

*Walking with the Other:
On Zionism, Teshuvah, and a Future of Peace
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There is a fascinating story in the Talmud¹, about two rabbis walking together: one riding a horse on Shabbat, the other walking behind him, learning Torah from him. The rabbis' names are Elisha ben Abuya and Rabbi Meir.

Elisha ben Abuya, also known as *Acher*, literally “the Other,” was a rabbi who adopted a worldview that was considered so heretical by his fellow rabbis that they stopped referring to his teachings in his name.

In this particular story, we are told that *Acher* was riding his horse on Shabbat, an activity prohibited by Jewish law. Walking behind him was Rabbi Meir. The Talmud tells us:

והיה רבי מאיר מהלך אחריו ללמוד תורה מפיו

“Rabbi Meir was walking behind him **in order to learn Torah from his mouth.**”

As they continue walking together, bordering the area that is permitted to walk on Shabbat, *Acher* tells Rabbi Meir that he should stop, making sure that Rabbi Meir does not break the laws of Shabbat.

There is something almost paradoxical here: *Acher*, the one who no longer follows the rules, is worried that his student might cross a boundary of the tradition he himself has rejected.

And Rabbi Meir responds:

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Chagiga 15a.

“You, too, return.”

That can be understood in two ways. Literally, he might be saying: if I am turning back in our walk, you can turn back with me. But he may also be saying: Come back to the practices and traditions of our people. You, too, return.

One rabbi remains within the boundaries of the tradition; the other has put himself outside of them. And yet they remain in conversation, walking together and continuing to teach and learn from each other.

That story has stayed with me, and it has led me to three questions that I have been wrestling with, questions that feel especially urgent in our own time:

First: When someone becomes an *Acher* to us, how do we remain connected and curious about what we might learn from them?

The story of Elisha ben Abuya and Rabbi Meir invites us to consider that we can learn from everyone, and that each of us has the capacity—and perhaps the responsibility—to learn even from someone who stands outside the boundaries of what we understand to be true or right.

So what happens when we begin to see someone in our own community as the *Acher*, as the Other?

I think about how often these questions come up in the Jewish community: “Are you a Zionist?” Or, “Are you an Anti-Zionist?” I imagine some of you have heard them, too. These questions can become litmus tests—a way of deciding who is with us, who is against us, and who has a legitimate place in the community or even in the conversation. And too often, a “wrong” answer is enough for us to make someone into the *Acher*, to place them outside the boundaries of the community, and, unlike Rabbi Meir, to stop walking and learning together.

I think part of the problem is language. For some, Zionism means that the Jewish people have a right to national self-determination, and that there should be a Jewish state in the land that has been at the center of Jewish longing for thousands of years. For others, the word has become inseparable from occupation, settlements, Palestinian dispossession, and other unjust policies of the Israeli government. It has become a term for an ideology they see as inherently oppressive and destructive.

And so, two people use the same word—Zionism—while actually talking about two different things.

And suddenly, we can find ourselves separated by what feels like an unbridgeable gulf, without having stopped to ask the most basic question:

What do you mean?

This is happening on social media, between friends, between parents and children, and within our own communities. And it is pulling us further apart at precisely the moment when we need to be able to remain in conversation.

This disconnect between the word Zionist and what people actually mean shows up in the data, too.

A national survey conducted by the Jewish Federations of North America² found that only 37% of American Jews surveyed identify as Zionist, even as more than 70% report a deep emotional connection to Israel and 88% believe that Israel has the right to exist as a Jewish, democratic state.

We see this same challenge in a local Boston survey. The 2025 Greater Boston Jewish Community Study, conducted by CJP, makes an important observation about these labels: “Views on Zionism are reflective of a broad ideological spectrum. These views clearly show that community members do not necessarily speak a shared language when they use the terms ‘Zionism’ and ‘anti-Zionism’.”³

² https://www.jewishdatabank.org/api/download/?studyId=1277&mediald=bjdb%5CJFNA_Survey_4_IsraelZionismInsights.pdf

³ https://www.cjp.org/hubfs/Boston_2025_Study_Report_Israel.pdf?hsLang=en

So perhaps these numbers don't actually tell us what people believe. They tell us that we cannot always know what someone means when they say Zionist or anti-Zionist.

We have to ask for clarity.

I think about a friend of mine who, like me, identifies as a progressive Zionist. She had a colleague who called herself an anti-Zionist. My friend decided to ask her colleague: "What do you mean?" And her colleague, in turn, asked my friend: "And what do you mean?"

Over the course of a two-hour conversation, they discovered that they shared far more than they expected: they both believed that Jews and Palestinians have deep historic, cultural, and religious ties to the land; that Jews need a place where they can live in safety and dignity; that the occupation is unjust; that the current Israeli government is pursuing policies they both see as harmful; and that the massacre committed by Hamas on October 7th was a massacre and terrorism is not a legitimate form of resistance.

It is also important to point out that in some circles, especially on university campuses, the word Zionist has become a slur or an insult, or that, even more dangerously, it is sometimes used as a proxy for Jews themselves, crossing the line from anti-Zionist ideas into antisemitism.

