

Rabbi Benjamin David

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Two Truths and a Lie

When I was growing up, we would play the game 'two truths and a lie.' Do you know that game? It's a good game. You'd go around and each person would have to make two true statements about themselves and one false statement. The group would then guess which of the three statements was the lie.

Should we try it? Yes. OK I'll start:

I used to be a hockey goalie.

When I was in my 20's I went bungee jumping in Switzerland.

I love pears.

Any guesses? Hmm. Well I do NOT love pears. Ok let's try one more:

Lisa and I met at Camp Harlam when we were fourteen.

This summer my family and I went camping at the Grand Canyon.

My favorite movie is the Shawshank Redemption.

What do you think? Any idea? HMMMM. Actually Lisa and I met at Camp Harlam when we were...eleven.

Everyone always loved this game. It's about imagination. It gives you a sense of who people are, where they've been, how they think, what they stand for.

We didn't know it at the time, when we were playing it in youth group or on the ride home from camp in the back of the David family car, but we were learning about something called Cognitive Dissonance. That's a big phrase. Cognitive Dissonance. What is it? It's the stress that can come as we attempt to hold two truths at once, especially if they are competing truths.

The fact is that we Jews love Cognitive Dissonance. Our lives are loaded with conflicting narratives and seemingly incompatible truths.

Think about it: The Torah is inspiring and captivating while also antiquated and at times deeply problematic.

Or how about this: I want to do everything I can to protect the natural world and all its creatures while I also really, really love a good brisket.

Or here's one: I believe Shabbat services are restorative and sacred, connecting us to our God and our community, but I also want to go to the Phillies game on Friday night with my friends.

Or how about this one: I want desperately for KI to remain rooted in its remarkable history while I also want us to embrace the best of innovation and technology as we foster a kind of Judaism that is forward-thinking and relevant.

There are so many of these. Here are some more: We Jews feel at home and secure here in the United States in ways our grandparents and theirs, looking out from their homes in Poland and Germany and Ukraine, could never have fathomed, while at the very same time antisemitism is all about us and we feel the grinding, heavy weight of prejudice and narrow mindedness so often these days.

Here's one: Israel embodies the best of Jewish values. It's a place that is enriching, embracing, diverse across peoples and geography, a mosaic of faiths and cultures, blending yesterday and tomorrow, where religious and secular meld together seamlessly, and yet Israel teeters maybe more than ever before on an exclusive, ultra-Orthodox, anti-democratic society governed by a fanatical coalition that is baffling at best and altogether dangerous at worst.

How many truths can you hold in your hand at once? How many conflicting stories can we carry with us at the same time?

In an age of oversimplified, black-and-white thinking, where everything has to be put neatly in a box, from our politics to our Zionism to our understanding of everything from economics to history to Jewish identity, how can we challenge ourselves to carry nuance and multiple realities simultaneously?

When I was growing up there was a pitcher for the Astros named JR Richard, who could hold eight baseballs in his hand. Eight! Now we're not on the Astros and actually the Astros might be our new nemesis after last season. We're not living meagerly in the cloistered shtetl of yesteryear, hoping just to survive. We're not living in a time when Israel is but an idea, something we dream of and pray for from the pews.

To live here and now, to be us, today, while we as a synagogue community are so fortunate and so blessed, and our lives are fundamentally good, we acknowledge at the same time that we live in a time of unrelenting messiness. This is early autumn of 2023 and here you must be able to hold various truths at the same time and no place is that more important – even essential – than when it comes to our relationship with Israel.

That's what this sermon is about. Can you hold multiple truths in your hand when it comes to Israel?

This summer we had the best trip to Israel. Twenty-four of us. Across ages and backgrounds, we got on our El Al flight out of Newark. We flew halfway around the world and then there we were, all of a sudden, with a giant blue sky overhead and Hebrew buzzing around us. We were in Israel. Moses never made it there but we did.

Our days were packed: Jaffa, Caesaria, we rode jeeps through the Golan Heights, we walked the narrow alleyways of Tzfat, we rafted down the Jordan River, we put our hands on the Western Wall and welcomed Shabbat as we gazed out at the walls of the Old City. We prayed atop Masada and floated in the Dead Sea.

