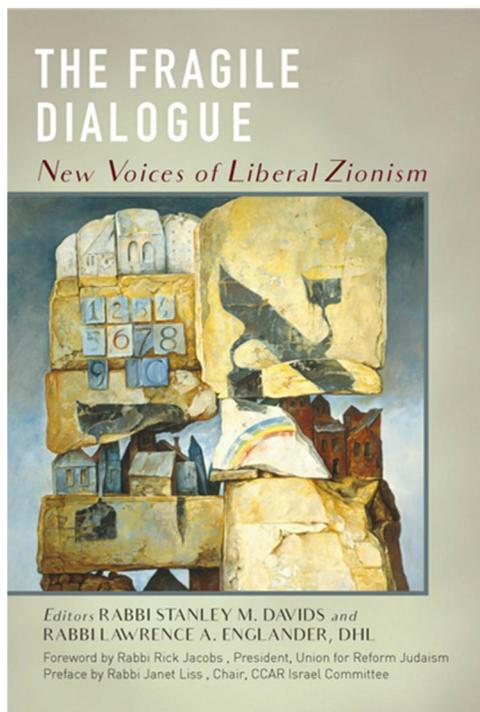


Fragile Dialogue: New Voices of Liberal Zionism



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The Fragile Dialogue offers twenty-two essays exploring what it means to have a progressive religious relationship with Israel. Some of these essays introduce distinct Zionist philosophies or ideologies. Others offer pragmatic solutions to identified challenges. Others are heartfelt personal tales.

Taken together – as a symposium of sorts, as editor Rabbi Larry Englander describes it—this collection might prompt and nurture conversation and contemplation around the relationship between the state of Israel and Liberal Jews worldwide. This study guide is meant to help individuals and groups engage in that conversation and join the symposium.

The guide offers ten sets of discussion questions, framed around several of the dominant themes explored in the book. We bring different authors into conversation together, and suggest essays that may be read with or against each other.

Many of the authors investigate multiple themes in their essays, and their inclusion in one discussion here does not preclude them from having what to say on another topic. Rather, we gather them together in this way with the hope that readers may draw out significant ideas and apply them to the dilemmas examined.

אמר רבי חמא (אמר רבי) חנינא מאי דכתיב ברזל ברזל יחד לומר לך מה ברזל זה אחד מחדד את חבירו אף שני תלמידי חכמים מחדדין זה את זה בהלכה.

Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina, said: “What is the meaning of that which is written: “Iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17)? This verse comes to tell you that just as with these iron implements, one sharpens the other when they are rubbed against each other, so too, when Torah scholars study together, they sharpen one another. (BT Taanit 7a)

1. The Myth of Israel: Communal Identity, or False Narrative?

Rabbi Dr. Michael Marmor introduces the concept of myth as “a story, a way of marshalling experiences and memories and attitudes ... in order to serve a communal or personal need.” He observes that myths have been deployed throughout the history of the state of Israel to describe and explain its place in the wider Jewish world, as well as to construct particular narratives explaining and contextualizing the many different important events that have occurred throughout Israel’s history. (“Myths and Facts: Zionism and Reform Judaism,” p. 3).

Rabbi Dr. Lisa D. Grant argues that we have mythologized Israel, so that we can approach it as “Zion as it ought to be,” rather than Zion as it actually is. She notes that the representation of Israel that is often presented in Jewish learning environments avoids the “real” version of Israel. She observes that as a result, current education on Israel and Zionism is low level and ambiguous, reflecting no ideological principles with no clear sense of meaning. (“Educating for Ambiguity,” p. 77).

- Is the story you tell yourself and others about Israel a myth to help us understand its place in the wider Jewish world, or a mask that causes us to avoid the “real version of Israel”? When do you lean in each direction?
- What myths have you heard emphasized in your community?
- Have you been a part of a conversation reminiscent of any of the three scenes described at the beginning of Dr. Grant’s article? How did it feel in each of them? What do they represent?
- What are the myths you tell yourself about Israel? How do these serve you well (along the lines of what Rabbi Dr. Marmor argues), and how might they hamper your own education (along the lines of what Rabbi Dr. Grant argues)?
- How can we become more aware of the ways in which we relate to these myths?
- How might we dialogue with others who have different myths? What if someone else’s myths appear to negate our own, or if our myths negate someone else’s?
- What is the version of the State of Israel that has been avoided in conversation around you? What would it be like if everyone simply spoke openly about these things? What is the upside? The downside?
- How much ambiguity are you comfortable living in? How many diverse opinions about the State of Israel would you be able to handle in a conversation? Where are the red lines for you?