To be clear, I am not minimizing the real differences that exist between people, differences that can feel so painful that it is hard to stay in conversation. But I am saying that we must slow the conversation down so that we can stay in it. We must continue walking side by side with the *Acher* in our lives, and maybe, just maybe, we will discover that we are teaching Torah to one another.

I experienced this myself.

Not long after October 7th, a dear Muslim friend of mine who lives here in Brookline liked a social media post that said, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

I remember feeling frightened when I saw it. As a Jew, after October 7th, I heard that phrase as a threat to the existence of Israel and to the safety of Jews.

But I knew this person. So instead of assuming I knew what she meant and staying away, I called her and asked: “What do you mean?”

She told me what the phrase meant to her. She was talking about freedom from occupation and about a future in which both Palestinians and Israeli Jews could live with freedom and dignity. She did not mean what I had assumed she meant.

I was able to understand the intent behind her words, and she was able to understand why the phrase was frightening to me and to many Jews.

We did not come away agreeing on everything. But we understood each other more deeply, and this experience even deepened our relationship.

But it also reminded me that staying in relationship is only part of the work. There is another question we have to be willing to ask ourselves: What is ours to examine? What is ours to change?

Rabbi Zachary Truboff, in his book *Zionism in Crisis: A Call for Teshuvah*, asks what *teshuvah* requires of us in the aftermath of October 7th and the war that followed. In the introduction to his book, he writes:

“Why must a crisis lead to *teshuvah*? Because if we cannot turn inward, examine ourselves, and accept responsibility when the world is crumbling around us, when will we ever do so? (...) *Teshuvah*, however, begins instead by admitting, ‘I am somehow implicated in this, even if I don't yet understand how.’ (...) This does not mean accepting blame for everything that has happened. We are not all guilty. But we are responsible for what comes next and for how we choose to respond.”⁴

Truboff also describes what he calls a “fantasy of innocence”: the tendency to believe that because our intentions are justified, because our fear is real, or because Jewish

⁴Zachary Truboff, *Zionism in Crisis: Jewish Power and Moral Responsibility After October 7* (2026), xi.

history gives us reasons for the choices we make, we are therefore innocent of responsibility for the consequences of those choices.

Which brings me to a second core question that I invite you to engage in today: **What is our *teshuvah* when it comes to Zionism? And what are we being called to examine, and perhaps to change?**

I believe that we can affirm Jewish peoplehood and self-determination while also confronting—and doing *teshuvah* for—Palestinian suffering, occupation, and the ways Jewish power has and continues to cause harm. We can be committed to Jewish safety and to fighting antisemitism while doing *teshuvah* for the ways we allow our fear to deny another people's freedom and dignity.

This summer, while learning in Jerusalem, I had a few experiences that spoke to this question. Let me share three quick stories with you.

The first story involves a day of Protective Presence with *Smol Emuni*⁵ in the Palestinian village of Tarkumiya in the West Bank. Protective Presence is the practice of Israeli Jewish and international activists, including American Jews and rabbis, who put their bodies on the line in Palestinian communities that have experienced settler violence or are at risk of being targeted. I imagine many of you have seen news reports of the horrific violence of extremist settlers against Palestinians—assaults, even murder, the dispossession of land and homes, often carried out with impunity, and at times with the active protection of the Israeli military, and with the backing of members of the Israeli government.

The idea of Protective Presence is that the presence of activists can help to discourage violence or reduce its severity.

Smol Emuni, or the Religious Left, is a group of Jewish religious activists who support Palestinian communities out of a religious conviction that this is what we are obligated to do—that this is what Torah calls us to do.

⁵ <https://www.smolemuni.com/>

We walked through the village with Palestinians, saw homes that had been destroyed by settlers, and listened to people talk about what it means to live with this reality every day. Thankfully, there was no violence that day. But we were there because we knew there could have been.

What moved me most was that everyone standing with me was an observant Jew. We were there not despite our Judaism, but because of it. At a moment when acts of violence against Palestinians are carried out by Jews speaking in the language of Torah, I feel an even greater responsibility to reclaim what I see as the true voice of Torah—one rooted in compassion, humility, and moral courage.

Second story: On another day, I went to Tekoa, a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, where we met young Israeli women who are shepherds and part of the Hilltop Youth settler movement. They spoke with deep conviction about their belief that this land was given by God to the Jewish people.

I asked them about the violence against Palestinians in the area. They denied that the violence was happening in the way I was describing it. But as we continued talking, they also told me that they felt they had no choice but to be forceful in asserting their claims, because this land belongs to the Jewish people and they were not willing to give it up.

That was painful to hear—not simply because I disagreed with them, but because I was hearing Jewish tradition invoked to explain why there was no room for another people.

And what struck me was how familiar some of the language sounded. They were speaking about God, Torah, Jewish history, and our connection to the land—things that are deeply meaningful to me as well. And yet they were drawing from those very sources a conclusion that left no possibility of sharing the land with Palestinians.

And the third story from this summer: I was spending a day at a pool with dear friends of mine. The son of my friend, now a young father, was in the pool with his

toddler. His mother had been deeply involved in the peace movement for years, and I had known their family for a long time.

