

From the Rabbi

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“Civil Discourse Redux”

One of the hallmarks of the White Plains Jewish community is its much-celebrated collaboration on matters of public interest. For one, we boast an inter-shul committee to discuss Israel affairs. One of the committee’s tasks is to sponsor joint projects on behalf of Israel. In the past, we have raised money for a fluoroscope to detect shrapnel in terror bombing victims; an ambulance for Magen David Adom; a youth village serving inter-ethnic Israeli orphans; and now a bi-cultural Jewish-Arab school in Jerusalem.

Over the years, our committee has brought in engaging (and sometimes controversial) speakers to address our multi-movement community. Most of them have represented a center- to center-right point of view. This spring the committee decided to invite someone who took a more left-of-center stance.

Now granted, it’s not simple to bring together Jews with widely variant views about the politics and policies of the Jewish State. But God knows we’ve tried, and we deserve huge credit for trying. When it came to this most recent speaker, I give the committee a *yasher koach* for stretching itself.

The speaker, who addressed us on the night following *Yom Ha’atzma’ut* (Israel’s independence day) was the internationally acclaimed Israeli legal expert Danny Seidemann. Mr. Seidemann began his talk with a ten-minute self-introduction that included his own story of Aliyah, his army service, his children’s army service, and his long involvement with the Government of Israel. He told us that in his opinion, the Jewish people needed a strong, secure State of Israel more than ever, and that it would behoove us to consider moving there and doing our part for Jewish history.

He let us know that he was a decorated colonel in the IDF, and that his children had seen combat in last summer’s Gaza conflict. He made it known that he had high-security clearance status in the Prime Minister’s office, and that the Government routinely called him to escort foreign officials on explanatory tours of Jerusalem’s border issues. What he didn’t have to say was that he is recognized as the world’s leading expert on international law pertaining to Israel and the territories it acquired in 1967, especially around the confines of Jerusalem.

My thought at that point was that anyone who was even slightly pro-BDS, or anti-Zionist, or anti-Semitic, or even a non-Zionist affiliated Jew – might stand up noisily and leave the room in a huff. Here, at least in terms of his credentials and his life story, seemed to be yet another center-right pro-Israel figure speaking to a group of pro-Israel American Jews.

Then he began laying out the complex legal case against much of what the Israeli government has either done or allowed to be done concerning the appropriation of Jerusalem property belonging to Palestinians. He discussed the Jerusalem municipality's elaborate plans to create public archeological parks in neighborhoods that were still under international negotiation, thus creating a *fait accompli* situation in which some sort of Palestinian municipal capital would *de facto* be impossible to establish. Most important, he told us that Jerusalem may be one city under Israeli rule, but that culturally and ethnically it remained not simply two cities but two *countries*, as anyone who drives through East Jerusalem can readily see. He spoke about both benign and intentional neglect of municipal services for residents of East Jerusalem. He warned of mounting tensions in Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods as a direct result of poor services, property appropriation by nationalist Jews, and aggressive police tactics.

At this point, most of his audience seemed not to be able to remember who this man was. They certainly had forgotten his strong classically Zionist opening statement about the need for a proud, secure Jewish State and his own prominent role in defending it. All they could see was yet another left-wing, self-hating Jew who wanted to concede our hard-won State to the Arabs and help us commit national suicide. Some folks heckled. Some asked biting questions. Some left early (and noisily). Many said afterward that the Jerusalem he described in no way corresponded to the Jerusalem that they themselves had visited many times.

I was proud to see a more polite, open-minded attitude on the part of Bet Am Shalom members in attendance. Some of our congregants heartily disagreed with Mr. Seidemann, but they treated him as a credible individual with a legitimate point of view. Some applauded his frankness and his erudition, even if they couldn't get their minds around everything he was preaching. Some, of course, heartily agreed with his point of view.

I'd like to think that everyone who comes with us on a Bet Am Shalom tour of Israel, including our children and teens, sees not one or two sides - but *many* sides - of the socio-political landscape there. We see the security fence and the neighborhoods on either side of it. We talk with people like Danny Seidemann and with his opposite numbers among the policy makers of Israel. We drive through Arab Jerusalem and see with our own eyes neighborhoods that clearly resemble Cairo and Amman more than any place in Jewish Israel. We stand on promontories at the edge of the West Bank and stare down on the heavily populated coastal plain of Israel (including a birds-eye view of Ben Gurion Airport), and we talk frankly about the trade-offs between Palestinian statehood and Israeli security. We go into Israeli Arab enclaves and talk about coexistence in the current political climate. On our last trip, we even visited the West Bank Palestinian dream city of the future, Rawabi, and spent an hour with the Palestinian billionaire who has battled both Israeli and Palestinian bureaucracies to make it a reality.

Yes, I'd like to think that sophisticated Jews in Westchester can handle nuanced conversations about this most central matter in our Jewish lives today; that we can hear passionate experts say things that don't register with our own experience or education; and that we can intelligently engage those counterintuitive ideas in our ongoing search for truth. I'd like to think that our own congregation, with its history of respectful dialogue – both dialogue with one another *and* with the Jewish past itself – can lead the way for this precious local community of neighbors from across the Jewish religious spectrum. We really have no choice but to do so. For there will only be peace for our people among the nations when we can reach a place of respectful embrace among our very different Jewish selves.

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