2. Universalism and Particularism

Dr. Joshua Holo argues that liberal ideology in general pairs well with Zionism, and that in order to revitalize Jewish American Zionism, it must speak to the dominant secular liberal sensibility held by most American Jews. (“Peering into the Nationalist Mirror,” p. 11).

Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi addresses this idea, asking how much either universal values, or particular Jewish text and law, should influence our responses to the challenges of post-modern Zionism. (“An Evolving Covenant: Renewing the Liberal Commitment to a Jewish Democratic State,” p. 37).

- From where do you draw your own universalist and particularistic values?
- How do these orientations play into your conception of Zionism and Israel?
- How do you prioritize your commitment to universal human values or particular Jewish values?
- How do you navigate moments of tension between these values?

3. Liberal Humanism or Jewish Distinctiveness?

Joshua S. Block argues that the erosion in support for Israel is a symptom of the larger problem of the failure to identify with other Jews. His proposed solution is that universalism today must be built on a stronger foundation of Jewish belonging and learning. (“Social Justice and Universalism vs. Jewish Peoplehood and Particularism, and the Security of the Jewish State,” p. 47).

Rabbi Dr. Haim O. Rechnitzer on the one hand agrees, noting that the Israeli Reform movement will always appear more “Israeli” than “Reform” to American Jews, as long as the American Reform Movement maintains a commitment primarily to a universalistic, humanistic ideology. On the other hand, he suggests that a post-nationalist Zionism could be used to help guide Israel’s own national policies toward the realization of the universalist message of the Jewish tradition. (“To Be a Post-nationalist Zionist: A Theo-political Reflection,” p. 25).

Rabbi Joshua Weinberg agrees in some ways, noting that despite official statements and platforms, American (Reform) Jews have not made Zionism and Israel a significant part of Jewish identity. He argues that while Israeli and American Jews all hold different political and moral ideals, for those outside of Israel this is largely a hypothetical and emotional matter, while for those in Israel it is potentially a literal matter of life and death. He provides something of an antidote to Block’s and Rechnitzer’s critiques, suggesting that if American Jews are serious about a relationship with Israel, they must show up to Israel in massive numbers, and make significant financial contributions to causes of importance. (“Is There a Common Ground?”, p. 217).

- How do you understand the relationship between Jewish identity and Zionism?
- How have you experienced the rift between the Jews of the State of Israel and those outside the State?
- To where do you turn for ideas on what it means to be an ideal society?
- How can a stronger sense of shared Jewish belonging and deeper learning inform your understanding of relationship with Israel? What are some ways that this might manifest itself?
- Absent a shared sense of national or particular boundaries, how does Israel remain a shared project?
- Do you believe the values which define Israel’s society should be determined only by Israelis, or by all Jews? Where do you root your opinion?

4. Inclusivity and Indifference

Student Rabbis Max Chaiken and Eric Rosenstein describe their relationship to Israel and suggest that in their rabbinical careers, Zionism and Israel will take a lower priority. Focusing on Zionism and Israel is, to them, a barrier for entry to Jewish life for many, and should be demoted in order to help create more inclusive communities. (“Coming Clean on Israel: An Honest Assessment by Two Rabbinic Students of Priorities for Our Future Rabbinate,” p. 105).

Rabbi Leah Cohen shares her experience with Israel engagement and conflict on college campuses. She invalidates the view that college campuses are the battleground for Israel in America, and instead asserts that student indifference to Israel is the bigger problem. Rabbi Cohen proffers a different set of metaphors to use for the way in which college campuses engage with Israel in hopes of helping to educate against indifference. (“Metaphor and Meaning 101: The College Campus as Battleground,” p. 89).

Liya Rechtman writes about the necessity of addressing the political difficulties surrounding the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land within the context of synagogue life. She sees that many people are being excluded from this conversation due to a heavy-handed response from the Jewish establishment against those who hold beliefs they view as dangerous. In light of this, she calls for a new, more critical Zionist approach to the State of Israel that enables wider dialogue for people of all opinions and viewpoints. (“A Letter to My Rabbi, from Your Favorite Twentysomething Congregant,” p. 125).

