

Shabbat Korach 5781
Zooming Out for Clarity on Israel
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom!

Sometimes to get a *closer* look we need to zoom *out*.

My kids subscribe to a magazine with games and activities in the back. I bet you've seen one of these activities before. It's a series of close-up photos of everyday objects, and you have to guess what the object is. It sounds simple. But when you see a thick wooden rectangular beam capped by a dark frosted top, it appears new and unfamiliar. However, when you zoom out you quickly see it's just a matchstick. It's a small example of how zooming out provides clarity.

In the aftermath of Israel's battles against Hamas last month, I was speaking with an eighth grader who described how her school teacher was explaining the situation to her class. In jest, I told her to share with her teacher that I'm available to be a guest lecturer. Given that schools let out this week, I suppose the answer is No.

But I've been thinking more deeply about this. What would I have shared with a public school class if I had been invited to talk? Imagine that the teacher had reached out to me with the following assignment: Please share some facts - and only facts - that serve as starting points for understanding what's happening in Israel and Gaza. These points should illuminate what happened in Israel last month, as well as inform what will happen there for years to come. Focus on the big picture. Remember that 8th graders are old enough to understand the basics with some sophistication, but are not ready for college-level nuances. Keep in mind that these students are both Jewish and non Jewish. Stick to the facts as opposed to your own personal analysis and commentary. And keep it to 10 minutes.

Today I want to share with you what I would say to this 8th grade class. While the details of what happened during last month's 11 days of fighting are important, today is about the big picture. Sometimes we need to zoom out in order to recognize clearly what we are looking at, like those close-up photos in the children's magazine. When we focus on the widely-recognized facts, we see a compelling case for Israel. Here we go:

1. The Jewish history of Israel is over 3,000 years old.

Starting with the Bible, the Jews were settled in Israel for about 600 years before most were exiled by the Babylonians. Then many returned. Jews lived there for another 600 years before the Romans exiled them. Despite these two exiles, there were *always* some Jews who remained *physically present* in the Land of Israel. And in the intervening 2000 years, Jews scattered across the globe had Jerusalem and Israel in their hearts and minds. Jews around the world turned their feet towards Jerusalem whenever they prayed daily; they spoke of Jerusalem in

their daily prayers, at the Passover Seder, at their weddings; they recited prayers for beneficial weather - not with their own towns in mind but for Israel. In 1948, the state of Israel was not merely born, but reborn. As Rabbi David Wolpe wrote in the New York Times two weeks ago, "The Jewish relationship to Israel did not begin in 1948. Our history here, of both pain and holiness, stretches back dozens of generations."

2. Israel has historically and repeatedly sought peace with its neighbors.

In 1937, the British established the Peel Commission to explore the possibility of dividing Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. The Jews accepted in principle while the Arabs said No.

In 1947, the United Nations voted on a partition map that would divide the land into two states, Jewish and Arab. The Jews said Yes - together with 33 nations of the world - while the Arabs said No. When Israel declared independence, five Arab armies immediately invaded Israel, but Israel would win that war.

Israel would later make peace with two former enemies: Egypt in 1979, and Jordan in 1994.

In 1993, Israel - led by Yitzhak Rabin - signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization, led by Yasser Arafat, a deal which was better known as "The Peace Process."

In the year 2000, President Bill Clinton convened Israel's Ehud Barak and the PLO's Arafat to Camp David. Israel offered a very generous package of land and more in exchange for peace, but Arafat rejected it and did not even offer a counter proposal. The second intifada broke out months afterwards.

In 2008, Israel's Ehud Olmert made a second very generous peace offer that was rejected again by the Palestinians. Crucially, it was Mahmoud Abbas who turned it down, which is significant because he remains the *current* leader of the Palestinian Authority.

And just last year, Israel entered the Abraham Accords, a normalization of diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

From 80 years ago through today, Israel's reflex has been to seek peace with its neighbors.

(Before I turn to the topic of Hamas, which rules the Palestinians in Gaza, I want to clarify that Hamas has the support of many Palestinians, and at the same time there are many Palestinians who do not support them. This is an inconvenient truth for people who would like this to be a black and white issue, but this gray area is one of many complexities in the conflict).