At one point, he told me that since October 7th, he no longer believed that peace was possible. I understood why he felt that way. How could I not? After October 7th, after the murder and kidnapping of Israelis, after so much fear and loss, and after this young man had spent months serving in the reserves, I could understand how the possibility of peace could feel unattainable.

So I asked him, “What is the alternative? What is the vision?”

And he said to me: אין חזון “There is no vision. We will live in war and survival forever.”

That broke my heart.

Not because I expected him to have a peace plan. I wasn’t asking him how we get there. I was asking whether he could still imagine that there was another future.

I worry that one of the most profound dangers of this moment is not simply that we disagree about what the future should look like, but that we lose the ability to imagine a different future at all.

In the book *The Future Is Peace*⁶, Palestinian peacebuilder Aziz Abu Sarah and Israeli peace activist Maoz Inon write about what it means to imagine a different future. Both have experienced devastating personal loss. Aziz lost his teenage brother after he was abused in an Israeli military prison. Maoz’s parents were murdered on October 7th.

And yet, in the aftermath of that loss, something remarkable happened. Maoz and his family made a conscious decision not to seek revenge or allow the deaths of his parents to become a justification for more killing. And Aziz, knowing what had happened to Maoz’s family and knowing the pain of his own history, reached out to

⁶Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon, *The Future Is Peace: A Shared Journey Across the Holy Land* (2024).

him. Their relationship became a bridge between two people whose communities had experienced profound violence at the hands of the other.

Their story reminds us that hope is not something we simply discover. It is something we choose to create. We can imagine a future that does not simply repeat the present, and we can take responsibility for helping to create it.

And we have to, because neither people are going anywhere. Israelis are not going anywhere, and Palestinians are not going anywhere. Both peoples have deep histories and attachments to this land. Both deserve to live with freedom, dignity, and safety.

The question is whether we can imagine—and work toward—a future in which that is possible for both.

So this brings me to my third question for today, perhaps the most important question of all:

What kind of future can we imagine? And what is the future we will fight for?

On October 27th, Israelis will go to the polls to elect the next *Knesset*, Israel's parliament. God willing, as an Israeli citizen, I will be one of those traveling to Israel to vote. And I know I am not the only one. Many others, including members of our TBZ community, are making the effort to be there and to vote, because we believe that the stakes are high. Perhaps the highest they have ever been.

The future of a democratic Israel is on the line. And so is the possibility of imagining a future in which Israelis and Palestinians can one day live side by side, with freedom, dignity, and security.

And what gives me hope is that, even in this incredibly difficult moment, there are people running for office who are articulating visions for what that future could look like. They may have very different ideas about how to get there, and I certainly don't agree with all of them. But they are reminding us that there are choices to be made about the future, and that the future does not have to be simply a continuation of the present.

And this is my invitation to all of us: to commit ourselves to imagining a future of peace. It means refusing to accept that the reality we are living through is the only future available to us, and continuing to cultivate a *hazon*, a vision for something different.

This is why, together with Rabbi Andy Vogel from Temple Sinai, we are planning a trip to Israel and the West Bank called **Supporting the Peacemakers**. On this trip, we will meet Israelis and Palestinians who are building relationships, working for human rights and equality, creating partnerships, and refusing to accept violence as the only possible future. More information about our trip has been sent to our community, and flyers are available outside. Please reach out to me, if you have questions. The dates of the trip are January 17 to 25, 2027.

And this brings me back to where I began, with the story of *Acher* and Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Meir could have walked away. Instead, he kept walking with *Acher*, learning from him and remaining in relationship. Perhaps in doing so, he refused to let *Acher* become simply “the Other.”

I know we cannot change one another’s minds. And I don’t think that should be the goal. But I do believe we have a responsibility to keep walking together. To keep asking, “What do you mean?” To remain curious enough to learn, humble enough to examine ourselves, and courageous enough to imagine a future that does not yet exist.

So let me bring us back to the three questions at the heart of our conversation:

How do we remain connected to those we see as the *Acher* and curious about what we might learn from them?

What is our *teshuvah* when it comes to Zionism? And what does *teshuvah* ask of us in our relationship with Israel?

“What kind of future can we imagine—and what are we willing to do to help create it?”

That is the work before us: to keep walking, listening, and resisting the litmus tests that divide us, while holding on to a vision of a future we cannot yet fully see.

Together, we can bring it into sight.

In a moment, we are going to read the *haftarah*⁷ for Yom Kippur morning, from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah asks what kind of fast God really desires. Is it simply to afflict ourselves, to bow our heads, and perform the rituals of the day? No, Isaiah says. The fast God desires is to “let the oppressed go free,” to “share your bread with the hungry,” to loosen the bonds that hold people captive.

In other words, our rituals are meant to move us toward action. Our prayers are meant to change how we live. And our vision of a different future asks something of us: not only to imagine what could be, but to take responsibility for helping to make it possible.

So on this Yom Kippur, as we fast and pray and imagine a different future, may we also have the courage to walk toward it—and to do so together.

*Ken yehi ratzon.
Chatima Tova.*

⁷ Isaiah 57:14–58:14