community's exclusive focus on that single assumption explains much of the malaise in Israel engagement, and in the relationship between American Jewry and Israel.

The other half of the story is that *the problem of Israel engagement is located not just in American Jewry, but also in the Israeli context*. That's the key difference between old forms of Israel engagement and a new form of liberal Zionist Israel engagement.

Let me highlight the problem with the following story. As the director of Keshet Hadash, the Davidson School of Education of the Jewish Theological Seminary's new semester-in-Israel program, I have held many conversations and meetings with leaders of Israeli educational institutions. The comments of one senior Israeli academic are typical. Her analysis of the weaknesses in the relationship between American Jews and Israel was rooted entirely in a critique of American Jewry:

"It's such a shame that American Jews don't feel connected to Israel," she said. "Why do you think that is?" she asked me. "Is it their lack of Jewish education, the fact that they don't speak Hebrew, they prefer to assimilate and be American, not Jewish... why don't they want to have a relationship with this country?"

At no point in the conversation, however, did she pause to wonder if perhaps *Israel* played some part in the disconnect. There was no soul-searching along the lines of "what is it about *us* that has led them to disconnect?" In this professor's eyes, *the problem of Israel engagement was located entirely in the American Jewish context*. This conversation was not unique. Most conversations, education, research and writing about Israel engagement are rooted in that single-location core assumption. They are

akin to the teacher who blames his students for not liking his classes, instead of wondering whether he might in some way be contributing to their lack of interest.

Israel engagement programs that, whether implicitly or explicitly, see the problem as having a “single location solution,” i.e. that focus their attention only on the weaknesses of the American Jewish context, are unlikely to succeed in the long term.

I would suggest that the single-location assumption is one of the main reasons that rabbinical, cantorial, and Jewish education students who spend extended periods of time studying in programs in Israel often end up feeling ambivalent towards Israel. They are tacitly expected to buy into this core assumption, and to prepare themselves to go back to the US and “sell Israel” to their communities, whose members are not engaging with Israel as much as they “should be.”

But while they are here, they experience moments of disconnect. There is no conceptual foundation that provides the space and justification for integrating that disconnect into their personal or professional identities, or into their approach to Israel engagement. They are not provided the tools to bridge the distance or to bring authenticity to their relationship to Israel, which would, in turn, translate to an ability to share that relationship with others.

As a result, Todd feels alienated from his Israeli classmates, Alyssa is happier to conduct her Jewish life without thinking about Israel, and Rachel falls back into an engagement mode that was appropriate for the 1950s but not for contemporary Israel.

Even the best recent thinking about Israel engagement does not go far enough. The felicitous and evocative phrase “hugging and wrestling,” coined by my colleague Robbie Gringras, still assumes that the primary location of the problem is with American Jews and how they relate to Israel. The notion of hugging and wrestling has been an important contribution to the field; but now we need to go further, and broaden the horizons of what we mean by Israel engagement in the first place.

*Liberal American Zionism must reframe the issue of connection with Israel from being a one-sided problem, in which one party simply needs to love the*

*other party more strongly, to being a maturing, dialogical relationship, in which both partners have work to do in order to improve the relationship.*

We need to develop a second core assumption that puts the Israeli context on the table, and states that it too is responsible for American Jews’ weak Israel engagement. In other words: *it’s not only the American Jewish community’s fault that American Jews don’t relate to Israel, it’s also Israel’s fault.* I’m being very careful with my language here, and I want to stress the “not only... also” construction in the previous sentence. This position is not a denial of the problematic elements of American Jewish identity and education, nor of the responsibility of the American Jewish community to look inside itself and consider whether it is doing enough to inspire its members to take on more Jewish rituals, learn more Jewish texts, speak more Hebrew, and explore Israeli culture.

This position’s new claim is, though, that American liberal Zionism must *also* be rooted in the consideration of Israel’s part in the disconnect.

American liberal Zionist Israel engagement must change from being a *passive* activity, wherein American Jews are expected to be inspired by everything about Israel, to being an *active* or *activist* endeavor, wherein commitment to Israel *gives* Israel goes along with the possibility of open, explicit, dialogical critique of elements of Israeli society, culture, religion and politics.

