

To Sarah, With Love
Rabbi Elana Rabishaw – Rosh HaShanah 2024/5785

We have all seen images of student protests on college campuses in the past few months. Let's take a few moments to imagine one of those students. Let's call her Sarah.

We all know a Sarah.

Let's say Sarah grew up like me, attending Day School in a large metropolitan area with a vibrant Jewish community.

Like me, Sarah learned to read, write and speak in both English and Hebrew. Her school days were filled with Jewish studies and tefillah just as much as they were with math and science.

For both of us, a connection to the modern State of Israel was embedded in nearly everything we experienced. We started each morning with Hatikvah. As in Israel, there was no "spring break," just Passover break, even when Passover fell late in the school year. Jewish holidays were incorporated into classroom bulletin boards, art projects, and secular classes. My school even had an assembly to honor the legacy of famous Israeli poet Naomi Shemer, composer of the renowned song Yerushalayim Shel Zahav.

I learned and deeply felt that being Jewish meant that I was part of the people and the land of Israel. And that one day, I would build my own life and relationship with the land. I could not wait.

Years later, I relive those lessons and feelings as I watch your kids jumping around in the Kehillah Center, proudly singing Am Yisrael Chai. The People of Israel live. The best part of my work is knowing that my relationship with the land, state, and the people of Israel has led me to instill that same love I was taught into the next generation.

But Sarah? She doesn't feel the same way. We had the same upbringing, but something changed when Sarah went to college.

When Sarah went to class, she began hearing the words "power" and "privilege" repeatedly. And her mind opened up to what the brilliant Dr. Rachel Fish, who serves as special advisor to the Brandeis University Presidential Initiative to Counter Antisemitism in Higher Education, describes it as "a toxic stew of postcolonialism, post-nationalism, and postmodernism." These are important stories and lessons from other places and periods of time that are not exactly favorable towards us when placed like a template on the story of Israel and her establishment. And more importantly, they don't tell our story.

But, Sarah took the misguided lessons of her classes to heart. She started believing her instructors when they said Western civilizations were inherently destructive and dangerous to vulnerable populations. Sarah learned and began living by the theory that there is no singular truth in life and that everything is debatable through the truths of lived experiences. In these educational and social spaces, Sarah was encouraged to celebrate minority communities. To lift the non-majority voices in our midst is certainly a commendable effort. And along the way, she forgot about her own community.

Over the last several decades, American Jews were taught not to look so closely at our ethnic roots but rather to focus on the color of our skin. We quickly became white and forgot how

persecuted we used to be. No longer was Sarah the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. She recast her identity into the black-and-white narratives that she was exposed to.

From her research, Dr. Fish understands this behavior to be common among college students. As someone from an upper-middle-class family who attended private school, Sarah suddenly recognized her privilege and would NEVER want to be seen as immoral or racist. We must understand: this is not a departure from Sarah's upbringing. She was raised to be caring and compassionate and wants to be on the right side of history.

For many college students, it is easy for the lessons learned in class to shift into conversations about what is happening in Israel today. For many, this is straightforward. There are good guys and bad guys. The Israelis are a powerful, oppressive force who displaced Palestinians, the innocent victims. And if you believe anything else, you are immoral and racist. The problem is that the history of Israel and her neighbors has always been more complicated than this narrative but quickly oversimplifies into slogans.

Suddenly, Sarah had an epiphany. She felt her eyes were open to things she had never seen before. She had many questions. Why had no one told her these things before? Why hadn't she seen this side of Israel while traveling with school? Did the rabbis and teachers she loved so much lie to her? And if so, why? Why did no one tell her we were on the wrong side of history? Sarah felt betrayed.

She began to think that until college, no teacher, rabbi, or even her parents would tell her the truth! That Israel is in fact, a powerful oppressor. That the Israeli government is guilty of treating a minority population with violence and without compassion. And that our entire Jewish education has been a facade to make us complicit in continuing this inhumanity for another generation.

For Sarah, Yom Haatzmaut was no longer a joyful day to celebrate the miracle of Israeli independence but instead, a somber commemoration of the displacement of the Palestinian people from their homeland. Somehow, we became Pharaoh in our own story of the Exodus. The vision of Israel as an ingenious people who made the desert bloom transformed in her eyes into seeing Israel as a force, not for good innovation, but for evil exploitation.

As an emerging adult, Sarah felt a deep sense of shame. She was embarrassed that she hadn't known these things and was angry that the values she was taught were not actually lived by the people she trusted most. That Israel and all she stands for is antithetical to the Jewish values we learned as children.

She came to believe that if we in fact, were to live according to the values we were taught, we need to stand up for the innocent Palestinians and against the Israelis. So she did. Sarah proudly participated in the protest on her college campus this spring. And she experienced what she called her most authentic and powerful Jewish experience... In the encampment on her campus lawn. Wearing a keffiyeh in solidarity with the Palestinians, celebrating Passover, and praying for true liberation for those who were oppressed.

