

A GUIDE TO

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

FROM JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE

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Intro

WHY EVEN TRY?

This is an especially intense time to have a national holiday that, whatever else it does, celebrates the conquest of a continent. The election and ongoing convergence of native water protectors at Standing Rock are two huge examples of how high the stakes are right now in our shared struggle for justice, equality, and dignity. If you choose to stay home or share a meal with chosen families and friends where political conflict won't be a part of the dynamic - we understand! We hope many of us will get to spend this weekend reconnecting with family and friends who we draw support from and can learn together with.

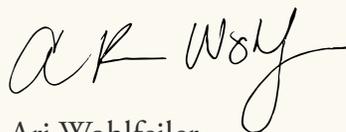
But for those of us who are going to spend time with loved ones and acquaintances we don't see eye-to-eye with, the next few days also present an opportunity. Not only to convince, but to listen. To experience a tough conversation that goes better than expected, to get at least some point in that was unspeakable before. To recruit a new JVP member. To convince someone that JVP isn't as scary or dangerous than they had heard. To model the patience, clarity, and passion that inspires people to be their best selves.

This year's conversation guide is lightly edited from last year, with two new sections on how to talk about the elections and the struggle at Standing Rock. If you have reactions or stories that emerge over the weekend you want to share, please let us know!

With hope,



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Part 1

TIPS FOR GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

LISTEN

Start by asking questions about what they believe, what they hope for and what they fear. You can empathize with and affirm their hopes and fears, without agreeing with the ways they see the problems or the solutions.

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, go from there. 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 AND THEN STEER THE CONVERSATION IN THE DIRECTION YOU WANT TO GO

Start by asking what their vision for justice 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, but you can say that with continued settlement construction, displacement and the network of checkpoints dividing up the land, Israel is making that impossible in the near term, so we need to talk now about respecting Palestinian equality, dignity and human rights.

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 oversimplify 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

Shaming never works. Lectures very rarely work. Listening works amazingly well.

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, 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.

SHOW DON'T TELL

Speak in language that 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.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

We made this guide for a reason: these encounters can be painful. Hang in there, we're here to debrief after if you want, and we're so sorry if you are exposed to people - especially people you care about - saying things that hurt. We're cheering you on.

Let us know how it goes!

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?”

“ISRAEL HAS NO PARTNER FOR PEACE”

4.

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.

New for 2016

ELECTIONS

So far in the presidential transition (we're writing this Nov 19th), what we've seen is not good in terms of either appointments or hints as to policy priorities (largely, there has been a near total refusal to walk back any of the most terrifyingly racist and sexist campaign promises). We have a lot of work to do building an even stronger movement for justice in Israel/Palestine and at home for our basic values: justice, equality, and dignity.

With help from other leaders in many movements, here are the key messages and perspectives we've assembled so far:

WE SHOULD TAKE TRUMP AT HIS WORD.

We should believe the administration will try to enforce many of the harmful, violent and racist policies that have been promised. This is not a time for business as usual, and we can't afford to normalize the dangerous onslaught that's coming. We commit to challenging Trump, his administration, and the hate he has emboldened alongside our allies in the streets, in Congress, in the courts and in the press.

TRUMP'S AMERICA AND NETANYAHU'S ISRAEL GO HAND IN HAND.

The racist and violent policies promised by a Trump presidency mirror what has been happening in Israel/Palestine for decades. In both places we are seeing plans to continue the building of militarized walls, deporting refugees and asylum seekers, religious discrimination, and the consolidation of power in the hands of those who want to implement policies that infringe on civil liberties and basic rights. The xenophobic nationalism that shapes Israel's domination of Palestinians and the white nationalism of many of Trump's advisers and supporters are a danger to all of us.

Also, we need to acknowledge that the problems in both societies don't begin or end with those leaders. There's a lot to say and reflect on the role of corporations, the relative weakness of justice movements, and the way the political center has moved distinctly to the right over the last generation. We have to have a vision for justice here that is bigger than fighting Trump, and for Israel/Palestine we know that even if Netanyahu stepped down today, things would still be extremely difficult.

WHAT WILL A TRUMP PRESIDENCY MEAN FOR ISRAEL/PALESTINE?

Probably not much good. It is likely that Israel will be able to act with even more impunity to seize land and violate Palestinian rights. It is unlikely that Trump will take steps to hold Israel accountable to international law and its human rights abuses. Under the new administration, legislative efforts to curb the growing nonviolent boycott, divestment and sanctions movement will probably accelerate, as will efforts to undo the diplomacy of the Iran deal, to expand military aid to Israel even further, and to block efforts by the international community and the United Nations to take action. All of these steps were also likely under a possible Clinton presidency as well. In this context, the grassroots, nonviolent movement for Palestinian rights is more important than ever.

