

## The Power of Hope and Vision: Two Israeli Peacemakers in the Midst of War

**By Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde**

I want to use my precious time on this holiest day of the year to talk to you about Israel. Although we have just marked the collective Jewish trauma of October 7, I want to step back a little from the headlines of the Israel-Hamas war, as well as the war with Hezbollah to take a larger view.

I want to tell you a little about my relationship with Israel because I think that it's important for you to know about me as your rabbi, and it profoundly informs what I'm saying today. I lived in Israel for two large stretches of time. The first was in Jerusalem from January-May 2003. The second stretch was also in Jerusalem when Rabbi Daria and I lived there for almost two years from 2004-2006, while she was studying in rabbinical school. We got engaged in Israel. We had our *tenaim* ceremony— the traditional Jewish engagement ceremony— in a packed friend's apartment in Baka in Jerusalem. We got married in the US in the summer of 2005, and then spent our first year of marriage together back at our apartment in Jerusalem.

In addition to learning in yeshiva and studying in Hebrew ulpan, I was deeply involved in Israeli-Palestinian peace work. I spent several weeks living in the West Bank with Palestinians and international peace activists. I saw many intense and disturbing things. For example, I witnessed Israeli authorities demolish Palestinian homes with bulldozers twice before my eyes while the family sat outside weeping, sitting next to the few possessions they could save.

I lived with the Christian Peacemaker Team inside the Palestinian old city of Hebron and had several Arabic lessons with a woman who had actually been inside the tomb of the patriarchs and matriarchs when Baruch Goldstein massacred 29 Muslims at prayer. One of my proudest accomplishments is that I was one of the leaders of the first several trips of what became known as Encounter— an organization that has grown enormously — taking future and current Jewish leaders to meet directly with Palestinians in the West Bank.

One of the things I came to deeply believe 20 years ago and I still deeply believe now is that one of the most important things I can do as an American Jewish leader is to amplify courageous and visionary Israeli voices who believe in a shared future between Israelis and Palestinians, one based on justice, equality, and freedom from domination. After all, they are the ones living there, dealing with the intensity of life there.

The book of Proverbs says: "Where there is no vision, the people become unruly." (28:19) Having some kind of vision is absolutely essential to overcoming the stuckness and depressed paralysis so many of us can feel when we hear continual news of

unending violent conflict for Israelis and Palestinians. There is so much negativity in the discourse around Israel and Palestine —especially right now — and we so desperately need to be exposed to some kind of vision that is hopeful. Hope really is a mitzvah here.

So I want to bring you the words of two bad-ass Israeli women peace activists, each working in different ways. Really, I just wanted to say “bad-ass” in a High Holy Day sermon.

The first woman is Rabbi Haviva Ner-David. In 2006 she became the first woman to publicly receive Orthodox rabbinic ordination, only to eventually leave Orthodoxy and call herself a post-denominational rabbi. Now 55, she is a writer and the founding rabbi of Shmaya: A Mikveh for Mind, Body and Soul on Kibbutz Hannaton in the Lower Galilee, where she lives.

She may be familiar to some of you, since she has written numerous times since October 7 for *Evolve: Groundbreaking Jewish Conversations*, the online magazine created by *Reconstructing Judaism*. How many of you have heard about or read articles from *Evolve*? This is one of the most fantastic resources that our movement has created; and it’s really a shining example of what contemporary Reconstructionism is. They have a whole section on Israel and Palestine that has a wide array of articles from thoughtful perspectives. Haviva’s words here are actually from an article she just wrote for *Evolve*, reflecting on the *yahrzeit* of October 7.

Rabbi Haviva writes:

“I moved to Israel in my 20s. I grew up in a religious Zionist home with much family in Israel. I arrived with love for this place but also with eyes wide open. I knew there was work to be done, and I was an activist from the start. I hit the ground running.

At first, my activism was more focused on religious pluralism, and I am still involved in that work. But when I moved to the Galilee, made many more Palestinian Israeli friends and realized the extent to which the Zionist narrative I had been taught is only part of the story, the foci of my activism, and much of my writing became healing our painful past and building a joint peaceful future....If that issue is not solved, I see no future for this country.

More recently, I became especially involved in *Standing Together*, a grassroots activist movement based on equal partnership among Palestinian and Jewish Israelis. I had a clear redemptive vision of how we were meant to live together in peace, and I believed we were on the path towards it. I knew it was a long road ahead, but I believed we were moving in the right direction.

Then Oct. 7 happened. My vision was not shattered, and my relationships with my Palestinian Israeli friends remain intact. In fact, our local *Standing Together* chapter has doubled in size since then [it’s now around 600 people], and our work has only intensified. And so, I believed this major crisis would be the shattering that would lead to

resolution, that Palestinians and Israelis would realize the status quo is not sustainable and the all-or-nothing aspirations on both sides are not attainable.