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As we speak, thousands of Sarahs are walking around college campuses. They are about to welcome Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, with their Jewish friends in their proudly "Jewish and anti-Zionist" spaces. We all know a Sarah—someone who

wholeheartedly believes that by living by the Jewish values they were taught, they must criticize Israel and all she is doing right now to defend her existence.

Like Sarah, I learned to champion the underdog, to root for David over Goliath. I knew the story of the Exodus from Egypt and that every day, we are commanded to **remember** that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt.

So when someone like Sarah says that there is an incongruence between the Jewish values taught and how they are embodied, as much as I want to dismiss her, I also understand how she came to this conclusion. I think that we all share the same set of values, and Tikkun Olam, making the world a better place is essential.

Again, Sarah doesn't hold these beliefs by accident. This is what she was raised to believe. In addition to the biblical story of Purim, where Queen Esther spoke up, we were also taught stories of leaders like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King and stood up for those whose voices needed to be amplified.

But Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, senior rabbi at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York, teaches that Tikkun Olam is not absolute and does not exist in a vacuum. It is not everything. Judaism boasts many other equally compelling values that guide our daily living.

Many of our values are universal. We care about the whole world and every human being because everyone is made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Midrash teaches that when the Holy One created the world, it began with a single person so that someone could never say to another "my ancestors are better than yours." These values are the foundation of who we are as a Jewish people.

However, just as we celebrate creation, we celebrate Rosh HaShanah, the anniversary of creation. Our unique rituals, like dipping apples in honey, are our specific way to relate to this story annually. This universal idea of creation balanced against that of the particular.

One way of thinking about the particular begins by recognizing that each of us has widening circles of relationships that grow beyond and lead to how we care about the whole world. Understandably, we care about our own families in different ways than we care about our neighbors. I still care about my neighbors, but not in the same way I care about my parents. There is value in recognizing our peoplehood, in where we belong. We proudly carry a particular set of texts, rituals, food, language, and history. I am proud of this and everything else that makes us unique, including the specific land we were called to in the Book of Genesis.

Rabbi Hirsch teaches that we "cannot erase our particularity to recognize universal rights and truths. It is not one or the other. It is both."

Judaism does not teach that we need to negate our own values; in fact, we must care for ourselves first and foremost because loving one's own family is a virtue—not a prejudice. Only then can we love and care for others.

Rabbi Hillel famously asked, *Im ain ani li, mi li?* If I am not for myself, who will be for me? It is a simple, rhetorical question that we must remember. Even though it is not easy, it is so much easier to be critical.

In the year leading up to the tragedy of October 7th, thousands upon thousands of Israelis filled the streets each Saturday night, protesting their government. They didn't like the direction that

the State of Israel was going. And they made it known by activating their values and speaking up. And guess what? I joined them. Why? Because Israel is mine, too, and I care about its future.

If Sarah were in the sanctuary right now, or if you want me to talk to your Sarah, this is what I would say: I don't agree with everything Israel has done or is currently doing. The difference is that I do not reject the Jewish state because doing so would be to deny a significant piece of my identity. There is no Judaism without Israel. There is no Torah without Israel. And right now, I am in pain when I consider the Sarahs on campuses who are ready to cut such a significant piece of themselves out in the oversimplified name of human values.

When planning a speech on antisemitism, Rabbi David Wolpe, Rabbi Emeritus at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and visiting scholar at Harvard University, imagined having the following conversation with his great-grandfather.

You know, there is some anti-semitism at Harvard", and he responds to me in shock. "There are Jews at Harvard?" and I say, "Yes, but some of them hate Israel," and he says, again in utter surprise, "There's an Israel?"

Not long ago, dreams of a Jewish homeland were just that—dreams. In 1902, Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, envisioned the State of Israel as liberal, economically vital, and inextricably linked to the rest of the world.

Today, we have the privilege of living in a world with a liberal and economically vital State of Israel that is a global leader in medical, technological, and agricultural innovation. There is so much to be proud of.

One of the miraculous things about Israel is that these victories are our victories. That's not to say Israel is perfect. But she is a country that ought to be afforded the same recognition as other countries, which includes the right and moral obligation to defend herself.

As an American, I support Israel's right to exist just like any other sovereign nation. And a Jew, I know it is critical to remember that our relationship with Israel is based upon the promise of a sustained relationship with God.

Israel is just as central to Judaism as God and Torah.

That is why, Sarah, I am glad you are proud of your Judaism. I want to continue listening and understanding your perspective.

But just because I listen and understand does not mean I agree. We must not only remember but also celebrate what defines us as Jews. We are responsible for ensuring our safety, security, and future as a unique people.

My heart breaks over the prospect of losing our land, which means losing our people and our future. That is the central problem with only focusing on universal values: becoming everything, in general, means becoming nothing in particular.

It is now the year 5785. This is not the time to lose sight of the covenant that our ancestors built with the Holy One. We need to recognize the critical role of the State of Israel in ensuring our existence for future generations.

Standing with Israel means embracing the essence of who we are—a people with a homeland embodying our dreams, struggles, and triumphs. May Israel be our heart, where our history and our future intertwine. May our legacy be that love for Israel does not negate compassion for others but strengthens our commitment to justice and peace. Let this be our blessing.