

EDGERS

ROSH HASHANAH, DAY ONE

They say that there are two things one is not supposed to speak about in polite company: religion and politics.

They also say that there is one thing one is not supposed to speak about in polite Jewish company: Israel.

So *shana tova* and welcome to IKAR. If I can't talk about religion, politics or Israel, all I've got left is my analysis of the 3rd season of Scandal, which I frankly don't think is what you came for today.

I want to start by sharing the story of one particular prostitute and how the torah of her life just might change the way we look at the world.

When Joshua prepares to conquer the land of Canaan, at the end of a forty year desert journey from slavery to freedom, he sends in spies, as Moses did before him. The spies approach a prostitute named Rahav, who lives on the outskirts of Jericho (Joshua 2:15) – her home is built into the walls surrounding the city. The Book of Joshua goes out of its way to tell us this because she literally lives on the edge – on the geographic and social fringes of her community. From that perch, her perspective is not insider but also not outsider, enabling her to see what those within the walled city cannot. She recognizes the spies not as enemies, but as future redeemers of the land, an insight that saves her life. She makes an oath with them – she protects them and they protect her.

It is Rahav's marginalization that is the source of her power.

Rahav was not a Jew, but her story becomes emblematic of one of the great Jewish lessons of history: For all that you have achieved – for all the deals you have signed, wealth you have accumulated, status you have earned: make no mistake. You are not an insider. You live on the margins. Eternally.

Not that we really need the reminder, after this summer. I'm not one to cry "Anti-Semitism!" (though I do always make sure our passports are current, just in case...). But I admit that I was pretty shaken when a drunk group of neo-Nazi teens boarded a Jewish day school bus in Australia and threatened to slit the throats of the 5-12 year old children on board. We've all read that this summer there was a spike in anti-Semitic incidents worldwide as the fighting persisted in Israel and Gaza. In Paris, Berlin and Antwerp, there were cries of "Death to the Jews!" and "Reopen Auschwitz!" In Liege, signs were posted that said: "Dogs are allowed in this establishment but Jews are not under any circumstances."

As much as we think we are insiders, this summer reminded us: we live on the cusp. The margins. One thing the Jew must do: remain vigilant. You're never as safe as you think you are...

But life on the margins is not only a physical state, it is also a spiritual state. It's about perspective.

For Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, an essential dimension of the Jewish psyche is the awareness that we are eternally marginalized. He argued that the Jewish calendar is designed precisely to thrust us, periodically, back into *a frame of mind that enables [us] to detach ourselves from what we have come to accept as normal, and [instead] view it critically*. These ritual moments are designed to plant an eternal

reminder that the Jewish heart is called to *protest against the injustices and inequities of civilization* and rearticulate the values and standards that we ought to seek to achieve (Mordecai Kaplan, *Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*).

Or, to use a formulation of Rabbi Arthur Waskow: The Jewish people are “edgers.” “Perhaps we are to learn,” he writes, “‘Insiders’ often close their eyes to truth and to suffering, and so act like Pharaoh... ‘Outsiders’ often glance at surfaces and act... cowardly, touristy... ‘Edgers’ can see more deeply” (Jerusalem Report, *Shlah Lekha*, June 18, 2001).

It strikes me that it’s in our DNA to be edgers. MOSES was an edger. When he looked up one day and witnessed an Egyptian task master beating an old Israelite slave, he saw with the privileged assumptions of an insider, but also with the sensitivity of an outsider.

Every agent of social change in this country was an edger. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an edger. He loved America enough to know how to hold it to its greatest aspirations. Abraham Lincoln? An edger. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Gloria Steinem, Harvey Milk, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Those who led and lead the fights for marriage equality, racial equality, economic justice – all of them are edgers.

Inside enough that they’re invested deeply in the outcome – because this is MY neighborhood. My city. My country. I have something at stake here.

And outside enough that they are still awake. They are not intoxicated by popular assumptions of what can and cannot be.

Edgers breathe a different air. An air of possibility that comes with perspective.

Fast forward to this summer. With the war between Israel and Gaza came unprecedented polarization in the public sphere between those who called themselves pro-Israel and pro-Palestine.

