

## The Challenging Family of Israel

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From time to time, a conversion candidate will tell me that part of what has drawn them to Judaism and to Congregation B'nai Israel is that Jews are kind, warm, accepting, welcoming, and affirming of each person in their distinctiveness. They don't feel judged. Instead, they feel valued.

I understand what they mean. Some of our conversion candidates have survived religious trauma. In previous communities, they have not been welcome to ask questions, and their identity has not been tolerated, let alone accepted. In some cases, they have repeatedly been told that they face eternal damnation, even before they reveal their plan to convert to Judaism.

Still, I am duty-bound to tell them the truth. If they hang around us long enough, they will find that we are not all so nice and kind, certainly not all the time. We have our jerks, too!

This Shabbat, we complete our annual reading of the Book of Genesis—the story of four generations in one family who would become the Jewish people. One after the other, alongside their faithfulness and goodness, we see the flaws and downright meanness of our patriarchs and meanness. Abraham nearly sacrifices his son. Sarah demands Ishmael's expulsion. Isaac and Rebekah engage in destructive, competitive favoritism with their children, ending in nearly fratricidal disaster. Jacob then perpetuates that dysfunction to the next generation, so favoring his beloved Joseph that Joseph's brothers consider killing him before selling him into slavery. This week, as we meet a fifth generation, Joseph tries to end the pattern of favoring the younger son; but Jacob won't have it, insisting on bestowing the primary blessing on Ephraim, not the elder Manasseh. On his deathbed, Jacob then "blesses" each of his twelve sons, but for the three eldest, he really has only curses. Here's a taste: "Reuben, my first-born, ... excessive in exalting [yourself], ... Licentious one, boil up like water no more."<sup>i</sup>

Genesis includes nearly as many reconciliations as ruptures; but still, the pattern is set. This people will frequently battle among ourselves. Our disagreements, the substantive as well as the petty, frequently divide us.

I am not referring to the fact that we have different synagogues, reflecting a variety of ways of practicing Judaism. Though we don't always behave respectfully in negotiating our diversity, pluralism is good. No one synagogue can meet every Jewish person's religious, spiritual, and communal needs.

Even political differences are not always destructive. With widening polarization, American progressives and conservatives have increasingly sorted themselves into different houses of worship. Going separate ways can be sad, and it's not as easy in a community the size of ours as in a larger one. We do well to welcome diversity of opinion, even as we acknowledge that a nonnegotiable bedrock religious principle—for example, celebrating people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities—may be viewed by some as an endorsement of a particular political party.

Recent months, though, have presented a new, unprecedented challenge. While much of the American Jewish community has demonstrated consensus in support of Israel and its war effort in response to the horrific October 7 terror attack, others have objected.

I was appalled that anti-Israel activists chose a religious observance, Chabad's public candle-lighting for the first night of Chanukah, as an opportunity to protest. Taking a political protest to a Jewish religious observance is antisemitic. Equally troubling was that the demonstration was styled as an effort of Jews who do not support Israel's armed conflict with Hamas.

The tiny contingent of Jewish protestors among the Little Rock demonstrators are joined by larger numbers calling for ceasefire. This month, some eleven hundred young Jewish adults, describing themselves as alumni of the Union for Reform Judaism—young people who grew up in our Reform congregations, camps, and NFTY—signed a strongly-worded letter demanding that our Movement call for ceasefire. The letter even quoted a United Nations description of Israel's war effort as “genocide.” I am not aware that any young people from our congregation signed that letter. My younger son was invited to do so, but he declined, as did his close friends.

In a podcast this week, my teachers, Rabbi Donniel Hartman and Yossi Klein Halevi distinguished between two groups of people who are calling for ceasefire—those who deny, minimize, or justify the terrorist attack of October 7, on the one hand; and, on the other, those who, despite accepting the full horror of the Hamas assault, but do not support the nature of Israel's military response.<sup>ii</sup> The young Reform Jews who demanded that our Movement call for ceasefire almost certainly fall into the latter group, though their rhetoric strayed into the narrative of the first, which is disappointing. Still, I urge us to resist any temptation to brand these young people as traitors to the Jewish people, writing them out of our people's future.

Two weeks ago, speaking at our Union for Reform Judaism's sesquicentennial celebration, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union, addressed

the young Reform Jews calling for a ceasefire: “[W]e must...acknowledge [that] a significant number of younger Jews are struggling with the humanitarian disaster the civilian population of Gaza is facing and with America’s, [and] the American Jewish community’s, strong support of Israel’s prosecution of the war. ...My hope is that we can remain strong in our support of Israel but not cut off our younger Jews, including those within our own families and in our synagogues, with whom we need to stay in relationships, because we love them. They wrestle with these complex moral issues drawing on the justice and equity values they learned through their Jewish upbringing that we nurtured in them.”<sup>iii</sup>

We would do well to recall that, throughout most of 2023, from January through September, the Israeli public was more divided than ever in the State’s seventy-five-year history. Notably, large numbers of reservists refused to report for voluntary duty, which was unprecedented. Nevertheless, when Israel came under attack, more than 100% of reservists reported—that is, more reservists reported than were called. Protestors transformed themselves from *achim laneshek* to *achim lameshek*, a Hebrew play on words, as “brothers and sisters at arms,” in opposition to the government, became “brothers and sisters for the farms,” assuring Israel’s food security by volunteering in agricultural work when so much of the country’s farm labor became suddenly unavailable. They still deplore Prime Minister Netanyahu and the most extreme right-wing government in Israel’s history, but they stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the government’s supporters to combat evil.

As the Book of Genesis draws to a close, Jacob dies. Honoring his wishes, his sons bury him alongside his parents and grandparents in Hebron. Upon their return to Egypt, though, ten of the bereaved brothers are terrified. Now that their father is dead, will Joseph get his long-deferred revenge on them for selling him into slavery? No, Joseph assures them. He has long since forgiven them. The last words about this family are, “Thus did he comfort them and speak straight to their hearts.”<sup>iv</sup>

Like the matriarchs and patriarchs before us, we Jewish people can be divided and even divisive from time to time. We are a challenging people, a fractious family. Our greatest asset, though, is unity that does not require unanimity, sameness, or even consistent fondness. Let us always articulate our differences respectfully. Let us seek to be forgiving when that’s possible. Then, united, may we face a too-often-cold world as one.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 49:3-4.

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Donniel Hartman and Yossi Klein Halevi, “Israel at War—Ceasefire?” *For Heaven’s Sake* podcast, December 27, 2023, <https://www.hartman.org.il/israel-at-war-ceasefire/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Rick Jacobs, “Bound Together for Good,” Shabbat Sermon at the URJ 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, December 16, 2023, <https://urj.org/blog/bound-together-good>.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 50:21.