We ate watermelon. We ran into people, met up with cousins, took in the chaos of the *shouk*, marked Havdalah in the shadows of the Tower of David.

We laughed. We loved it. We joked with Itzik our tour guide and bonded with Zion our bus driver. We took in Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust memorial and recited Kaddish for the six million who would never find safe haven in the grandeur of Israel.

We balked and stood silently as we learned of those Holocaust survivors who were the last remaining member of their family; they came to Israel and then died fighting in the War of Independence. The memorial to this group specifically is an overturned house; it a house that would never be built up by subsequent generations. It's called the Memorial for the Last of Kin.

We learned about the West Bank. We visited Gush Etzion. We heard from new immigrants. We talked with troubled teens. We zip lined. Even the rabbi went on the zip line. We stayed up late. We got up early. We didn't want to leave. We resolved to come back.

And all the while during our trip there was the undercurrent of the political realities playing out every day. As you may know a coalition of ultra-orthodox parties brought Benjamin Netanyahu back to the Prime Minister's seat and quickly thereafter came proposals that threaten so many of the fabrics that bind together to create a functional democracy.

The proposals are jarring: the executive branch can override the judicial branch at any time and undo its rulings. The continued denigration of non-Orthodox institutions and their leaders. Harsh limitations on immigration. Staunch backing of settlements and their ongoing construction. Religious exemption from army service.

Protestors have taken to the street every week for most of this year. Waving the Israeli flag high and proud with great gusto, they are crying out for the state Theodor Herzl envisioned over a hundred years ago, a place for all Jews, regardless of ideology or affiliation, a place predicated on justice and equity, upstanding and resolute in its moral, ethical and legal character.

They are crying out for the place our parents and grandparents fought for, the place embodied by David ben Gurion and Golda Meir and too many heroes to list.

It was ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the tiny state, who stood up – five feet tall and brimming with chutzpah - at what would be called Independence Hall but had until then been a very modest Tel Aviv art gallery. With the war already raging outside and thousands gathering in the streets to celebrate Israel's birth, ben Gurion read from the Declaration of Independence through static-filled speakers on Friday, May 14, 1948:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.

It was a moment of profound hopefulness, a moment for which our people had been longing for centuries as they remained scattered and beleaguered around the world. As the State of Israel was finally born Jews across the globe had to ask, echoing the Israeli poet Rahel, 'is this real or am I dreaming a dream?' This was an Israel of unity and steadfastness, brought into being by a mix of fate and determination and God.

Independence Hall represents the best of Israel. It represents all of it: history and hope and togetherness and faith and grit and intellect and courage.

But there are other symbols too of Israel that are so compelling and so sacred; I offer up these symbols as a juxtaposition to the painful reforms and accompanying proposals that test our connection to the place again and again.

Consider for a moment the mezuzah at the entrance to the children's memorial at Yad Vashem, worn almost totally smooth by the countless hands that have touched it as they entered this harrowing space.

It's a space that honors the million and a half children murdered by Hitler's unthinkable Nazi hate machine. How many have walked through that doorway to that exhibit to remember, to cry, to pray, to try to conceptualize, to apologize that the world couldn't save them, that their lives would be cut so tragically short, that they would never bloom into the teachers, the doctors, the artists, the writers, the parents, the rabbis, the poets, the human beings that they should have been.

The worn mezuzah shows that we are a people who remember; we have not forgotten and we will not forget. That our hearts and hands will come back to them and their story again and again and again. The worn mezuzah shows that those sacred young lives matter to us and matter deeply to Israel.

That mezuzah is the best of Israel too. Memory and honor and shared experience, ritual, the human heart and such undying passion and compassion.

Or consider this, another inspiring Israeli reality: In the north of Israel is a Kibbutz called *Lohamei Ha'Getot*, the Ghetto Fighters. It is a kibbutz founded after the Holocaust by a group that fought in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943, eighty years ago this past spring. They came to Israel together, survivors, warriors, downtrodden but still living. Broken but breathing. They were ready to begin anew in a new place and that's what they did.

They took their pain and their scars and their stories and they brought all of it to Israel and vowed to create a life of opportunity and joy for those who would come after them. They did that. It's there still, the kibbutz, blossoming each spring. It continues to grow and evolve, like the country all around it.