In the rest of this book, I will explore the conceptual foundations of this new dialogical approach to Zionism and Israel engagement. I’ll suggest that there are four such foundations:

- \* **Complexity**
- \* **Conversation**
- \* **Empowerment**
- \* **Politics**

So far in this book, I have suggested that there are problems with simplistic portrayals of Israel, and stressed the need to recognize the complexity of the situation. Complexity, that first foundational element of

a dynamic relationship with Israel, will underlie everything else in this book. In part two, we'll examine how 'conversation' is a key element as well.

But first, a digression into the L-word: liberal.

## A liberal digression

In this book so far, I have specified, in passing, that this is a problem for "liberal" American Jews or "liberal Zionism."

Before going further, it's worth taking a moment to explain what I mean by "liberal," and why liberalism is central to the problem I am describing and the solution I will be setting forth.

The liberal position has both political and religious dimensions, which often overlap.

### *Political Liberalism*

Politically, being liberal is usually understood to mean being more universalistic and less nationalistic, being inclined to identify with and support the rights of minority groups, being strongly interested in social justice, and tending to believe it more possible to resolve political issues through negotiations, compromise, and mutual self-interest than through the use of military force for the purpose of subjugation.

In general, young American Jews are politically and demographically liberal. The evidence can be seen in the results of the 2008 and 2012 American elections where President Barack Obama was disproportionately supported by the young (66% support for those under 30 in 2008, 60% in 2012) and the Jewish (78% in 2008 and 69% in 2012).

As political liberals, young American Jews are likely going to be concerned about how Israel treats its minorities and otherwise respects human rights.

And they're going to be more likely to believe that Israel — or any other nation — should improve itself to measure up to universal ideas of justice, rather than be honored as a country that is already exceptional.

It's worth noting that in Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman's oft-cited 2007 report on the alienation of young Jews from Israel, they found that those with *conservative* political leanings were more likely to express alienation from Israel than those with liberal leanings. This data has never been satisfactorily explained or understood (or replicated). In general, though, Cohen has elsewhere argued, as have other researchers,

that many of the problems of Israel engagement are particularly acute for those with liberal political leanings.

### *Religious Liberalism*

There are a broad range of beliefs and practices within the liberal Jewish world, which includes Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Secular, Humanist, and pluralist/post-denominational. What these positions all have in common, and what makes them “liberal,” is that they see Judaism as a phenomenon which, rather than being purely Divine, has significant human cultural, historical and sociological influences and sources. Liberal Jews reject the fundamentalist notion that the corpus of Torah and Jewish law is literally a Divinely-authored body of work. (Some Jews who self-identify as Modern Orthodox might also share that sentiment, but in general, those opinions are much harder to voice openly in Orthodox communities.)

Liberal Jews tend to give more weight to modern values such as egalitarianism, even when those values appear to clash with tradition. Of course, there’s a wide diversity among the different liberal Jewish movements, and they all navigate the tension between modern values and tradition differently. But to liberal Jews, claims from Israel’s national-religious settlement movement that God promised us the complete Land of Israel in the Torah simply do not resonate.

While not all American Jews are religiously liberal, the vast majority are, despite increases in the Orthodox sector’s numbers over the past two decades or so. Israel engagement needs to take account of the religiously liberal nature of most young American Jews.

### *Conservatives and Liberal Zionism*

If you’re politically conservative, you’re probably going to disagree with some of my discussion of the problems facing Israel engagement. If you are religiously conservative (or Orthodox), you may not like my solutions for Israel engagement, or at least not the sources of some of my ideas, since they stem from liberal Jewish theology and learning.

But assuming that you agree with my underlying premise that a strong Israel-Diaspora relationship is to be desired, don’t let your being politi-

cally conservative stop you from reading this book and considering its arguments.

For one thing, most young Diaspora Jews are liberal — and whether or not you agree with their beliefs and feelings, it’s critical that we find ways to engage them with Israel.

For another, I hope that one powerful message this book will leave you with is that it’s possible to be avowedly liberal and intensely connected to Israel.

Before we take the next step in building up a new liberal Zionism, we’re going to explore a particular liberal approach to the Bible — one that I believe has a great potential to help us think about a liberal approach to Israel.