- Each essay here argues for greater inclusivity, yet the authors argue for different strategies. What myths do each of these authors use, reject, or deconstruct, in support of their arguments? To which are you drawn?
- In what ways might Zionism create ambivalence or barriers to engagement for people? Who or what do you think is responsible for these barriers? How might they be overcome?
- Have you seen Zionism “become a stumbling block to Judaism” for people? Have you seen it as an entry point?
- What kind of space is ideal for exploring different truths about the State of Israel? Which pieces of information should be highlighted? Which pieces of information should be downplayed? What would it look like to be unbiased?
- How do you imagine Student Rabbis Chaiken and Rosenstein would respond to Rabbi Cohen?
- To what standards do you hold your communal leaders? What do you expect of them when it comes to Israel and Zionism?
- How do you draw your own red lines?

5. Personal Context and Formative Experiences

Rabbi Danny Burkeman's essay addresses the way in which generational change impacts individuals' relationships to Israel. By investigating the experiences held by different generations, Rabbi Burkeman asks readers to remain aware of which era of Israel they identify with, especially when in conversation with those who may identify with entirely different aspects of the country and its history. ("The Seventy Faces of Israel," p. 131).

In the conversation between American Rabbi Neal Gold and British Rabbi Charley Baginsky, the varied relationships to Zionism, Israel, and Jewish identity across the international Zionist spectrum are discussed. The two rabbis focus on the ways that conversation between Jews of different experiences is integral to framing a Jewish national identity of the future. ("An Intercontinental Dialogue: What North Americans and British Zionists Can Learn from Each Other," p. 141).

Dr. Joshua Holo's essay explores the ways that we relate to Israel based on two of Israel's foundational wars: The War of Independence of 1948, and the Six Day War of 1967. These wars created what he terms as an "irredentist mirror" with the Palestinians, as it leads to both people being "unredeemed" in their search for a national homeland. He argues that in addition to the Jewish right to the land of Israel, liberal Zionism must acknowledge the displacement of Palestinians in 1948, and the legitimacy of competing claims over one homeland. ("Peering into the Nationlist Mirror," p. 11).

- The authors presented here all note how our relationship with Israel is determined by the context into which we are born and by our own formative experience. They then explore what happens when different narratives collide. In what ways does the particular history of your country affect your understanding of Zionism and the State of Israel?
- Rabbi Burkeman argues that our personal and communal experiences define the Israel that we see looking back at us, and we need to acknowledge the possibility for there to be a multiplicity of faces. What faces and identities have you seen looking back at you when you consider Israel?
- Rabbis Baginsky and Gold observe a desire by progressive Jews to separate their religious and ethnic or national identities. How might this desire impact the phenomenon of the "irredentist mirror" that Dr. Holo describes?
- What do the wars of 1948 and 1967 mean to you? What other significant moments in Israeli and Jewish history inform your relationship to Israel?
- Have you ever experienced Judaism outside of your immediate, most familiar setting? How might different Jewish experiences inform different relationships to Israel?
- In what ways do these distinctions play out in your conception of your own country? What is the "golden age" of your home country? How has this conception of the "golden age" colored your contemporary experience of your home country?
- What is the difference between the State of Israel you know and the State of Israel of other generations? How have you spoken with those of different generations about the State of Israel? How have these conversations been productive? Unproductive?
- How can we form a shared, cross-generational vocabulary to speak about the State of Israel? What do you think the keys to holding this kind of discussion?

6. Aspirational Zionism: An Israel to Pray for

Rabbi Dalia Marx discusses the way in which Zionism has been addressed within Reform liturgy throughout history. She uses this lens to understand and chart the shifting relationship between Reform Judaism, Zionism, and the understanding of the place of Zion in the Reform movement. (“Zion and Zionism in Reform Jewish Prayer,” p. 155).

Rabbi John L. Rosove believes that Diaspora Judaism must shift from a narrative of Jewish history based around crises to a narrative based around our shared Jewish values, and that this narrative should inform a new “Aspirational Zionism.” Zionism will allow Diaspora Liberal Zionists to direct Israel towards what we believe to be in Israel’s best long term interests. (“To Love and to Criticize: Diaspora Reform Zionists Must Make Our Voices Heard,” p. 235).

- Rabbi Marx notes that the Israeli Reform siddur has as a guiding principle the desire to not only continue a sacred tradition, but also to respond to evolving contemporary needs. How does prayer—particularly about Israel—relate to Rabbi Rosove’s idea of Aspirational Zionism?
- How do you relate to the early Reformers who were “unsympathetic” towards references to Zion? What myth of Zion do you think they were unsympathetic to?
- In what ways does Israel influence the religious character of Diaspora Jewish identity?
- How do you most often think of Zion: as “the cradle of the Jewish people” or as a place you “petition to return to”?
- How does your understanding of Israel relate to the traditional Jewish view of redemption, as expressed in our liturgy?
- How does your understanding of Israel relate to the aspirational view that Rabbi Rosove suggests?
- How might these two views exist together on a spectrum? Where do you see yourself on this spectrum of redemption?

