

From the Rabbi  
March 2014

### “Seder Table Redux”

Some families have no trouble gathering their dispersed masses around the seder table. It's not that they're all of one opinion about matters of kin or matters of the world. It's just that they seem to know how to sit and enjoy what brings them together.

Other families wouldn't dare consider it. Out-and-out war would appeal to them more than such a proposition.

So it is with the Jewish people in general. About a year and change ago, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater New York assembled a motley group of individuals to talk about an elephant in the room. That elephant was not Israel, per se, but rather the seeming impossibility of *talking* about Israel in any sort of mixed Jewish company.

It had come to seem that whenever a Jewish congregation or organization would invite a speaker to address current matters in Israel, verbal fights would break out. Often the sparring would erupt in protest to the invitation itself, weeks before the speaker arrived.

Clearly, Jews hold strong beliefs about Israel, and especially about what's good and bad for Israel. That's as it should be. Yet many of our beliefs tend to include a sense of shock and *disbelief* about the beliefs of those we disagree with. Apparently, it's hard to accept the fact that someone whose outlook is not the same as yours nonetheless shares your deep hopes and dreams for Israel's wellbeing.

I gladly accepted an invitation to participate in what were called “the Israel Talks.” There at the table - and it really resembled a big seder with relatives one doesn't remember ever having laid eyes on - I met some pretty important figures from parts of the Jewish community I rarely interact with. The table featured leaders from the Haredi world, the Jewish journalism community, the secular Zionists, the spectrum of religious streams, the Right, the Left, the Center, the AIPAC folks, the J-Street chevra, and so on.

Eventually those talks were regionalized. Our own Israel Action Committee chairs took part in the Westchester version of the project.

I somehow wound up on the subcommittee tasked with writing the statement you see attached here. From the get-go, it was destined to be a “parve” document. How else would we get everyone to sign it, or even to stay in the room long enough to get something in writing?

So what we ended up with is pretty much the best that our composite Jewish community, such as it is, can agree upon in this time of reckoning for the Jewish State. It is not pretty, but it's something, which is so much better than nothing, and better still than the screaming and yelling that had drowned out all hope of intelligent conversation.

It's signed by people you know, including my beloved White Plains rabbinic colleagues. It's also signed by people you *don't* know, and would otherwise not come in contact with. That, too, is something rather than nothing.

Let's hope that we ourselves – opinionated people that we are – can abide by the promises made here. Let's listen at least as much as we talk. Let's think through our responses before we castigate even those opinions we're sure are dead wrong, even while we proudly stand up for what we know to be morally sound positions.

Let's do our part as Jews and Americans to help Israel make the crucial decisions it must make in the next months. Let's figure out how to be present and accounted for when Israel faces its true enemies in the world, and let's pray for the wisdom to distinguish between enemies and friends.

Such wisdom will only come from talking *to* one another rather than *past* one another. Sort of like that marvelous family that still manages to get together at one big seder table. *Halavai!* It should only be so!

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

Here is the text of the statement:

*The State of Israel, a vibrant democracy dedicated to the equality of all its citizens, embodies the 3,000-year connection of the Jewish people to its homeland. Israel has sparked a renewal of Jewish life both in the State and across the Jewish Diaspora, serves as a refuge for Jews anywhere threatened by anti-Semitism, stands as the international center of Hebrew language and culture, and is host to a new flowering both of a world of Torah learning and a world of extraordinary innovation in technology, science, arts, culture, business and medicine.*

*For American Jews to engage in active discussion and debate about Israel is healthy and welcome. In fact, it is the best guarantee of an enduring, meaningful relationship between Diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel and the surest antidote to the worrying trends of weakening relationships between these two worlds.*

*We therefore embrace the reality that our community contains a wide range of perspectives on internal Israeli political and social issues, American foreign and domestic policy, religious affairs, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Israel's safety and security and many other issues. And we are proud that our community remains robust enough for all those who are committed to Israel's Jewish and democratic character to take their place within it.*

*Yet differences of opinion regarding the State of Israel now too often serve as a cause for American Jewish communal discord and even acrimony. When disagreement becomes hostile it frays the bonds of our community.*

*The consequences of such disconnectedness are profound and severe. We must ask ourselves what we can do to listen with more patience, to hear each other and ourselves with greater clarity, and not to impugn the character or motivations of those with whom we disagree.*

*To that end, we commit ourselves to the following in our engagement with each other about Israel: We will see our fellow members of the Jewish community of New York, and of Jewish communities all over the world, as part of Klal Yisrael, the family of Israel, with a shared connection to the Jewish people and to Israel.*

*We will treat others with decency, honor and resilience, be curious about our differences and cherish what we have in common, even if we agree to disagree with each other.*

*We will be mindful of the Jewish teaching *Derech Eretz Kadmah L'Torah*, that proper conduct precedes the Torah. Respectful speaking and listening are possible even in the midst of a heated interchange of ideas*

*The Talmud (Brachot 58a) teaches that “just as people’s faces all differ, so do their opinions.” Just because we may differ over Israel’s course is no reason for Jews to be disrespectful to one another. Committed to our community’s vibrancy and diversity, we simply have too much to lose. May our love for Israel unite, rather than divide, us.*