This too is the best of Israel. Forging ahead. Taking new steps. Writing a new chapter. Taking what was and bringing its message to tomorrow. Learning together. Marching together. Living together.

Or how about this. Atop Masada, not long ago there were date seeds found. These seeds were thought to be two-thousand years old. Testing confirmed that they were. Some of you know the story of Masada, the desert fortress designed by King Herod.

It became the final refuge for those scant few Jews who had not yet fled as the Romans took control. The powerful Roman army had already besieged Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and now, with their shields and their armor, their great numbers, they were ready to root out these final few Jewish families, who were clinging to life, adamantly, atop an inhospitable mountain with nothing all around.

As the Romans circled Masada, 960 men, women and children made the most impossible choice, deciding to die by their own hand, rather than subject themselves to the torture and humiliation of inevitable Roman dominance.

And so it was. The Romans arrived at the top of the mountain and found only silence. Silence and bodies. Only two women and five children were found alive. They would go on to tell the tale.

Masada is a symbol today not only for what it is but for what can never be again and the fact that we will never be put in that position again, not with an Israel of depth and breadth, a place and a people committed to live and live fully even as there are so many detractors near and far. We come to Masada now not as we cling to life but as a reminder of how far Jewish life has come and how far Israel has come.

Back to the seeds. On a kibbutz not far away they planted those age-old seeds. They watered them and nurtured them and tended to them. I don't need to tell you how it ends. The seeds grew and in time became trees and the trees grew and now there are date palms that are linked in life and legacy to the story of and the brave people of Masada.

This too is the best of Israel. Then and now. Planting seeds of hope and hopefulness. Taking what was and breathing new life into it.

One more anecdote to remind us that Israel is not all politics and strife, that we need to remember the beauty that exists there even on days when we are frustrated by the decision-making of its leadership and relentless commentary of the international community:

After our group had experienced Masada we do what every group does, we loaded onto the bus and got ready to head down the road to experience the Dead Sea. We were still processing all we had seen at Masada (and all we had bought at the gift shop). As we got on the bus and found our seats, three men approached and asked if they too could come on our bus. I didn't know them. We didn't know them. Our driver and guide didn't know them.

As it turns out they too were bus drivers and as they had gone up to Masada with their group, they now needed a ride down to the parking lot to get back to their buses.

Now if three people approach you in the U.S. and ask for a ride, chances are you'll balk and politely decline or maybe not so politely decline. But in Israel we're all brothers and sisters. We stay away from each other here. We walk around suspicious. We assess each other.

In Israel, contrary to what you're led to believe, it's the opposite. In Israel there's a sense of family, a big, layered, complicated family. You're neighbors. You served in the IDF. You live side-by-side with dreams of peace. You share the same land and the same destiny. So of course our wonderful driver Zion gave them a ride down to their buses, laughing the whole way with them as they chatted about the profession they loved.

50 years ago today was one of the most gruesome wars Israel ever faced. Her neighbors attacked together on Yom Kippur knowing that the nation comes to a complete standstill on this day and this day alone. It's the one day that life truly and totally stops in Israel.



The Yom Kippur War wouldn't be the last heartbreaking chapter for Israel nor would it lead to far-reaching peace of course. But there would be loss of life, for Israel, not to mention for Syria and for Egypt. Even as they were caught off guard and ill-prepared, Israel did what it could to defend itself, denying another Masada but not by much.

Competing truths, hard truths, parallel truths everywhere you look: Israel is a place of peace, but always vulnerable. Israel is a place of moral character, but hardly perfect. Israel is galvanized by its miraculous past as it is a place reaching always for a better tomorrow. Israel is real; Israel is not (yet) the place Theodor Herzl envisioned so long ago.

To echo the closing lines of *Hatikva*, written in 1886 by Naftali Herz Imber, one of the countless souls who would never be as lucky as we are, living now, Jewish now, Jewish today, at a time when Israel lives, vexing and flawed and disheartening, sanctified and fabulous and heartening: *Od lo abda tikvateinu, ha'tikiva bat shnot alpayim...*

We have not yet abandoned our hope, the two-thousand-year-old hope, to be a free people in our land, the land of Israel, and Jerusalem.

Amen.