

A GUIDE TO

# DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

FROM JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE

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In conversations about Israel/Palestine, the same questions come up over and over again. You don't need to be an expert to talk about the issues of human rights at stake to have an opinion. In this guide, Jewish Voice for Peace offers some ways to get conversations started, approach common questions, and address the myths and facts of "The Israel/Palestine Conflict."

# TIPS FOR GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

## FRAME THE ISSUES USING SHARED VALUES

If they care about concepts such as equality, human rights, justice and international law, use that language! If they care about strong and vibrant Jewish communities, affirm that, and then talk about how the immorality of the occupation hurts Jews too. Point to the disturbingly blatant racism in Israeli society, the violence of the far-right, the divisions in the American Jewish community and the misplaced priorities of Jewish communal and institutional leaders. Give them a way to take a step closer and without feeling like they have to give up membership in their community.

## FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN AGREE ON

You can then guide the conversation in the direction you want to go. Start by asking what their vision for peace in the region looks like. If they say “a place where Jews can be safe,” great, affirm that and then explain that Jewish safety should not come at the cost of Palestinian lives and freedoms. If they say “two states for two peoples,” you don’t necessarily need to affirm or reject that desire, but can simply say “through its continued settlement construction, displacement and the network of checkpoints dividing up the land, Israel has made that impossible in the near term. We need to talk now about the urgent need for full equality, dignity and rights for Palestinians, not wait for a diplomatic solution.”

## REFRAME THE PROBLEM

Ask them what they think the conflict is really about, and gently disabuse them of the myths that this is an age-old conflict between two peoples who have always been at odds, that it is a religious conflict, that Israel is only the victim. Talk about what this conflict is really about: Israel as a refuge for Jewish people was created on land where people were already living, through a process which displaced and killed many of them, and now continues to grab more land and resources at the expense of the Palestinian population.

## **USE HISTORICAL ANALOGIES**

People resonate with stories that are already familiar to them. You don't need to over simplify or draw false comparisons to use analogies effectively to help people reframe the situation. You can talk about Palestinian demands for full equality, dignity and freedom from institutionalized discrimination through the lens of the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. You can make the analogy between Israel's current policies to the system of institutionalized segregation and oppression that constituted apartheid policy in South Africa. You can draw on the history of boycotts to demand political change, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, or the Grape Boycott

## **DON'T MAKE IT A COMPETITION OR A HISTORY LESSON**

Try to avoid letting it become competition about who knows more about the history or whose facts are better. Shaming never works. Reframe and redirect as needed to keep the conversation centered on the moral cost of Israel's security regime and the urgent need for justice now.

## **VALIDATE THEIR FEARS, AND MODEL VULNERABILITY**

We don't have all the answers, but we do know that things urgently need to change. Don't shame people, rather call them in to thinking about the issues in new ways.

## **AVOID "TRIGGERING THE FRAME"**

Repeating a misconception in order to disprove it often ends up reinforcing the erroneous idea in people's minds. Don't start by refuting a claim you think they will make, start by describing your vision for change with a positive framing.

## **SPEAK IN A LANGUAGE THEY CAN HEAR**

Don't use jargon or academic-ese. When you use buzzwords like 'apartheid' or 'colonialism' explain how Israeli policies or history fulfil those definitions. Don't just use the label like a hammer to make a point, but describe how the reality of life for Palestinians under Israeli control fits those definitions/experiences.

## **ASK THEM WHAT THEY KNOW**

Often people know less than they think they do. By simply asking calm questions and sharing facts you can help them realize that they may be missing pieces of the story.

## **BE CONFIDENT!**

You don't have to be an expert on Middle East history to have an opinion about human rights issues in Israel/Palestine. Start with what you know, and then learn together.

