

A few weeks ago, flying home from Toronto, I was seated beside a man balancing a full tray of baklava. He was so eager to get this treat safely to Saskatoon for an after Ramadan indulgence. It didn't leave his lap the whole flight. This was a great conversation starter.

This baklava bearer was a Libyan man who imports cars to the Middle East and lives part time in Ontario. Between my love for sharing food, my connections to the car business, and our mutual concern for the Middle East, we could have talked for days.

Our discussion was simple, and extraordinary. For me, there was, as always, that first moment when I worried. Will my Judaism or love of Israel create tension? I'm lousy at keeping either a secret!

Well, within minutes I was reminded, as I so often am, of the decency of people. We talked and talked. He spoke with such palpable goodness that it took my breath away. Libya's instability consumes him. He told me of his friends who are Gaddafi followers, and those who aren't. He knows some will die, and worries equally about the divides it will create among those that don't.

And we talked about Israel. It wasn't a difficult or uncomfortable discussion at all. We agreed that the situation is complex and wished peace could be simple. Israel does things he doesn't like or support, but he doesn't hate Israel, Israeli's or Jews. We both agreed that the two of us would engineer a peace process differently. Apparently even one Jew and one

Muslim sitting on an Air Canada flight have our own distinct vision of peace. I think there's a joke in there somewhere.

My new friend reminded me, "after all, we are all just people."

Wow. Of course nothing he said is profound, or different from what I already fundamentally believe. But he lives in a country that we expect should be fostering hate, and he is so filled with goodness it was oozing out of his baklava.

I personally need to use that experience to organize my thoughts about Israel, and my dreams for Saskatoon. I always say that we are required as citizen of the world to be critical, and engaged. There is no true love that

precludes criticism, and no relationship without a history of mistakes or hurts.

Why is it when it comes to Israel something chemical, cellular happens to so many of us? Why do we feel that if we are critical we are violating a blood liable, or if we are lavish in our adoration we aren't sensitive to injustice.

I understand that the generation of my parents and grandparents who were born before and immediately after the WW11 will always see Israel in a way that I am privileged not to understand. For them, Israel is the promise, the hope and the life that was taken from them. Their need to protect this is as visceral as their memories of the war and the faces on their parents and relatives as they recall these horrors.

A generation later, we all understand that our connection to Israel is, and must be much more than a Holocaust settlement. In fact, our right to exist is both more than the Holocaust and much deeper because of it.

We all know that freedom of speech is a privilege. We relish in debate and discussions that don't define our friendships. Yet, when the subject of Israel comes up, we bristle. We feel threatened in a way that we never do when we talk about Canadian or American politics.

Why is that? And how do we change it?

When I was younger I knew the difference between black and white, right and wrong, and I knew exactly where that line was. It was wrong to have children outside a marriage, wrong for a 5 year old to wear a

diaper, wrong to call an elder by a first name, and right to never say anything critical about Israel.

We all know that the line grays and obscures with age. I won't embarrass my kids by telling you how long it took to get them out of diapers, some of my best friends have kids and aren't married, "Mrs. Avivi" became June, and I am critical of Israel and still love her with my heart and soul.

Yet, despite this I am still learning to hear others be critical of Israel and not take it personally or beyond face value. And, those who are less critical than I still listen to my judgment and consider me disloyal.

Today, I have only a few things that are absolutes where Israel is concerned. I believe that according to the lessons of history, Israel is not an apartheid state,

and calling it such has unearthed a dangerous, and threatening new hate. And I believe without condition, hesitation or an ounce of gray that Israel has an inherent right to exist and not negotiate with anybody who feels otherwise. The rest is all gray.

So much about Israel is remarkable. Thousands of years of Jewish history are literally at our feet and in archeological digs all over the country. Our connection to this land is historical, spiritual and visceral.

I am proud that right now, Israel is engaged in a serious, compressive social revolution. Citizens are protesting the outrageous cost of living, and other social challenges. In the Middle East, Israeli's right to protest is both unconditional and unprecedented.

I am deeply worried about the challenges of the chardim and the toll they exact on a country already facing so many challenges. I am angry that a religious government has power, and that the religion of the government is not the religions of its entire people.

Some of Israel's corrupt and dishonest leaders have embarrassed me. I have been angered by decisions and actions of the government, and questioned the logic of others, especially in a world so quick to judge.

I can feel all of those things at the same time, and not feel even a bit conflicted or disloyal. I wish we all could accept this dichotomous relationship within others and ourselves and move forward. I know this wish sounds unsubstantial, but it isn't.

For me, this idea is not naïve, but concrete and practical. Judaism at its core demands that we analyze and question everything. We have a tradition of considering all three sides of one argument, and yet we stop short when it comes to applying this practice to our feelings and understandings of Israel. This conflicted consideration is the core of critical engagement, and a key to re-defining our Israel perspective.

There may always be protests, acrimony and division. But until we actually listen to each other, all this will do is build bigger walls and create bigger divides. What we really need is to build the peace in the middle. The sooner we establish the layers of friendship, the better, and stronger and more

permanent a foundation we will establish from which to grow this just peace.

I am putting my feelings into concrete action. I am working with groups of Muslim leaders to create relationships and organizations that will demonstrate the value of friendship and goodness. We have started an organization called Salam Ha'bayit. For now, it's a youth movement with members in both communities, who will be doing visible good volunteer things around Saskatoon. The adults will join in with our own activities.

We are not building bridges. They already exist. We are simply spreading friendship, goodness and their example. Our only rule is friendship and food before politics. We are making friends and when we do

ultimately discuss more substantive things we may disagree, but we will do so as friends. I know this will make a difference. Others in our own community are committed to growing peace. FRAPP is one such organization that works to grow multi-cultural and mutual tolerance.

It's okay to call me naïve, but clearly the paradigm that permeates our media and much of our culture isn't working. With all our talk of a political left and right, we aren't looking hard enough to find a place for peace in the middle.

In Saskatoon and beyond, we need to blur some lines in order to both re-define our own unique relationship with Israel the Israel interactions we with have with others.

Israel needs supporters. She doesn't need radical, unconditional love, but critical, sustaining friendships. As Diaspora Jews, we have the opportunity to fight the wave of anti-Israel rhetoric that I fear is becoming dangerous with a new kind of tough love; one that isn't defined by a line or any one platform.

I believe in the goodness of people. It didn't take my baklava friend to convince me, but it was a tangible reminder. Good things don't grow when we draw lines, only when we erase them

I want to see an Israel that engenders the kind of controversy we all enjoy over coffee and around the dinner table. I want us all to love an Israel that is autonomous and safe, praiseworthy and proud. I want this Israel for Jews, and Palestinians, Muslims and

Christians. I want it for my children and grand children,
my brother and my friends for all of the schlichim we in
Saskatoon call family. I want this in KerenOr's memory,
for all who gave their lives to protect, and those who
lost theirs in challenge. This yontif I will pray that we
all can try to live differently, view more gently, judge
less quickly and help fill the space in the middle where
we can truly live together in peace. Shana Tova!