TRUMP'S APPOINTMENTS

It is unconscionable that some Jewish institutions have chosen to prioritize defending the indefensible policies of the Israeli government, cozying up to the Trump administration and refraining to speak out against white supremacist Stephen Bannon. Many supporters of Israeli policies that have obsessively accused the movement for Palestinian rights of antisemitism are now indefensibly silent in the face of antisemitism within the Trump Team. This is one more sign that we are going to need to reframe how we think about this struggle not as a conflict with two sides, but a struggle over respecting basic values, where what we fight for is determined by our beliefs, not our identities.

WHAT WILL A TRUMP PRESIDENCY MEAN FOR OUR WORK AS JVP?

We know how to fight this, we've seen it before. In Israel we've seen fascism creeping into policies and the rising xenophobia in society. The same racism, anti-Muslim bigotry and nationalism that we have been fighting in Israel has come into power in the United States. We have to fight it both here and there.

THIS IS A SCARY TIME. IT'S ALSO AN EXCITING TIME.

There are going to be some really big fights ahead against racist policies, and a lot of work to be done now against hate and bigotry. But this moment of political upheaval is also an opportunity. People are polarized, angry, sad, and more ready than usual to be organized into movements for justice.

There are tons of ways to get active right now -they're all great!

New for 2016

WHAT IS HAPPENING AT STANDING ROCK?

When people are talking about “Standing Rock” or #noDAPL these days they’re talking about the largest convergence of native people on this continent in over 100 years. It’s an inspiring call to action.

The reason for it, though, is grim: the Energy Transfer Partners is trying to build the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline, which was originally going to go thru Bismarck North Dakota, a 90% white town. That community rejected it because of the risk of leaks, so Enbridge decided to reroute the pipeline through the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, under the Missouri River. Since April 2016, native leaders and allies have been camped out there trying to stop construction of the pipeline. There’s been a lot of police brutality, with elders praying getting attacked with rubber bullets and people arrested en mass at prayer.

The struggle at Standing Rock is against environmental degradation and colonialism. The people of Standing Rock, like native people all over the US, have specific legal rights under treaties with the US Government. Just because the government routinely breaks those treaties does not make them any less the law.

It’s really important not to reduce it to an environmental issue alone. But it is that too: a fight to protect the water source of millions of people from oil leaks and to prevent growth in the fossil fuel industry.

Enbridge has demonstrated a total disrespect for native sovereignty and basic dignity. They already knowingly bulldozed a burial site, used attack dogs and pepper spray against peaceful protestors and tried to push the pipeline through without permits from the Army Corps of Engineers. The state and private security forces have used excessive force against peaceful protestors, elders praying getting attacked with rubber bullets, people at prayer being arrested en mass. In late October, militarized law enforcement moved in with tanks and riot gear against the water protectors. Thousands of peaceful protectors have been arrested.

HOW DOES STANDING ROCK RELATE TO PALESTINE?

Standing Rock and the Palestinian Freedom struggle are both about indigenous people fighting for sovereignty over land and resources. The Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC), the largest coalition in Palestinian civil society that leads the global BDS movement, sent a message of solidarity to the sovereign Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, saying

“From Palestine to Standing Rock, we shall stand united against colonialism, corporate criminality and for our inalienable right to freedom, justice and equality.”

The ideas of “A land without a people for a people without land” and Manifest Destiny are mirror images of each other.

SOME OTHER IDEAS:

- This might be a conversation you can have without making connections to Israel/Palestine directly - maybe people at your dinner table don't have the same emotional connection to the North Dakota National Guard as they do to the IDF. without selling out what you think about Palestine you can get specific about Standing Rock and build some common understanding that might help your conversations about Palestine go better next time.
- There's also a piece of this that's about religious freedom, which might be a good way in for some people. Until 1978 it was illegal to practice native religions publically, and that's what a lot of the water protectors' parents survived. It's only recently become possible to publically acknowledge sacred sites and practice religious observance publically. So the intensity of what this further desecration represents is particularly egregious and heinous.
- On the environmental side of things, it might be helpful to bring up that this is about the barest of minimums we need to fight climate change: to not expand the fossil fuel industry. That's a pretty low common denominator to aim for - but also one we clearly haven't built a shared societal value around yet!
- This is winnable. Delaying the pipeline in this case works in our favor - some strategists say that people in Standing Rock and their allies can actually bankrupt the project by causes delays that make it economically unfeasible, as much as by winning a court or administrative protection. This is also part of the logic of BDS - when governments won't take the steps needed to protect basic rights, we can make it economically impossible for them not to change course.

FURTHER STANDING ROCK RESOURCES:

STANDING ROCK SYLLABUS:

<https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>

RESOURCE PACKET

<http://www.standingrocksolidaritynetwork.org/resource-packet.html>

CONVERSATION GUIDE ABOUT TALKING ABOUT #NODAPL FROM A NATIVE PERSPECTIVE

<https://transformativespaces.org/2016/10/27/how-to-talk-about-nodapl-a-native-perspective/>

Thanks to Miriam Grossman and Jessica Rosenberg for contributing to this guide.

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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