3. Having said that, Hamas is a terrorist organization.

To be extra clear, I am *not* saying that all Palestinians are terrorists. They are not, but Hamas is. This is not my own personal observation, though it does meet the definition of terrorism by intentionally using violence against innocent civilians for political aims. It's the conclusion of Israel, the United States, the entire European Union, and other nations. In its violent attempts to create an Islamic State in the region - more on that in a moment - Hamas has consistently and repeatedly targeted innocent Israeli *civilians* for years. Last month they launched about 4000 rockets toward Israel - including its largest population centers Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. At the same time, Hamas intentionally embeds its fighters and weapons in Palestinian civilian areas like apartment buildings, mosques, and schools, which has the tragic effect of maximizing casualties among innocent Palestinians too.

4. For Hamas, the goal is to take *all* of Israel, not just the West Bank and Gaza.

In 1988, Hamas published a charter with its goals, all of which point towards its larger goal of destroying the state of Israel through holy war. I will let Hamas speak for itself with these direct quotes:

"The Islamic Resistance Movement...strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine."

"Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it."

"There is no solution for the Palestinian problem except by Jihad [holy war]. Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are but a waste of time, an exercise in futility."

"The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight Jews and kill them. Then, the Jews will hide behind rocks and trees, and the rocks and trees will cry out: 'O Moslem, there is a Jew hiding behind me, come and kill him.'"

Again, these frightening words come directly and openly from Hamas itself, which you can read when you Google "Hamas Charter." So their fight is not just for Gaza and the West Bank, but equally so Tel Aviv and every other city in Israel proper. It seeks to undo not just 1967 but 1948. *This* is what Israel is up against.

5. To deeply understand all the issues in full, we all need to read full books.

Recently the comedian and political commentator Bill Maher said, "You can't learn history from Instagram. There's just not enough space." While that witty quote can itself fit on a Twitter post, explaining the backstories about any of these issues today requires much more room. Newspaper articles, blog posts, videos, even full websites provide a taste but not a whole meal.

We need books for that. And we need time for that. Whatever our own personal opinions about what's happening now in Israel - and I recognize that not everybody here agrees - we each have more to learn. This topic is so important and complicated that we should each commit serious time to learning more. The specific history book you read matters less to me than that you pick up any respected volume. If you are just starting out, I recommend the one from Daniel Gordis. If you have more time and want a deeper dive, read the one by Howard Sachar. Just Google their names and the words "Israel history."

Class, these are my starting points, but remember there is much we did not get to today. Class dismissed.

In my thought experiment, I was speaking only to the mind. But of course Israel is about the heart too. My relationship to Israel is emotional, not just intellectual.

Of course there is much I did not say today because this is one sermon, not a year-long course. People are passionate about this topic, and opinions vary widely. Make sure you first access the facts - which I focused on today - before reaching your conclusions. I proudly support Israel for many reasons, and the historical facts support Israel's case again and again.

Is Israel perfect? No, it has room to improve in many ways. And *Israelis themselves* are the first to articulate these. But I love Israel nonetheless. Just like I love Chicago, which is far from perfect. And just like I love America, despite its own deep flaws.

All this reminds me of a famous story from the Talmud, where someone wants to convert to being Jewish and approaches the sage Hillel. He says, "Convert me while I stand on one foot." Many of us know the first part of Hillel's answer: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow." In other words, love your neighbor as yourself. But the second part is equally important: "This is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and study."

Let's imagine someone asked me to really zoom out and state Israel's reason for being, all while figuratively standing on one foot. Or in today's language, short enough to fit in a single Twitter post.

Here is my response: "Hardly a secret, it is part of Israel's national anthem. First the Hebrew - עֹד לֹא אֶבְדָּה תְּקֻמָּתִי, הַתְּקֻמָּה בֵּת שְׁנוֹת אֲלֵפִים לְהִיּוֹת עִם הַפְּשִׁי בְּאַרְצִנוּ אֶרֶץ צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם."

In English: "Our hope is not yet lost, the hope of 2,000 years, to be a free nation in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem."

And then I continue: "The rest is commentary. Go and study."

Shabbat Shalom!