Where did you sit this summer? You probably felt, as many did, dismay, consternation, resentment as the ferocious debate swirled around this conflict. Many took a Facebook hiatus because you could no longer stomach the invective of your newsfeed. Some avoided family gatherings because you worried what would happen when the conversation about the East turned South, as it almost always did this summer, and suddenly war monger meets traitor over BBQ.

How did it happen that sensible and decent people came to disagree so vehemently on this conflict? That each side felt that they had the moral authority, both sides felt like victims, both felt that the world had abandoned them, and both felt that the New York Times was biased against them?

Here’s what I observed this summer:

I heard a mainstream Jewish and Israeli narrative that began with the nightmare kidnapping of the three boys, then the cascade of rockets from Gaza, then the revelation of the tunnels, all of which had the cumulative effect of re-opening the wounds of the bus bombings and blown-up cafes and bars and shopping centers. And wounds even deeper that preceded those. Ami Ayalon, former head of the Shin Bet, once said that when Jews count our dead after an attack, we don’t count 1, 2, 3. We count 6,000,001, 6,000,002, 6,000,003. Every Jewish death is felt by the whole nation – each loss is all of our

loss, every murder falls on the open wounds of the past, every one of them reinforcing our eternal vulnerability as a people. Our people's greatest trauma, the Holocaust, has not faded into the past because it regenerates itself with every rocket, every kidnapping, every suicide attack.

In this narrative, held by many American Jews and most Israelis, the war with Gaza was a defensive war, fought to protect innocents from Hamas murderers who chose to spend millions of dollars building an underground war machine rather than building the Palestinian economy. Imagine masked terrorists digging tunnels under your kid's bedroom. How could the world not sympathize with that fight?

And yet it seemed that sympathy for Israel was indeed hard to come by this summer, outside the American Jewish establishment.

Instead, there was a rising tide of support for a very different narrative, one that argued that the grave threat to safety and personhood in the region was not terrorism and crude rockets but an ongoing military occupation in the West Bank and a crippling blockade in Gaza. This round of fighting, it was said, was the predictable outcome of the systematic denial of Palestinian rights and dignity for forty-seven years. The issue, according to this narrative, is the fact that 3 million Palestinians have been forced to live a life of daily indignities, humiliation and struggle. That Gazans have been sentenced to life in an open air prison, and that the continuous expansion of settlements has sent the clear message that nothing is getting better any time soon.

I know that this is hard for many in the Jewish community to hear. There are, in fact, certain words and ideas that are out of bounds in mainstream Jewish circles – words like Occupation and Palestine. And I understand why – it's because we feel, frankly, besieged. We are stunned by the disproportionate anger directed toward Israel by members of the press, politicians and activists who can barely muster an ounce of concern for the murder of thousands of innocents just across the border in Syria and Iraq. We feel abandoned by friends, stunned and terrified by the deep hatred revealed in rantings against Israel around the world.

It is hard to engage in open-hearted reflection and good old fashioned Jewish self-criticism when the world seems to be turned on its head. And it would be much easier for me today to reinforce for all of us our deepest fears and concerns about Israel's isolation and vulnerability in the context of a global rise in anti-Semitism. Let me be clear: I believe all of that to be true. *It's just not the whole truth.* And we are not here today to reinforce our preconceived notions about the state of our lives and the world, but to look the new year square in the face and consider who we are, who we want to be, and what we're going to do differently this year. And in this sense, our community has some real work to do.

I am a Zionist.

I first realized this in college. I had fled the Jewish community for its narrow-mindedness and judgmentalism, for its everyday reminder of my Jewish illiteracy and inadequacy. My return to Judaism began when the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires was bombed in 1992. Just a few days earlier that week there had been a horrible gas explosion in a coal mine in Turkey killing hundreds. I don't remember the details but I do remember my heart aching as I sat on the floor of my dorm room and read of the families weeping as they waited outside the mine while bodies were extracted. But then, the bombing at the Israeli Embassy – 29 people were killed, including four Israelis and a number of Argentine children in

an adjacent school, clergy in a church across the street and pedestrians. 250 people were severely injured. Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah claimed responsibility.

