

Why Israel Is Frustrated With American Jewish Leaders



The Jewish Week

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In Jerusalem, I read Gary Rosenblatt's column, "Frustration With Israel Is Growing Here At Home" (Jan. 8), with my own sense of frustration regarding American Jews and Israel. I have regular conversations with North American Jewish leaders. Many of them take too many cues from the loud but marginal voices in Israel, getting a very distorted view of reality and missing the big picture.

Jewish leaders' list of complaints cited by Rosenblatt opens with the failure of the Knesset "to liberalize positions on personal religious status — on such issues as conversion, marriage, divorce and women's prayer at the Kotel." Yes, our democratic political system is gridlocked and problematic, and the same (and much more) can be sadly said for the U.S. Congress.

On these issues, the formality of the Knesset and the symbolism of the Kotel are far less significant than what is happening elsewhere on the ground, among the wider population. A very large and increasing number of young Israeli Jews are experimenting with new and interesting forms of Jewish life. As Rosenblatt knows from his visits, in Jerusalem, there are dozens of new and unaffiliated minyanim, reflecting the full range of options, and far removed from the official rabbinate, which is rapidly moving itself into irrelevance. Many young couples choose to ignore the state religious structures when they get married, and are developing new twists on ancient Jewish rituals to make the occasions meaningful to them.

However, in order to appreciate and be part of this renaissance, which in addition to security is the main reason for having our own state and space, young Americans need a Jewish education. And here, U.S. Jewish leaders and their organizations are not doing well. Far too many young Jews — including many who are outspoken critics of Israel — are terribly ignorant of even the basics, with little to zero knowledge of Hebrew or of Jewish and Israeli history.

Which brings me to "the conflict," and to Rosenblatt's point about young Jews "who want to see greater efforts to resolve the Palestinian conflict and who put the onus for the impasse on

Jerusalem” and the massive campaign to cast the Jewish state “as a pariah, accused of apartheid.”

In blaming Israeli policy for the fact that on many U.S. campuses, the classmates of Jewish students “shun them for identifying with Israel at all,” perhaps American Jewish leaders are overlooking the failures at home, particularly among liberal progressive diaspora Jewish leaders. Many Jewish students are stuck entirely in an American bubble, with no understanding of the centrality of Jewish self-determination (i.e., Zionism) to our survival as a people. So how can they even begin to understand Israel, let alone give us advice?

For two decades, too many American Jews have ignored or downplayed the gratuitous post-colonial Israel-bashing from the supposedly liberal bastions such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and which are echoed in the mainstream media. When Israeli soldiers are repeatedly and falsely accused of being child murderers and war criminals, where is the outrage from the mainstream American Jewish establishment? A couple of years ago, the federations finally established a fund to fight boycotts, but this group is also largely invisible and very timid.

Instead, fringe Israeli voices that polarize and demonize our society under the façade of human rights, democracy and peace are given legitimacy and resources in America, and the Jewish leadership is silent or in some cases complicit. Much of the BDS war — and make no mistake, the goal is the elimination of Israel — involves bogus peace NGOs that received their initial funds and public relations boost via U.S.-based Jewish groups who thought they knew better than the Israeli public. Such groups include the Coalition of Women for Peace, the Israel Committee Against House Demolitions, Breaking the Silence, Jewish Voice for Peace, and many others.

And now, when the Israeli public finally demands an effective response to the NGOs that lead to this demonization, the American Jewish leadership condemns Israel, repeating liberal pieties about free speech, but without addressing the real issues. In all of the criticisms of the proposed new NGO funding transparency laws, I have yet to see any serious understanding of the threat or alternative strategies. On this, as on so many issues, criticizing Israel from a distance is far too easy.

When crying out for an Israeli peace plan, “any plan,” your interlocutor makes it seem so simple. Like most Israelis, I also hope for a peace plan, but not any plan, and certainly not one that will bring us yet another disaster when it fails. The reality that I see not far from the windows in my Jerusalem home includes Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS, Assad, Iran and others. Our only “peace partners,” led by Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah group, are corrupt and stuck in the rejectionist dead-end of 1948. So no, “any plan” that helps Israel’s PR among liberal students, but makes our security situation even worse, is not better than the status quo.

On this and many other issues, I understand why American Jewish leaders want us in Israel to take risks, and probably think that this is for our own good. But we do not see many American Jewish leaders taking many risks in terms of criticizing President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry when they put all of the blame and responsibility on Israel, and patronizingly give the Palestinians a free pass. And where are your tough decisions to exclude BDS groups and Israel bashers from the big “Jewish tent?”

So it is not only “that Israel’s leadership is moving in a direction at odds with the next generation of Americans,” but that America’s liberal Jewish leadership is moving in a direction at odds with Israel and our realities.

If we are to continue to be one people with a common fate, both Israel and diaspora Jewry will have to learn much more about each other’s realities, and to move toward a meeting point in the middle.