



Advocating for Israel in the Next Generation

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Shabbat shalom. Today I'm here to talk about a theme that we barely ever discuss at synagogue, Israel. Well, actually to be more specific, I'd like to speak about Israel advocacy. As a Jewish teen, I used to feel as though I lacked sufficient knowledge to discuss issues relating to Israel. This past spring I had the privilege to participate in the Israel Engagement Fellowship, a program created through the collaboration between two fantastic organizations, The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and the Jewish Community Relations Council, both of which serve to strengthen the Jewish community. The program was a six part seminar in which we examined the relationship between our Jewish community and Israel and acquired the skills needed to advocate for Israel within our communities. My abilities to stand up for Israel have definitely been augmented as a result of the Israel Engagement Fellowship program, but advocating for Israel, or anything for that matter, is a difficult job. Let me recount an incident that I recently experienced to justify my point.

Last Saturday, I returned from a three week Social Justice program at the University of Pennsylvania in which we discussed various issues of inequality worldwide. Obviously, when discussing world conflicts, the Israel-Palestine conflict was brought up multiple times. A couple of Palestinian girls initiated a session that was advertised as a discussion about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Hoping to see and discuss other perspectives with my socially conscious peers, I decided to attend the session to see what they had to say. Upon attending, I found out that rather than being an open discussion, it was actually a one sided presentation addressing the injustices that the Palestinian people experience while living in Israel. These girls had a singular perspective on the issue and believed that Hamas, a terrorist organization, did not have influence over Palestine's government, but it was merely working to protect the Palestinian people against Israel's army. While some of my Jewish comrades and I tried to rebut these claims and inform the others in the room that Israel has many positive attributes, it was quite difficult to get the point across because not everyone is open to hearing contrasting opinions. After reflecting on the events of that day, I was reminded of a subject matter that we discussed often in the Israel Engagement Fellowship- the concept of two contrasting historical narratives, a Jewish perspective and a Palestinian perspective. Every historical event can be interpreted differently based on how it affected those people who experienced it. As Jews, the story that we hear usually goes something like this: *Once upon a time a people who were perpetually persecuted underwent a genocide and were finally granted a land of their own. They transformed this land from a desert wasteland to a successful agricultural and technological hub through many innovations while concurrently defending*

themselves from their hostile neighbors and threats within the country. While that perspective is one that the majority of us identify with, unfortunately it is only half of the narrative. The Palestinians' viewpoint is: *Once upon a time a people were living alone, peacefully in the middle of the desert. Then thousands of Jewish people started moving in to their land. WWII ended and England gave their land to the Jewish people. They are still in Israeli territory, but they're displaced from where they were once living and the Israelis are oppressing them through the implementation of check points and almost apartheid like conditions. And they support Hamas because they believe it is keeping them safe and looking out for their best interests.* Both of these narratives have some validity and as Jews, we need to acknowledge this and take it to heart. As much as we idealize Israel-it is a pretty great place- we need to see that it does have some issues regarding the treatment of the Palestinian people. And with that we reach another important concept that was discussed in the Israel Engagement Fellowship; you can support Israel without supporting all of its policies and practices. But we should recall that despite whatever issues we have with it, Israel is pretty awesome, the only democracy in the Middle East, our ally and a homeland for the Jews.

Through the attending the Israel Engagement Fellowship, I have been fortunate enough to learn both historical narratives. Many people, Jews included, only hear one side of the story. The Palestinian narrative may be so shocking that some people may completely flip their perspective. Many of my fellow high school students, upon entering college may be exposed to people with ideas similar to those of the girls who gave the presentation. Upon hearing such stories, some Jewish youth who have only been exposed to the Israeli perspective feel appalled by Israel's apparent behavior in the Palestinian narrative and they become Pro-Palestinian supporters. As members of the Jewish community, this is exactly what we want to avoid. There are many influential pro-Palestinian groups on college campuses and these groups make their voices heard. Sometimes, these supposedly anti-Israel sentiments may just be a guise for antisemitism. As a high school student who will soon be entering college, I personally find all of the anti-Israel activity on campuses disconcerting, but I am happy that at least I know where they are coming from.

So after all of this you may be wondering, how have I learned to advocate for Israel? Well, in the program we were told that to be a good advocate, one must have a solid background knowledge about Israel, the ability and willingness to speak up and the skills to advocate. We discussed four strategies in particular in relation to skills: the first of which being to stay informed, the second being to stay aware of biases in the media and to use social media, the third being to support Israel and pro-Israel organizations and the last being to practice political activism. To effectively stay informed, one should know the history of Israel in relation to the Middle East and stay up to date on current events pertaining to Israel. When reading the news, one shouldn't concentrate entirely on the Israeli perspective, but rather look to US and international news sources to obtain different perspectives and always be aware of biases in the media. One shouldn't blindly believe everything on the internet and there can be completely different takes on the same story depending on its source. Furthermore, social media pages from pro-Israel organizations and official Israeli government accounts typically are reliable sources for the Israeli perspective on issues and deliver relevant news. I learned that supporting Israel involves harnessing all of the knowledge that I have about Israel and making sure that



the people around me are well informed. There are many people around my age who know little to nothing about the conflict. When they arrive at college campuses, where pro-Palestinian groups are very visible, they see the Palestinian perspective. This, coupled with a media that typically portrays Israel negatively, tends to leave many in the dark about the multitude of beneficial deeds that Israel has accomplished. Therefore, I feel that it is necessary to advocate to those who lack knowledge or are on the fence about issues pertaining to Israel. As I learned from my experience, it is very difficult to advocate to those who have set opinions seeing as though said opinions will likely not be modified by anything. Lastly, some passionate advocates could join lobbyist groups or write letters to their congressperson or local government official about pertinent issues involving Israel.

I would like to thank Noa at the Jewish Community Relations Council and Pnina at the Jewish Federation for all that they taught me during the Israel Engagement Fellowship. It truly was an amazing experience and I would recommend it to any teenager who is interested in learning about Israel advocacy. So to wrap this up, I'll leave you all with a quote, "If you believe you can make a difference, not just in politics, in public service, in advocacy around all these important issues, then you have to be prepared to accept that you are not going to get 100 percent approval." I think that this quote pretty much sums up advocacy, but it was said by Hillary Clinton so to avoid current political controversy and to gain "one hundred percent" approval, I will now end with a different quote from a person who has guided me through life since my childhood, Dr. Seuss, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." Shabbat Shalom.