

**The Israel Equation: What Do You Want It To Be?**  
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"A Mathematician, a Statistician and an Accountant arrive for a job interview.

The Mathematician goes in first. The interview goes well and for the last question the HR person asks, "What does two plus two equal?" The Mathematician replies, "Four."  
Great.

Mathematician leaves, Statistician enters. After another good interview the HR person asks the same question, "What does two plus two equal?" The Statistician says, "With such a small sample size give or take .3%, 9 times out of 10 the answer will be four."

Satisfied, the interviewer then calls in the Accountant (Shout out to Michael Diamond, my favorite accountant) and at the end of the interview says, "One last question...What does two plus two equal?" Suddenly the Accountant gets up, locks the door, closes the shades, disconnects the phone, approaches the interviewer and whispers, "What do you want it to be?"

What do you want it to be?

Most of the time, it's playful and fun to notice how we spin details of stories to match the outcomes we desire. How we cherry pick and edit and present with great enthusiasm the obvious conclusion.

But here's when that  $2 + 2$  joke isn't funny...when lives are at stake.

When someone is sick or there's a wave of violence, it will be harder for me to tolerate YOU seeing the situation differently from ME.

And when Israel is under fire, and Israeli lives are at stake, we are even less interested in nuance or perspective. We need to crush what scares us. Take away what hurts us. Silence the opposition and those who would say otherwise.

We want it to be simple. But with Israel, it never is.

It's a story with so many parts and so many players: Which leaders are responsible? Which Arab countries can be trusted? Which 2 things are we adding up?

When Israel is under fire, it's easy to answer with what feels most familiar: You see!? says the Left. 54 years of oppression and occupation, politicians claiming they're doing the best they can do... Meanwhile, there's a powder keg waiting to explode.

You see!? says the Right. This is what happens when you pretend Palestinians are partners for peace, when we ALL know their claims of injustice are a smokescreen for the fulfillment of their ultimate plan - the eradication of our Jewish homeland.

And, when Israel is under fire, Sadly, it turns out to be the worst time to try and start a conversation.

This past May, during the 11 day war with Gaza, as the Iron Dome shot down Hamas missiles, Diaspora Jews experienced the weaponization of social media.

The assault was swift and brutal. Parents were stunned to hear their children ask questions about the plight of Palestine, and Israel as the oppressor, having picked up chatter at school about John Oliver and Bella Hadid. A conversation that used to catch parents off guard as their child left for college was now taking place in middle school.

We know how to hire a math tutor. Who do we call for help with a 5000 year old battle for the Middle East?

Actually, some of you DID know. You called us, with heartbreaking questions:

How do we teach our children to talk about Israel with their peers?

How can we prepare them to love and defend their homeland, a place they haven't seen or barely discussed outside of Sunday School?

If only the answer were as simple as  $2 + 2$ .

As the war in Gaza progressed, we sent an email to the community acknowledging the violence, and our collective grief as we watched from Los Angeles.

In that email, we chose to share reactions from Israeli clergy including my colleague, Rabbi Hadas Ron Zariz, who wrote:

"I have been on the phone with my son in the army, worried about the war. My family is in shelters in Tel Aviv. The roads near my kibbutz are closed because of the demonstrations. It feels like everything we worked for, to live together, (I have Arabic friends, students...) everything is falling apart.

And, (she added) I'm also thinking about the suffering in Gaza. And, tomorrow, I'm going to stand with other friends to protest against the violence and pray for peace. The signs for the demonstrations tomorrow will say: Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies. You know, (she wrote), it sounds better in Hebrew."

יהודים וערבים מסרבים להיות אויבים

We sent an email that shared the voices of our teachers, living in the land of our ancestors, trying to make sense of it all...just like us.

Can I be honest?

Ya'll didn't love it.



Okay. No worries. A few days later, we set up: A geo-political analysis of the Middle East. A service of healing for our homeland. A discussion/reflection group (offered at two different times!) A session just for teenagers on how to talk about Israel. An interview with the leadership of an Arab-Jewish school in Jerusalem.

I wish I could say you showed up.

So, here we are: 4 months later. That war may have ended, but our efforts to communicate, educate, and advocate for Israel continues. It's not just you. All of us are struggling to tell the story - Israelis. Diaspora Jews. Social Media Influencers. Middle schoolers. Movie stars.

The accounting joke, at its core, is cynical: I can manipulate the numbers to tell any story. But the joke could be transformed from manipulation to aspiration:

With what we see before us, how do we want to talk about Israel?

What if we stopped looking for the perfect response, the one that stuns our opponents into silence or surrender, and instead focused on beginning a conversation? Now.

Yes, I know it's embarrassing and infuriating when the Hollywood star comments on Israel and gets a million likes. But what if this year, before the next crisis in Tel Aviv, we all agree to sit down and talk with our children about Israel now, when there's time to reflect, and build their confidence and ours by engaging in a conversation that normally feels too toxic and fiery.

Can I make a recommendation?

Do it in the car.

Best conversations...always in the car.

"Ah...but Rabbi," you'll tell me. "My child is 2" or "My children are grown." So, maybe this year, we talk to our friends, or a neighbor we like, or dare I say, someone who doesn't think like us. Not to defeat them in battle But to engage them in conversation. Who knows? Maybe you learn. They learn. You live with a little less anxiety and fear and they find out a little bit more of the story.

I'll give you an example:

During the 11 days of war, a group of ultranationalist, black-clad Israelis smashed the windows of an Arab-owned ice cream shop in Bat Yam screaming "Death to Arabs!" on live television.

Later that week, my Israeli colleague Rabbi Tzvi Graetz reported that Jewish residents of Bat Yam returned to the shop to show their support for their Arab owner and to offer help.

I'm guessing you didn't see that story on Instagram.

During that same time, a synagogue in Jaffa was set on fire by Arabs, and an Arab neighbor rushed in, saved the seven Torah scrolls, put out the fire and called the police.

Anyone remember that story being on the front page of the Times?

These stories don't fit the "script": Us/Them. Either/Or.

But THEY are the ones that need to be told. And in the New Year of 5782, we can be the ones to do it.

Okay. By now, I think you've recognized, this is the Rabbi's High Holy Day Israel Sermon.

Welcome.

So, we all know how these sermons tend to go: I make the case for deepening our relationships with our homeland. Then, I list all the opportunities we'll provide this year to renew your vows as a Zionist.

However, please note Exhibit A from May of 2021. We already did that, and nobody came.

That's okay. We will continue to offer Israel classes, and events, and opportunities like: An Audible Book Club (because, really, who has time to read?) An online lunch-and-learn to break up a day of endless emails. Interviews with Israeli scholars and non-profit leaders. A congregational trip to Israel in June 2023, please God. And next July, I'll be back in Jerusalem for a month, studying at the Hartman Institute as part of a 3 year rabbinic fellowship, so if you're in Israel, let me know and we'll grab a cup of coffee on Emek Refaim with Cantor Evan Kent.

It's a crazy time of the year. I know.

The pandemic is still with us. I get it.

That's why the "ask" of this sermon is an invitation for YOU to take the next step. But, don't wait too long. I am asking you to sit down with your family and talk about Israel.

The Israel equation is not predetermined. Our fate is not frozen or static. It's being told now. And it'll outlast us all. But while we're here, we've got an important role to play.

This year, start the conversation.

Add your voice.

Shana Tova.