7. Spirituality & Text: What's Religious about Liberal Religious Zionism?

Rabbi Dr. Haim O. Rechnittzer, in advocating for a post-nationalist Zionism, observes that the spiritual components that constitute a people are not necessarily shared between Israeli and non-Israeli Jews. He questions where we can find resources for such a vision. ("To Be a Post-nationalist Zionist: A Theo-political Reflection," p. 25).

Student Rabbi Jesse Paikin's essay answers Rabbi Rechnittzer's question, arguing that Jewish texts—in particular the Talmud—provide such a vision, and have the power to transcend geographic, linguistic, and philosophical differences. He writes that the Talmud should define and inform progressive religious Zionism, as it demands active participation in a communal endeavor and a willingness to represent divergent viewpoints. ("Old Words, New Vision: The Talmud and Liberal Religious Zionism," p. 115).

Rabbi David Ariel-Joel further discusses the rights and responsibilities of Jews both within and outside of Israel to the State. He notes that a unique role of progressive religious Jews is to add the dimension of Torah to the Zionist endeavor. ("I Have No Other Country: From an Israeli Rabbi Living in the United States," p. 175).

- Do the texts that Student Rabbi Paikin offers adequately address the spiritual vision advocated for by Rabbis Rechnittzer and Ariel-Joel?
- Have you ever read a Jewish text that has changed your understanding of Israel? What was that experience like for you personally? Communally?
- What responsibilities does a religious grounding of progressive Zionism place upon you? As an individual? As a member of a larger Jewish community?
- In what ways does the State of Israel's specifically Jewish character require it to behave in certain ways towards non-Jewish citizens? Non-Jewish neighboring countries? How is this different from other countries' ethical bases?
- What is your sense of responsibility toward Israel, as a Jew who lives outside of Israel? From where does that responsibility emerge?
- What has been your experience as a Jew living outside of the State of Israel in critiquing Israel or advocating for changes within Israeli society?
- How does Israel respond to or impact your sense of Jewishness as evoked in our texts?

8. The Role of *Tikkun Olam*

Joshua S. Block argues that the current practice of social justice held by most liberal Jews is a remnant of 1960s thinking, and has left little room for Jewish particularism, arguing that this has contributed to an erosion in identification with Israel among North American Jews. He discusses ways in which he believes the Liberal Jewish world can reclaim their identity in the face of encroaching postmodern social justice movements that are antagonistic toward Israel threatening to obliterate our perspective on history. (“Social Justice and Universalism vs. Jewish Peoplehood and Particularism, and the Security of the Jewish State,” p. 47),

Rabbi Noa Sattath takes up the opposing viewpoint, arguing that universal *tikkun olam* should be front and center as part of Liberal Zionism. She places herself in line with the ideology of *Achad HaAm*, and argues that Zionism must not be solely based on the “Jewish” question, but also work to resolving the major social and economic challenges of all. (“Restoring *Tikkun Olam* to Liberal Religious Zionist Activism,” p. 197).

- Rabbi Sattath envisions an Israel in which Judaism is expressed in every aspect of society, not limited to separate religious spheres: the way we speak and create policy around the environment, transportation, socioeconomic gaps, etc. Joshua Block advocates for a distinctly Jewish voice that addresses distinctly Jewish needs. How might these two thinkers respond to one another?
- How do we ensure that being Jewish is not just another “brand” of universal activism, as Joshua Block worries?
- How might we—in line with Rabbi Sattath’s view—uphold a universalist, social justice-based approach to understanding the problems facing Israel, while—in line with Joshua Block’s view—maintain our commitment to distinctly Jewish issues, and not condemn Israel as a whole?
- When have you been able to maintain hope and idealism about something or someone, while still consistently confronting their failings and flaws? What gives you support in managing that balance?
- How do you negotiate the conflict of acknowledging the Jewish social and political advances that have taken place in the State of Israel while also acknowledging its continued human rights challenges?
- How has social justice played into your Jewish identity? What do you think the relationship between American Judaism and social justice ought to be? How has social justice helped you engage further in the Jewish community and/or pushed you away from it?