But from where I sit now, it seems the opposite has occurred. The leadership on both sides seems determined to use this historical moment to either destroy the other or destroy us all, rather than find a way for us all to live here together in peace.

That does not mean we who believe in a different vision are giving up. It means the road ahead is longer than we had expected, and the stakes are higher. Personally, for me this year has meant having to make my political activism even more of a top priority than it already was. It has meant putting aside other projects, interests and responsibilities in reaction to the urgency of the moment.

After the elections but before the war, I was already demonstrating against this government every Saturday night, in addition to my peace work and Palestinian-Jewish partnership-building activism. Now, since the war began, I am out protesting a few times a week, even canceling or missing other meetings to do so. And my partnership-building and peace work continues, even though to some, peace seems far off if not impossible.

This Mishnah in [Pirkei Avot 2:16](#) has helped keep me focused on the work instead: “It is not up to you to complete the work, but you are also not free to stop doing it.”

This has also been a confusing year, unsettling my feeling of belonging with the progressive left. The speed and ease with which so many on the left jumped to praise Hamas and condemn Israel on Oct. 7 were stunning and eye-opening. My activism on this issue has consistently maintained that both the Zionist narrative and the Palestinian nationalist narrative are each only part of the story. Favoring one over the other, or accepting one but not the other, will only perpetuate the cycle of violence.

It has been challenging to keep my center. When in more right-wing or even centrist Jewish circles, I have played the role of reminding people of Palestinian humanity, and while in left-wing circles, even Jewish, I have had to remind people of Jewish humanity. The demonizing on both sides is unsettling. But it has reminded me of where I stand, of my special ability to understand both sides and see the bigger picture. It has not been easy to maintain that position, but it is my truth. My ability to sympathize with both “sides” is my superpower.

Living in Israel has at least put me in a position where I can criticize and demonstrate against my government without feeling I am feeding anti-Jewish tropes and encouraging Jew-hatred. I am grateful for that. But if this extremist government is not ousted in the next elections, the future here looks grim...”<sup>1</sup>

I wish I had time to tell you a little bit more about Standing Together, the amazing progressive grassroots movement mobilizing Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel

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<sup>1</sup> <https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/a-year-of-death-we-are-not-free-to-desist-from-the-work/>

that Rabbi Haviva works with. They have a super-inspiring three-minute video about doing their work in the current context of war that everyone on the planet should see.

The second Israeli I want to tell you about is a woman named May Pundak. May is 39 years old, a human rights lawyer by training, a feminist activist, and is now the Israeli co-director of an organization called A Land for All: Two States One Homeland. She lives with her family in Jerusalem. A powerful and poignant part of her background is that when she was 9 years old, she “knew that when her father was often away...he was involved in some kind of mission for Israel, one so secret that she could not breathe a word about it to friends at school. Her father, Ron Pundak, was in Norway conducting back-channel talks with Palestinians that resulted in the 1993 Oslo Accords, the foundation for the two-state solution that has long anchored the peace process.”<sup>2</sup> Sadly, her father died in 2014 from cancer at the too-young age of 55. May continues his work, in her own way.

While I have not yet had a chance to meet Rabbi Haviva, Rabbi Daria and I had a lengthy Zoom call with May last April, when Daria was preparing for several meetings with US Congressman, Senators, and White House representatives as part of an interfaith delegation advocating for a permanent cease-fire and the released of the hostages in Gaza. We were, quite frankly, blown away by her hopeful vision and clarity of insight.

It has become fairly common to speak of the two-state solution as no longer viable, as it was based on creating a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, separating the two populations. What has primarily killed the practicality of the traditional two-state solution is that settlements have become so extensive, with more than 700,000 Israeli Jewish settlers carving up East Jerusalem and the West Bank, making separation impossible.

What is practical about the vision of A Land for All: Two States One Homeland is that it is not based on a separation paradigm, as Israelis and Palestinians are “irrevocably intertwined, each clinging to a vision of a homeland on land claimed by both.

The answer, [A Land for All says is] neither a single state nor a simple division into two. Instead, it would be two states, confederated in a shared homeland. [May’s] model is the European Union, which, as she noted, was composed of countries, like France and Germany, which had been at war with each other not so long before the bloc began to come together.

‘Eighty years ago, would you have expected German hipsters to live in France?’ [She] said. ‘But they do.’

To make such a confederation work, both sides would have to accept conditions, like the free movement of Israelis and Palestinians, the settlement of refugee claims and the authority of common institutions to handle issues like human rights, natural resources

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/16/world/middleeast/israel-palestinians-new-peace-plans.html>

and economic cooperation. Palestinians living in Israel would vote in Palestinian elections; Israelis living in a future Palestine would vote in Israel. Jerusalem would be a shared capital...its holy sites managed by an international authority that included religious representatives.”<sup>3</sup> Most of the West Bank Jewish settlers could remain where they are as Israeli citizens and Palestinian residents. This vision has been co-created by Israelis and Palestinians over a period of 12 years.

