

Caught in the anguish

By Alice Rothchild, 9/24/2001

This year many American Jews have been numbed by the escalating Intifada and the tensions in Israel and stung by events in New York and Washington. At the same time, some American Jews have approached the New Year with a growing sense of anguish and uncertainty around a central core of Jewish identity - our relationship to the state of Israel and in particular the policies of the Israeli government.

The time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is reserved for self-reflection, renewing a commitment to a life founded on justice, and remembering and honoring the dead. In the tradition, repentance not only involves changing one's behavior, but also actively asking forgiveness from others.

For years, most American Jews have looked to Israel as a haven for victims of anti-Semitism and persecution, the only democracy in the Middle East, and a fulfillment of a long-held religious dream. Therefore, we are deeply troubled when we learn of increasingly militarized Jewish settlements in Gaza and bypass roads the width of football fields decimating olive groves while linking Jewish settlements in the West Bank, of Palestinian women humiliated at checkpoints by men in uniform, and Palestinian homes bulldozed as a form of collective punishment. American Jews have generously poured money and support into the Jewish philanthropies that have helped build a strong and vibrant Israel. We have pressured our government to support Israel both economically and politically and contributed to a massive military buildup while promoting the Oslo Accords and not paying full attention to refugee rights and international law.

Jews who have a long history of struggling against oppression, of fighting for the displaced and dispossessed, find themselves in the uncomfortable position of supporting policies that many of us disagree with. This New Year, while mainstream Jewish institutions are organizing solidarity rallies for Israel and voices are calling for war and revenge, many American Jews are asking painful, more personal questions:

Is it possible for Israel to be a democracy and a religious state? Will the power of the ultra-orthodox, and the fear and disappointment of the more moderate Jewish Israelis change this traumatized and weary people into a country that no longer reflects the Jewish values that have inspired us all? Is the intifada in some way a consequence of years of dispossession, closures, destruction of homes and orchards, and the humiliation of one people by another? Do political assassinations increase or decrease the number of suicide bombers? Is closure, which denies a whole population work, education, medical care, family contact, and enormously increases anger and hatred, an effective form of self-defense? Is the massively unequal distribution of water to Jewish settlers while Palestinian villages go dry, an appropriate distribution of scarce resources or a policy that breeds resentment and despair? As American Jews reflect and shift uncomfortably in the face of these facts of occupation and with the knowledge that our enormous economic and military assets are not always

balanced by an equal measure of wisdom and restraint, what does it mean to turn ones life toward justice, to make amends for that which is not defensible?

I am reminded of the beginning of the struggle against the Vietnam War, when any criticism of our troops was considered treason. I am reminded of a time when it seemed that apartheid in South Africa would last forever. This Yom Kippur, will American Jews have the courage to face the meaning and consequences of occupation, and to open their hearts to the narrative and aspirations of the Palestinian people who are also traumatized and weary?

Will American Jews take the lessons of social justice and human rights that are grounded in the Torah and in a long and powerful history and choose justice over the assumption that Israel is always correct and that military power can resolve this conflict?

Clearly in order to support all attempts to end the violence, we must support the end of violence in its broadest sense, from the suicide bomber to the state-run actions of occupation. We can as American Jews support our Israeli cousins and their Palestinian neighbors while honoring the needs of both people for secure, flourishing homelands. We can do this by supporting the growing number of Israelis committed to ending the occupation and by criticizing the strategies of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

We have learned from other nations and from Jewish tradition that the first step toward coexistence is to acknowledge the historical narrative of the other. American Jews are in a position to publicly acknowledge the Palestinian refugee issue created during and after 1948, and the terrible human and economic price of 34 years of occupation. In the spirit of the New Year, we can ask for forgiveness and make amends. As we recite the Yizkor, the remembrance of the dead, let us finally honor all the victims in this bloody struggle; from the firefighters and secretaries and travelers in New York, to the Jewish school children, the Palestinian babies, the young men who went to war filled with righteous fervor, and the families who have loved and lost them. Alice Rothchild is a physician at Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates.

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