

What Most of Us Can Agree On

By Debbie Epstein Henry

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For me, Judaism has always been inextricably linked with advocacy. I can't think of a more important time than now that we use our voices to advocate for Jews and Israel.

My lesson in Judaism and advocacy began at 10 years old when my older sister, Susie, was given a Friday night bat-mitzvah date at our temple, which only allowed boys to have bar mitzvahs on Saturday. My dad and Susie spent the next three years lobbying the temple board to switch Susie's date to a Saturday morning, to enable her to read from the Torah, like her male peers. While Susie's date was not changed, my dad's and Susie's advocacy enabled me to become one of the first girls at our temple with a Saturday morning bat-mitzvah and Torah reading. At age 13, as I stood on the Bima after my D'Var Torah, I thanked my dad and Susie and told our family, friends, and the congregation how grateful I was for their advocacy.

Fast forward to my career, I stopped practicing litigation early on and have spent the last 25 years as a professional speaker and author, advocating for changes in our workplaces, including making the legal profession more hospitable for women. Yet, despite my strong Jewish identity and my background as a speaker and writer, when it came to advocating for Jews, I'm not proud to admit that I've historically been reticent. Perhaps I was self-conscious because I felt that some Jews, like me, were raised by parents with humble beginnings who were able to attain professional and financial success.

However, my reticence changed after my most recent trip to Israel in 2022, when I realized that we must use our voices to fight antisemitism and misinformation about Jews and Israel. This recognition sadly became that much more apparent after the Hamas murders and rapes on October 7th, as well as the subsequent attacks on Israel from Iran's proxies -- Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen -- and now Iran itself.

That said, I know that advocacy is hard, particularly now that we're more than six months into the horrors of war.

Some of you may be ambivalent or fearful to speak up for Jews and especially Israel.

Maybe it's all too much for you.

Maybe you feel you're not informed enough to speak intelligently.

Or, maybe you've believed or wanted to believe that antisemitism is far away -- that it couldn't happen here.

But when my old temple in the Philadelphia suburbs was recently defaced with swastikas, and some of my New York City friends are removing their mezuzahs from their doors, and Jews are getting attacked on college campuses, and my family is attending High Holiday services with armed guards, I've come to realize that antisemitism is here -- it's at our doorsteps and in our communities.

And, here's the thing. We, as Jews are a tiny minority – a mere 0.2% of the world's population and only 2% of the U.S. population.

If we're not speaking up, who will?

If we don't have the courage to take the initiative, why should others?

Here's what I believe to be absolute truths that Jews and allies of Jews can advocate for; hopefully this will help you, as it's helped me.

1. Threatening Jews and advocates for Israel with intimidation and violence is never acceptable.
2. Vandalizing Jewish establishments with swastikas and antisemitic phrases should never be tolerated.
3. Supporting Israel's right to exist does not conflict with supporting the Palestinians' right to a homeland too.
4. Advocating for Israel's eradication of Hamas is not inconsistent with mourning the loss of both Israeli and Palestinian innocent civilian lives.
5. Demonstrating loyalty to Israel is not synonymous with supporting Israel's government with respect to its military operations, humanitarian aid, or otherwise.

Five days after the October 7th massacre, I attended, along with more than 100 law students, professors, lawyers, and Brooklyn Law School community members a Vigil, hosted by the Jewish Law Student Association and Students Against Antisemitism. Among Jews and allies of Jews, we mourned the murders of 1,200 innocent Jewish civilians and prayed for the return of 240 innocent hostages.

At that Vigil and through my own efforts ever since, I've learned these lessons in advocacy that I'd like to leave you with:

1. Stay informed;
2. Correct misinformation;
3. Show strength;
4. Speak up;
5. Provide support;
6. Demonstrate compassion;
7. Cultivate allies;
8. Engage in difficult conversations;
9. Invest in community; and,
10. Model humanity.

Thank you and Am Yisrael Chai.

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