

PRESENTATION BY RABBI JOSHUA LEVNE-GRATER

In 1995, I was a rabbinical student living in Jerusalem, my first time being in Israel. On the second day there, my wife and I saw a flier for a free tour of Hebron. We had no idea what we were doing. We were students and the tour was free – so we went. It was a horrible day and my introduction to this issue. We were trapped with this rabbi armed with 2 rifles and a pistol, taking us into Hebron, for 12 hours! The rabbi leading the tour screamed, in the marketplace, at the top of his lungs, about what animals the Arabs are "and how I would shoot them if I could."

This rabbi also took us to a statue of Baruch Goldstein and went on about what a hero Goldstein was. I would have walked home if I knew where I was.

That was a hard year: the assassination of Rabin and the first wave of bus bombings, which killed one of my classmates. Many of my classmates went home. *That* was my introduction to wanting to make a difference. Being in Israel was a powerful reminder that it's good to be able to speak about Israel in a positive light without always feeling that I have to say "but."

Later, as a Marshall T. Meyer rabbinic intern at Bnai Jeshurun in New York, I was able to speak out about Israel safely, but I also had my own small pulpit in upstate New York where I spoke out and became persona non grata in the Jewish community. They thought I was on the payroll of the PLO somehow.

I'm in Pasadena now, a very different place than Northern California where some of the other panelists are from. Southern California is, on Israel, fairly conservative. I work with colleagues on building the ability to talk about these issues. Being a Conservative rabbi is also a lonely place to be regarding this issue, but I do feel that I've been able to open up dialogue.

I've written for *Tikkun*, I'm clearly part of Brit Tzedek. Often, people immediately ask why I'm anti-Israel – but I feel that I've been able to build dialogue. I allow for differences of opinion. I've had AIPAC speakers at my shul even though I disagree with them (props to Jeremy Ben-Ami for inviting Rabbi Eric Yoffie here despite their disagreements).

For a while my shul had two Israel committees because people on the right and the left wouldn't speak with one another, but they've merged into one. Allowing people who hold positions I don't agree with to speak from the pulpit has given me the ability to say what I want to say, too.

I've organized two trips to Israel from our shul in the last six years; on one of them, there was an optional side trip with Rabbi Arik Ascherman. And even though it was optional, I got an incredible amount of flak for working with Rabbis for Human Rights. Taking risks sometimes means standing up for our position and being able to speak -- always with humility, but with the ability to say this is what I think. You hired me to be your rabbi and this is what I think.

When I speak about Israel, or another other heated subject for that matter, I often give a shorter sermon and then come down and listen to ideas, opinions and arguments from the congregation. In doing so, I have found that I am able to express my opinions strongly without people feeling that they are being "talked down to," and it offers the congregation a chance to engage in the conversation. This has been very effective in my ability to speak and be heard, even, and perhaps especially, by people who disagree with me. I would

recommend this to all my colleagues as a tool.

But you must also always allow space for other voices. Although I get flak from the right, I'm also not as far to the left as some of my community wants me to be. My conscience tells me to be a part of [Ta'anit Tzedek](#) and support the Gaza fast, but I'd be run out of town. So I've made the decision not to do that. Those kinds of compromises are necessary. To be the leader of my congregation means I can't say everything I want to say. That has given me the opportunity to have people hear me more when it matters.