I couldn't take my eyes off the photo of the shattered ruins of that building. And this time I didn't just cry - I collapsed. I was not only devastated by the loss of life, I was stunned and disturbed by my reaction. I had never been to Israel. I spoke no Hebrew. I was a secular New Yorker, a bagel Jew. Why did this tragedy, thousands of miles away, feel so personal? Why did it feel different from Turkey? It took some time for me to realize that one can be a decent, moral person and still weep differently for your family. Even family that you have never met. I realized in that moment that those victims, and their families were *mine* – and that I, a disconnected Upper West Side Jew – was theirs. I was a part of the Jewish people. And my destiny was wrapped up in Israel's story. This realization prompted me to sign up to spend junior year learning in Jerusalem, which led me to spend the next 20 years in a tumultuous love affair with a troubled and beautiful State, aching under the weight of history, driven and burdened by its messianic aspirations.

And yet I also know that I will never truly be an insider in the Zionist camp. Every time I hear a 'pro-Israel' speech accusing Arabs of loving death as much as we Jews love life – as if Palestinians don't weep for their children and yearn for peace and hunger for normalcy just as Jews do - I realize that I will never sit with ease under that banner.

Let me also say that I have always been both a progressive and an activist.

I may have been the only middle-schooler in Short Hills, NJ, to cover the wall of my room with a 6x6 ft. Keith Haring poster of a Black South African breaking the shackles of oppression by crushing a White man beneath his foot. I received a Master's Degree in Human Rights while I was in rabbinical school and travelled around the world to international human rights conferences.

But I will also never truly be an insider in that camp. One particularly memorable moment: At an international interfaith conference one year I got into a fierce battle with leftist academics who challenged the historicity of the Holocaust and blamed Israel and the Zionists for the misery of the developing world – from HIV/ AIDS to global poverty to famine. I was stunned. How will there ever be peace if the rhetoric around Israel is so deliberately provocative, so vicious and so inaccurate?

Which places me, uncomfortably, right at the edge of both camps.

I'll tell you what I see, standing at the edge and looking in:

The Jewish and pro-Israel community is driven by a very deep awareness of our vulnerabilities: the threat of terror, the feeling of being vilified and delegitimized and truly alone in the world.

The pro-Palestinian camp is similarly driven by a very deep awareness of its vulnerabilities, principally the Occupation and the freedom and dignity denied to its people.

But both camps have done a very poor job recognizing the validity of the others' claims.

One emphasizes the threat of terror, as if there's no occupation.

One bemoans the occupation, as if there's no terror.

In other words, at the heart of this conflict is a willful understating of core motivations of the other. *But why must we diminish or denigrate the validity of someone else's claim in order to preserve the truth of our own?*

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)
Walt Whitman, Song of Myself, 52

Ours is a tradition that holds at its sacred center a great, big book – the Talmud – 63 tractates, 6200 pages long. It would take you seven years if you read one page a day. It is, more than anything else, credited with keeping the Jewish people and the Jewish spirit alive, through pogroms and exiles and days of impenetrable darkness. What is this sacred text? It is the recording of generations of conversations, debates and struggles, a living testament to the complexity, diversity and richness of the Jewish tradition. It is a text that contradicts itself. It is large. It contains multitudes.

The Talmud, in *Masekhet Hagigah* (3b), teaches that in judicial rulings, it would often happen that half the Rabbis would declare an object kosher, while the other half would pronounce it treif. Some would prohibit it, others would permit. But how am I supposed to learn from a tradition that holds all sides of every question, the Rabbis ask. How can I function in a world of multiple truths? Make your ear, the Talmud says, like an *afarkeset* – a mill hopper, a funnel. Take *everything* in. And then cultivate a perceptive heart that will find truth - both in those who declare it kosher and in those who say it's treif, those who say pure and those who say impure.

But I want *answers!* I want *good guys* and *bad guys*. The Maharal of Prague, 16th century mystic, commentator (and Golem creator), writes that just as each of us is a complex being, so too the questions we ask are complex. Nuanced. *Ain ha'olam pashut* – the world is not so simple, he writes. All things change, expand, develop. Life is complicated. Multi-dimensional. In very rare cases, two sides are completely equal and justified (as in the case of the dispute between beit Hillel and beit Shammai). But most of the time, the discerning heart will be able to read the components of a situation to determine where there is *more* truth – so that we know how to live. Even still, he warns, be careful not to diminish the other, thinking it is *less than*. Recognize that both sides are part of the complex whole (Maharal of Prague, *Be'er haGolah*).

Accepting the subtleties of an argument and counter-argument does not mean creating an equivalency – moral or empirical. But it does mean that it is a critical task of a critical thinker to attune the heart to such complexities.