# ANSWERING COMMON QUESTIONS

## **[WHEN YOUR CONSERVATIVE UNCLE ASKS] WHAT ABOUT THE TERRORISM ISRAELI CITIZENS ARE FACING EVERYDAY?**

I want safety and dignity for all the peoples of Palestine and Israel, and I mourn each and every life that has been lost. Targeting civilians with political violence is always unacceptable. I oppose all violence against civilians, whether it be instigated by individuals, by organizations or by states. The uprising happening in Palestine today is the inevitable result of decades of occupation, dispossession and state violence. The right to resist colonization is enshrined in international law, this resistance will only end when the Israeli government stops brutally oppressing Palestinians so that they too can live with freedom and equality.

## **[WHEN YOUR GRANDMOTHER ASKS] WHY ARE YOU SINGLING OUT ISRAEL OR APPLYING A DOUBLE-STANDARD?**

Actually, it is the United States who is singling out Israel, with \$3.1 billion dollars in military aid (more cumulative aid than any other country since WWII) and protecting it from diplomatic censure in international forums such as the UN and the ICC. As Americans, we have a special responsibility to ensure that our tax dollars stop being used to commit war crimes. Israel claims to speak in the name of Jewish people around the world, so as a Jew, I feel a special responsibility to speak out against its policies.

This is not about singling out Israel, it's about holding Israel to the same standard as all countries to comply with international law and leveraging the particular responsibility and influence that we have as American taxpayers and as Jews to demand change in Israel.

## **[WHEN YOUR LIBERAL ZIONIST COUSIN ASKS] BUT DO YOU SUPPORT ONE OR TWO STATES?**

I support full equality, justice and self-determination for all peoples in the region, and any solution that will be consistent with those goals. It is true that under occupation, Israel has controlled millions of Palestinians, without representation, for nearly 50 years. This has resulted in a defacto one-state apartheid solution.

But the truth is that the journey to either two states or one state with equality for all of its citizens is a long one, and that the ultimate form for a durable solution—whether that be 1 state, 2 states, a confederation or some other form, is up to Palestinians and Israelis to negotiate. The boycott, divestment and sanctions movement does not advocate for a particular solution, it is about putting pressure on Israel so that it will make the concessions necessary for peace. U.S. policy, which enables Israel to continue its current policies, will also need to change in order for the parties to build a just and lasting peace.

## **[WHEN YOUR MOTHER ASKS] WHAT ABOUT THE RIGHT OF JEWS TO SELF-DETERMINATION AND SECURITY?**

I do recognize the right of Jews (and all people) to live in safety and freedom, but I do not recognize the right of the state of Israel to discriminate against non-Jews. Security for Jews cannot and should not come at the expense of Palestinian lives. The best way to ensure safety and freedom for Jews is to constantly fight for safety and freedom for all peoples.

## **[WHEN YOUR CONSERVATIVE UNCLE CHARGES] BDS IS ANTI-SEMITIC:**

BDS is a rights-based movement and its goal is to achieve justice and equality. BDS opposes all forms of racism and oppression, including anti-Semitism. It specifically targets oppressive policies and the institutions and companies that uphold them, not Jewish people.

Criticism of Jews for being Jews is anti-Semitic; criticism of the state of Israel is not. The Israeli government encourages the dangerous conflation of all Jews with Israel. When Prime Minister Netanyahu claims to represent all Jews, he furthers such misperceptions. Israel does not represent all Jews, and nearly 25% of Israel's citizens are not Jewish.

# MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT ISRAEL/PALESTINE

## 1. “A LAND WITHOUT A PEOPLE FOR A PEOPLE WITHOUT LAND”

This central myth of Zionism functioned then, as now, to erase the presence of Palestinian Arab society in the land of Palestine prior to the European Jewish settlement that began in an organized way in the late 19th century. Put simply, the land was not empty. The repetition of this myth serves to erase the direct impact that Jewish land acquisition had on displacing the indigenous population, and to obscure the violence that accompanied Jewish settlement in the land.

## 2. “THE OCCUPATION AND WALL ARE NEEDED TO KEEP JEWS SAFE”

Regardless of the intention to be a haven, Israel remains one of the least safe places for a Jewish person to be (precisely because of the conflict it created by displacing and occupying the Palestinian population). Safety of one population can never, and should never, come at the expense of another population.