9. Disapproval, with Total Commitment

Rabbi Dr. Haim O. Rechnittzer (“To Be a Post-nationalist Zionist: A Theo-political Reflection,” p. 25), Rabbi David Ariel-Joel (“I Have No Other Country: From an Israeli Rabbi Living in the United States,” p. 175), and Rabbi Dalia Marx (“Zion and Zionism in Reform Prayer Books,” p. 155) all examine the Ehud Manor song Ein Li Eretz Acheret (I Have No Other Country). Rabbi Ariel-Joel argues that the song demonstrates both a total commitment to Israel, and disapproval against a society that is disintegrating morally. Rabbi Marx shows how the text has taken on a liturgical gravitas, appearing in the Israeli Reform *machzor* alongside the prayer for the State of Israel. Rabbi Dr. Rechnittzer notes that the song is adopted by all political segments of Israeli society, becoming a “psalm of Israeli civil religion.” He says its use in this makes it an expression of a distinctly Israeli sentiment, which he contrasts to Jewish or Zionist identity.

- What do you expect, morally, from the State of Israel?
- In what ways do you feel you can contribute to shaping Israeli society?
- In what ways and forums do you feel comfortable critiquing Israel?
- In what ways have you seen prayer and criticism intersect—as with the use of this song in the Israeli *machzor*?
- How have you seen Israeli identity to be distinct from Jewish or Zionist identities? In what ways beyond the obvious do they overlap?

10. Hagshamah: Self-Actualization

Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg argues that Israel is the only venue that can satisfy all of the basic needs of the Jewish people as a collective unit. He writes about how fulfilling basic human needs underlie the motivations of all people, and argues that through participating in a collective self-actualizing project, Jews in Israel are able to engage more deeply in their traditions, and ultimately to further self-actualize. (“Israel: Projection, Potential, and Self-Actualization,” p. 185).

Professor Alon Tal writes that Zionism has always been focused on meeting needs of the Jewish people as a collective entity. He notes that until very recently, the needs of individual Jews were placed secondary to the land and the collective, and that Zionism was synonymous with sacrificing for the greater good in both areas. Professor Tal argues that the new culture of individual self-actualizing has redefined Zionism, and that while collective identity has not disappeared, the reorientation has had significant negative impacts on the environment and the natural land. He sees a possibility in rallying around environmentalism as a new mode of Zionist engagement. (“The Land’s Still Small Voice Beckons Us All: Preserving a Collective, Zionist Environmental Ethic,” p. 207).

Yoav Schaefer writes that Israeli Jewish hegemony has led to many of the benefits articulated by Rabbi Vaisberg and Professor Tal, it has also rendered its Arab-Palestinian minority as second-class citizens. He explores the ways in which maintaining moral foundations is difficult in a self-described Jewish nation-state. (“Between Judaism and Democracy: Arab-Palestinian Citizens of a Jewish State,” p. 67).

- Have you experienced the State of Israel’s “inspirational ideal of the collective?” What does this collectivism mean to you? How does it impact your Jewish identity?
- How do you understand the relationship between Jewish self-actualization and a democratic, pluralist society? How would you navigate the tension that arises from the conflicts Yoav Schaefer observes?
- How do you relate personally to the idea of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people? How is it different than your relationship to the countries of origin of your recent ancestors?
- In what ways do you place your own individual needs secondary to others? When do you place the needs of those outside your circles of concern above your own? Do any of these decisions relate to your Jewish practices and beliefs? To your sense of Zionist identity?
- Both Rabbi Vaisberg and Professor Tal write about how land fulfills a basic need of individual Jews on the path to self-actualization. If you live outside the State/Land of Israel, do you agree—do you feel as though your needs can be adequately met?
- Are there ways that Jews living outside of the State of Israel can self-actualize, that Jews living within the State might not be able to?
- If, as Schaefer argues, self-actualization leads to causing others to become second-class citizens, would you be willing to give up your ability to self-actualize as a Zionist or as a Jew in Israel?

Conclusion

Rabbi Lawrence A. Englander summarizes the ideas, arguments, and questions put forth by the authors in this collection (“Afterword: Where Do We Go From Here? One Liberal Zionist’s Vision for the Future,” p. 245). On his own, he proposes “Covenantal Zionism” as a way to address them as a new mode of engagement with Israel. He suggests that we might discover a new set of Zionist mitzvot as the foundation of a liberal religious relationship with Israel. Having read these authors in conversation with one another, consider which arguments you find most compelling, and how you would answer Rabbi Englander’s own questions:

- How do we overcome our frustration with the contrast between the ideals of Israel’s founders and the harsh reality of broken or unfulfilled promises?
- How can we steer beyond the inertia of cynicism and expediency to address the pressing concerns of racism, ultra-nationalist messianism, and economic and social inequality?
- How might we exert some influence in forwarding the peace process?