Only from the edge can you make your ear into a funnel. From the edge, you can see subtleties. Those on the edge have trouble shouting at rallies or waving signs with someone else's slogan. They generally avoid signing letters of contempt or support. It's complicated! they think. Yes and yes! No and no!

Edgers don't have to be left or right – they simply have to be willing to wrestle. They have to be willing to break from the "consensus," to agitate even when it's unpopular. Rather than bang his head against the wall asking: *How can the world fail to see how just and moral and right I am?* the edger stretches to see the situation from another perspective.

Etgar Keret, who defies a patriotism that celebrates right-wing thuggery and mocks expressions of empathy for the women and children in Gaza, is an edger.

“We are faced with the false, anti-democratic equation that argues that aggression, racism, and lack of empathy mean love of the homeland, while any other opinion... is nothing less than an attempt to destroy Israel as we know it.”

David Grossman is an edger. He refuses, even after suffering the greatest loss (his son, Uri, was killed in the final days of the war in Lebanon in 2006), to give up hope:

“We cannot afford the luxury and indulgence of despair. The situation is too desperate to be left to the despairing, for accepting despair amounts to an admission that we’ve been defeated. Defeated not on the battlefield, but as human beings.”

Fania Oz-Salzberger, an Israeli historian and daughter of Amos Oz, is an edger. She writes that:

“The dividing line in the current battle is not between the three religions, nor is it between the religious and the irreligious. It runs... between all fanatics and all moderates.”

Rabbi Donniel Hartman was speaking from the edge when he refused to join the chorus of mockery and derision toward the peace camp and instead proclaimed himself a peaceaholic. So, too, was Rabbi Benny Lau, a religious Zionist, when he told his community that revenge ought to be expunged from the Jewish vocabulary, and that “it’s important for minorities to feel secure in Israel. If not, we accomplished nothing by building the State.”

A few years ago, Former Minister Benny Begin, known as the “Prince of the Likud,” criticized the rising tide of anti-democratic legislation, saying: “Something dark is rising in Israel.” He, too, is an edger.

Gadi Gvanyahu, an Orthodox Jew and activist fighting Jewish extremism, is an edger. He responded to the Tag Mahir/ *PriceTag* movement of Jews committing acts of violence and vandalism against Palestinians by creating Tag Meir/ *Light Tag* – a coalition of Jews who visit victims of violence and apologize, offer help and sometimes pay for damages. “They want to create damage, we want to create light,” he said.

It was an edger who once said:

“We who come to the Land of Israel in order to resolve the question of our historical existence on a territorial basis, what is our attitude toward the non-Jewish residents present in the land? The answer can only be this: ...We, who in good faith present to the entire world the demand to be treated with complete equality as a nation, are also obligated to put this demand to ourselves [with regards to our Arab neighbors]. If [equality] obligates the entire world in its attitude to us, then it obligates us [as well]...”

That edger was David Ben Gurion, founder of the State of Israel and its first Prime Minister (“National Autonomy and Neighborly Relations,” 1926) – known to be both a visionary leader and a pragmatist. If he were a rabbi preaching those visionary and pragmatic words from the pulpit today, he’d likely be called a traitor and might even lose his job.

There are Muslim and Palestinian edgers as well. (Just because you don’t know them doesn’t mean they don’t exist.) One, named Rabia Chaudry, took great risk when she courageously wrote in Time Magazine this summer describing her change of heart from someone who saw Zionism as ‘toxic,’ to one who now looks at Israel and sees “the Jewish people’s longing of thousands of years for a homeland, a return from exile... a chance for redemption.”

Ali Abu Awwad, a Palestinian leader in the non-violent movement for peace, became an edger after his beloved brother was killed by Israeli soldiers and Ali realized the futility of revenge – he realized that no amount of spilled Jewish blood would ease the pain that shattered his family and his heart. As an edger, he travels around the world with bereaved Israelis who have also lost loved ones, crying sacred tears and building paths to peace and reconciliation.

Read Karima Bennoune, who profiles and amplifies the voices of Muslims around the world who strongly oppose fundamentalism and violence, often at grave personal risk. She, and they, are edgers.

And there are so many more.