The Wall that Israel built in the West Bank is not about security alone. It is not complete and does not prevent the most determined from getting into Israel ‘proper.’ Rather, it is a tool that has been used to entrench Israeli control over the everyday lives of Palestinians who are separated from their land, families and places of work and to seize increasing amounts of Palestinian land.

## 3. “ISRAEL IS THE ‘ONLY DEMOCRACY’ IN THE MIDDLE EAST”

How can Israel be democratic when it holds 4.5 million Palestinians under a seemingly permanent military occupation without voting rights? All people living under the control of the Israeli government, which in effect includes people in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza and the Golan Heights, should have rights to full equality and opportunity to vote for the government which ultimately decides their fate.

Even within Israel 'proper,' Israel's democracy is undermined by the discrimination and emphasis on being a Jewish state rather than a state of all its citizens. Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab and Minority Rights in Israel, has compiled a database of over 50 laws that, in intention and in effect, discriminate against non-Jews, including barring state funding from institutions that talk about the nakba, the violence against and displacement of Palestinians that began in 1948 with the creation of the state, and the law of return which grants special privileges of citizenship to Jews living around the world and excludes Palestinians from returning to their homes.

The far-right government in Israel is becoming increasingly anti-democratic, for example: passing laws that require loyalty litmus tests, undermining judicial authority, approving indefinite detention of migrants, and stripping social security benefits from families of people who commit violent attacks against Jews.

Following Prime Minister Netanyahu's reelection in March 2015, Israeli journalist Noam Sheizaf put it like this: "For years we have been hearing that Israel will either end the occupation or cease to be a democracy. Could it be that the Jewish public has made its choice?"

## 4.

### **"ISRAEL HAS NO PARTNER FOR PEACE"**

For decades, Israel has delayed or obstructed constructive peace talks, while continuing to expand settlement building, by claiming it had no partner for peace. Supporters often claim that Palestinians have repeatedly rejected opportunities to have their own state, but to frame those moments as 'opportunities' is disingenuous. At every point, Palestinians have been asked to give up their rights to freedom and equality in the land they were born in order for Israel to maintain an exclusivist ethno-nationalist state on their homeland.

The truth is, as even Palestinian Authority senior officials have noted, that Palestinians have no partner for peace. Despite the fact that Prime Minister Netanyahu occasionally pays lip-service to the two-state solution, more settlements have been built under his leadership than any other Israeli leader. Since Netanyahu returned to power in 2009, the number of settlers in the West Bank has grown by approximately 120,000, a number not even including a sharp rise in settlements in East Jerusalem. Israel has no interest in peace. In reality, it has demonstrated that its interest is in maintaining its control over the most amount of land with the fewest number of Palestinians.

# 5.

## **“THIS IS A RELIGIOUS CONFLICT BETWEEN TWO PEOPLES WHO HAVE BEEN FIGHTING FOR CENTURIES.”**

The violence between Israelis and Palestinians is often falsely presented as a conflict between two equal sides with irreconcilable claims to one piece of land. In reality, this is a conflict over territory between a nation-state with one of the world’s most powerful and well-funded militaries, and an indigenous population that has been occupied, displaced, and exiled for decades.

Although religion plays a role in defining the identities of the parties to the conflict, and for some Jews, in justifying their claims to the land, the conflict is not, fundamentally, a religious conflict. This is not a centuries-old conflict, but a relatively recent one which escalated with European support for Jewish settlement of the land of Palestine in the late 19th century and with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

At its root, what is happening in Israel/Palestine is not a religious conflict, nor should it be understood merely as two competing national struggles. This is, and has always been, a case of anti-colonial resistance to violence, displacement, and racism.

**Jewish Voice for Peace is a national, grassroots organization inspired by Jewish tradition to work for a just and lasting peace according to principles of human rights, equality, and international law for all the people of Israel and Palestine. Jewish Voice for Peace has over 200,000 online supporters, over 60 chapters, a youth wing, a Rabbinic Council, an Artist Council, an Academic Advisory Council, and an Advisory Board made up of leading U.S. intellectuals and artists.**

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