We will be having two Israeli leaders from A Land for All speak to us at Oseh by Zoom in just over a week, on Sunday morning, October 20. One of them, Avi Dabush, is a survivor of the Hamas October 7 attack at Kibbutz Nirim and also the executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights. I wish I had more time to get into the specifics of how their two states, one homeland vision would work, but you can find more of the details on the A Land for All [website](#).

One of the things I find most powerful about the vision of May and A Land for All is that it is based in justice and equality and not domination. Because—and I know this is hard for some of us to hear—Israel’s approach to the now almost 3 million Palestinians in the West Bank has been one of control and domination for over fifty-seven years. It’s vital that we as Reconstructionist Jews understand this. I used to speak of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, but occupation is, by international law and common sense, a transitory state of affairs. And what we have now is more like de facto annexation, except those annexed do not have voting rights.

“In 1993, when the Oslo Agreement was first signed, approximately 260,000 settlers were living beyond the Green Line [the 1967 boundaries]. Now, this number has grown to over 700,000 settlers. Israel has filled the West Bank with settlements, highways, and infrastructure, as well as with banks, factories, businesses, and a [large] university.”<sup>4</sup>

The Jewish settlers who live in the West Bank “vote there for the Israeli parliament, and they are subject to the laws it legislates, as enforced by Israel[i] police and judged in Israeli courts.”<sup>5</sup> The settlements’ sewage system, communication and road networks, and electrical grids and water for infrastructure are all integrated into pre-’67 Israel.<sup>6</sup>

The millions of Palestinians in the West Bank live under a completely different legal system of Israeli military rule, where, for example, Palestinians can be detained indefinitely without charge or trial. In the words of Amnesty International Secretary General Agnès Callamard, “Every aspect of their daily lives is disrupted and controlled by Israeli authorities, who place restrictions on their rights to move around, earn a living,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Omri Boehm, *Haifa Republic: A Democratic Future for Israel*, (New York City: New York Review Books, 2021) p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>

pursue educational and professional aspirations, and enjoy a decent quality of life, as well as depriving them of access to their land and natural resources.”<sup>7</sup>

And then there are the intense levels of settler violence Palestinians are subject to, much of which goes unpunished. These attacks have skyrocketed after October 7. The UN has documented over 1400 attacks by settlers on Palestinians in the West Bank in the past year, and that does not include harassment or threats.<sup>8</sup> Some of the most far-right Israeli settlers, who deeply believe in Jewish domination and some of whom openly advocate expulsion of the Palestinians, hold ministerial roles in the current Israeli government.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, many of us in the US, particularly those of us who are white, have learned about systemic racism. The way Israel has controlled the West Bank for over fifty-seven years is cut from similar cloth. It is a separate and unequal, intensely discriminatory system of domination, and it’s no wonder that people all over the world protest it.

May says “her father... understood that our liberation depends on the liberation of the Palestinian people...My dad was committed to the safety and continuation of the State of Israel...But he was as committed to equality and justice, and he taught me that you can’t separate the two.”

“The mentality of separation leads us to think we can solve the problem by putting the Palestinians behind a wire,” she said. “It starts with fear, which I completely understand, but it ends in racism.”<sup>10</sup>

The vision of A Land for All: Two States One Homeland is one way out of this terrible system of oppression, violence and fear.

While I am so inspired by the vision and incredible dedication of these brave Israelis, I will also admit to you that on bad days, the situation looks bleak, and I feel like they are like the resistance in Star Wars, being overwhelmed by powerful Darth Vader-led far-right forces whose only vision is endless Jewish domination. But as Reb Nachman says: *asur l’hitya’esh*/it’s forbidden to despair.

To close, I will briefly mention one more inspiring Israeli: “Maoz Inon, an Israeli entrepreneur and peacemaker whose parents and childhood friends from Netiv HaAsara were killed by Hamas on Oct. 7. Maoz describes that he used to say that nothing can prepare you to respond to the trauma of Oct. 7, but he came to understand that his entire life was preparation to face his parents’ death, led particularly by their

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/israel-must-end-its-occupation-of-palestine-to-stop-fuelling-apartheid-and-systematic-human-rights-violations/>

<sup>8</sup> How a year of war in Gaza has spilled into the West Bank, October 10, 2024, NPR.  
<https://one.npr.org/?sharedMediaId=nx-s1-5132084:nx-s1-5211698-1>

<sup>9</sup> See Boehm, p. 124. One example is current Finance Minister Bezalet Smotrich.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/16/world/middleeast/israel-palestinians-new-peace-plans.html>

example. During the shivah for his parents, Maoz had a vision: He saw all of humanity wounded from the war and the tears of his family washing the blood-soaked ground to reveal a path to peace.”<sup>11</sup>

May this be a year that a critical mass of Israelis and Palestinians choose life over endless violence and may we all find ways to support them. G'mar hatimah tovah, may we all be sealed in the Book of Life.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/we-are-disappearing-into-ourselves/>