

## Context

*What are our guiding principles about the State of Israel? Do we have shared understandings, opinions, reactions, to Israel's actions? The Jewish community in the UK contains a diverse range of views on all sorts of issues, but none more so than on the State of Israel. In this article, **Colin Eimer**, Emeritus Rabbi at Sha'arei Tsedek, North London Reform Synagogue, explores the question of whether there can be a 'Reform approach' to Israel and what it might entail.*

## Content

With over 30,000 members, in good Jewish style you are likely to have at least 30,000 views and opinions on any matter in question – and in particular as far as Israel is concerned. So is it possible to speak of a specific Reform attitude to Israel? What might constitute a 'Reform view' of Israel?

Reform Jews do not tend to see Israel as having been 'given' or 'promised' to the Jewish people by God. The Torah is a product of human creation inspired by God, written long after the events being described, reflecting their hopes, fears, aspirations, ideals, the society and circumstances in which they lived. So there can be no categorical claim of a God-given right to the land. Interestingly, while the Torah may have employed such terminology, Classical Judaism was more circumspect and didn't, for example, speak of the land in any way as *ha'aretz ha'muv'techet*, the 'Promised Land.'

That said, ever since the beginning of our history as a people, we have been connected to *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel: hoped for it, yearned for it, prayed towards it and for it. Every Jewish 'holy' moment, be it in prayer, on festivals, at celebrations, almost always has an implicit or explicit reference to *Eretz Yisrael*. Even at a funeral, the words of comfort to mourners speak of them as being among the 'mourners of Zion and Jerusalem'.

In its short existence, Israel has achieved incredible things; in science, art, literature, medicine, agriculture, technology and so on. For its size and age, it has an impressive list of Nobel Prize winners in many fields. It has an equally impressive free press. Whatever the imperfections of democracy in Israel, it remains the only state in the Middle East which can make any realistic claim to democratic status. Israel, as a political state, was established by decision and vote of the United Nations. While the Shoah might have brought forward the moment when Israel came into existence, that event did not, in and of itself, 'create' the State of Israel.

A Reform view regarding Israel must begin with Israel's right to exist as an independent and sovereign entity, advancing the interests and well-being of all its citizens, protecting them within secure borders. That much must be the bedrock on which any Jewish view regarding Israel is anchored. Beyond that, are there Reform Jewish values which should/could inform our attitude to Israel over and above its right to exist?

From its inception, Reform Judaism focussed on what came to be called 'Prophetic Judaism,' arguing that Judaism is not only concerned with ritual matters: how we observe Shabbat and the festivals, what we eat and so on. Prophetic Judaism looks to the ethical and moral teachings of the Biblical prophets as equally important in a fully-lived Jewish life. These teachings include protecting the weak and underprivileged in society; with the powerful not oppressing the powerless. Indeed, the most-repeated command in the Torah is the obligation to care for the stranger because we know the heart of the stranger; we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

How does this impact on a Reform view of Israel?

Since 1967, Israel has been an occupying power in the West Bank. Whatever the causes of this 50 year situation, the end result has been an imbalance of power between Israel and West Bank Palestinians. It raises the moral questions that arise wherever a military, which also means, therefore, a political power is in a place where ideally it does not wish to be, where it can only maintain its presence by military and, therefore, oppressive means, and where the pre-1967 inhabitants do not wish them to be there. In its starkest, most basic formulation, the question is, as Ari Shavit wrote, “will the Jewish State dismantle the settlements or will the Jewish settlements dismantle the Jewish State?”<sup>i</sup>

There are two conflicting narratives between Israel and the Palestinians about what happened before, during and shortly after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. What is *Yom Ha'Atzmaut*, Israel Independence Day, for Israelis and Jews worldwide, is *naqba*, ‘calamity’ for Palestinians and Arabs worldwide. Israelis and Palestinians each have ‘their’ version of events which they see as the ‘correct’ one. In such a complex situation, it must be clear that justice and injustice co-exist on both ‘sides’ and continuing historical research reinforces that view.

The Jewish world is torn by uncertainty about how to respond to these narratives: how to act fairly and justly while not compromising the existence of the State of Israel. It seems difficult to maintain a stance that is “Israel right or wrong.” Israeli governments, of whatever complexion, are no less-fallible, no more-endowed with wisdom than any government of any country. How do we separate the actions of Israeli governments from Israel’s right to exist? The ‘legacy’ of the Shoah, continuing world hostility towards Israel and emergent anti-Semitism do nothing to calm Jewish anxieties. Within the Jewish world, there is no issue that arouses more emotion, creates more bitter divisions and engenders more invective than this.

While it is inappropriate for a ‘Reform view of Israel’ to advocate supporting this or that Israeli government, what does seem appropriate to say is that we should be supporting and encouraging any initiatives which promote dialogue and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. Such a view would reject anything which wishes to demonise Palestinians or Arabs, which rejects any dialogue. There can be no security for Israel while Palestinians do not enjoy freedom; and there can be no freedom for Palestinians while Israel does not enjoy security.

As Reform Jews, our support is complicated and compromised by the discriminatory attitude of an Orthodox religious establishment in Israel which holds increasing political and economic power. It has consistently refused to recognise Reform values and principles; it has consistently denied Reform’s legitimacy and withheld from Reform institutions the State financial support granted to similar Orthodox institutions.

In our siddur, the prayer for Israel, recited every Shabbat, asks that God gives “wisdom and understanding to its leaders and friendship and compassion to the people, so that there may be lasting peace on its borders and in its homes.” For there to be peace on a border means that there has to be peace on both sides of that border. At the end of the Amidah, as we speak of the ‘Maker of peace bringing this peace on us all,’ the tradition is that we take three steps backwards as we recite those words. If we wish to make peace, we all have to be prepared to step back, to move away from fixed, entrenched positions and attitudes – only then can we make lasting peace.

## **Contemplation**

*There are ideas in Colin’s article that might make some very uncomfortable. Others will celebrate that a Reform Rabbi will use words such as “occupation”. Is this diversity of response in our communities a cause for celebration or sadness? How do we hold such disagreement in a way that is positive and productive? Are there, underneath it all, shared principles that unite us? How can we enable conversations on such a divisive subject so that people don’t disengage?*

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<sup>i</sup> My Promised Land, Scribe, London 2014, pp398-399