There's something innately Jewish about being on the edge, about resisting the magnetic pull of normative assumptions and insisting on holding complexities. In the words of Yossi Klein Halevi: "...to be a Jew means to balance paradoxes – security and morality, realism and vision, particularism and universalism, self-defense and self-critique."

Much has been written about the trend among American Jews – especially young ones - to detach from Israel, a detachment that correlates with a growing skepticism around settlement policy and efforts of the Israeli government to make peace with the Palestinians. Many feel that they are forced to choose – will you cast your lot with hard-lined, ultra-nationalist Israeli politics, or will you dissociate yourself from Israel altogether?

But this, of course, is a false set of choices.

Can we love Israel and hold deep concern for Israel's security also believe that the Settlement enterprise and ongoing settlement expansion is immoral, unJewish and endangering the very State we love? Absolutely, we can.

Can we worry for friends and family serving in Gaza, grieve for fallen soldiers, detest Hamas and still weep for the deaths of innocent Palestinians? Of course we can – are we not human?

In a time in which Israel is increasingly criminalized internationally, can we voice concern about a growing racism and nationalism in Israeli society, one that drove gangs of Jews to the streets shouting "*Mavet l'Aravim!*" – *Death to Arabs*, and ultimately led to the gruesome murder of Palestinian teen this summer? I believe not only that we can, but we must.

Can we see Israel as a source of religious and spiritual inspiration, and also worry that Judaism in the public sphere in Israel is increasingly rigid, extremist and misogynistic? Absolutely.

Can we worry for Israel in a tumultuous time and in a dangerous neighborhood, with Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, ISIS and Iran at the doorstep, and still believe that a diplomatic resolution to the conflict with the Palestinians must be a top priority? Indeed we can.

Can we hold - in this holy space on this holy day - complexities and contradictions that stretch the heart, that make us uncomfortable, that make life complicated? We must figure out how to.

And I know that we can do this. How do I know? Because look at us!

We hold, simultaneously, all kinds of contradictions.

We are a people who sit in services, many of us, with our cynicism, skepticism and sometimes atheism, and yet we pray together with all of our hearts until this room shakes and quakes with possibility.

We are a people who know how to hold grief and joy in one heart. We can stand at the funeral of a young mother and cry and cry because she was so beautiful and the world is empty without her and yet we know that this empty world still overflows with love.

We are traditional and imaginative. Religious and secular.

We have intellectual integrity but are not afraid to suspend disbelief.

We hold longing and love, loss and life all at once.

We make space for the bitter and the sweet. The honey and the sting.

This summer began with the kidnapping of three Israeli Jewish boys – Eyal, Gilad and Naftali. For 18 days millions of people around the world – believers and non-believers, left and right - prayed to God that they would make it home alive until it was announced that their bodies had been found; they had been murdered.

Many have said that in a summer of darkness and heartache, a great light radiated from the parents of these three boys. I met Gilad's parents in New York a few weeks ago. His father, Ofir, asked: *Why did we see such unity this summer around our boys? Because in a world of cynicism, a world in which everyone's asking 'What's in it for me,' suddenly three mothers spoke in a different voice. A voice not of pessimism, but optimism. A voice not of cynicism, but of faith. A voice not of hatred, but of love.*

Hear the voice of Racheli Fraenkel, the mother of Naftali, one of the first to speak out against vengeance and vigilantism. After the revenge murder of Mohammed Abu Khdeir she cried out: "Even in the abyss of mourning... it is difficult for me to describe how distressed we are by the outrage committed in Jerusalem – the shedding of innocent blood is against morality, is against the Torah and Judaism, and is against the foundation of the lives of our boys and of all of us in this country." "No mother or father" she said, "should ever have to go through what we are going through, and we share the pain of Mohammed's parents."

Those voices – voices of perspective, compassion, humanity – cry out to us from the edge. If there is ever to be a breakthrough, a chance for peace – it will be because of people like Ofir and Rachel, David, Gadi, Fania and Ali, who, with hearts cracked opened, become vessels of light and possibility.

I'm not asking that we give up what we believe in. My deepest prayer is that we open our hearts. Hear a different perspective. Trust our ears to take it all in, trust our hearts that when it's all said and done, we can discern truth, affirm humanity and find possibility.

It's not comfortable on the margins. It's lonely and scary. But we're called there for a reason – because the world desperately needs to learn what we see when we look in from the edge.

Shana tova.