

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5776
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I love my cousin Jacob. Growing up, he was my best friend. In my eyes he could do no wrong. Everything he did was the best: he was the fastest, the strongest, the smartest, the funniest—everyone loved Jacob. Jacob was the kid we all wanted to be around—the kid we all wanted to be. But as we grew older, things started to change, our relationship started to change, I started to change, he started to change...at least I thought so.

Perhaps he was the way he was and I just didn't know, or didn't see it. Yes, he was smart and he worked hard, but he made his share of mistakes. He was fast and strong and he protected me from bullies, but sometimes he was called a bully. I loved him still because he was my family and he was my friend. And yet, as the years went by, we grew apart and I saw him less and less. He didn't come around much anymore and I didn't seek him out either. Once a year I would send a card on his birthday and he on mine—sometimes not even that much—but I would still hear about him.

His accomplishments and his successes in business, in science, in technology, in medicine: he was doing things few could even imagine. He was changing the world and changing it for good, and I was proud. Yet I also heard some thought he was mean, confused, scared, and angry. I couldn't take it anymore, I needed to reach out and reconnect to my family—to love him and to help him, to let him know I am here, and to let him know that I know he is not superhuman, but rather human with flaws and challenges and loves and goodness. I am here for him because I know who he can be. I know as much as Jacob needs me, I need him. He is a part of me and I him no matter how much I used to deny it or ignore it, it is true. We are forever connected.

Sound familiar? It should, because Jacob is your family too. But you know him by another name. I know when you hear this name some of you may turn off or tune out, but please don't. You know Jacob by another name...Israel.

I tried something recently. I opened my Google browser and started typing the word 'Israeli', and not three letters into it, auto fill wrote 'Israeli Palestinian conflict.' Next I started typing 'Palestinian' and again not three letters in, it wrote 'Palestinian Israeli conflict.' Conflict, conflict, conflict.

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, emails, videos, the LA times, the New York times, The Daily News, the Daily Bruin, and the Daily Trojan have all placed a searing spotlight on conflict. Resolution after resolution, verbal attacks, physical attacks, rockets, bombs, conflict, Israelis, Palestinians, Israelis, Arabs, Jews, Muslims, America, the UN. It is dizzying, confusing, nauseating, painful, painful all around, and we the Jewish world are right to be concerned. But the challenge goes much deeper than any movement, resolution, or demonstration. Our task is not merely how to confront this external bombardment but rather how to face an ever-growing alienation toward Israel from within our Jewish community.

The Israel we were taught as children, the land flowing with milk and honey, the land where everything is the best—the fastest, the strongest, the nicest, the smartest—does not exist, it never existed or at least was only part of the story. Israel, our family, is flawed, nuanced, painful, innovative, beautiful, destructive, and creative. It is a country of human beings, a country that is real and has the potential to be a bright, bright light among the nations. I know it, and all we have to do is push ourselves to dig just a bit deeper.

Add a few more letters in our Google search. I type 'Israeli Palestinian' and instead of the auto fill conflict I type 'c-o-o', and only then comes the word cooperation. It is all there, all the

beauty, all the potential, all those striving for a better life—a better world striving for peace among human beings.

Just over a year ago, Katie Porter (a young Jewish woman in her 20's), did a search upon returning home from her first trip to Israel. She writes, "I was in there as Gaza and Israel captured the world's attention. And my experiences during this turbulent time completely changed the way I see and understand the world." She continues, "I grew up in a suburb outside of Boston, Massachusetts. When I was a kid, I thought the peace sign was just a symbol to doodle in my school notebooks. I was fortunate to grow up in a town where peace was never a question, and I had no idea that anywhere else in the world had it differently, despite what they taught in my history classes. As I got older and moved around the country, I was more exposed to the realities of violence in America. The news surely reports on violence, but they never describe it as a lack of peace. And, naïvely, I've never been fearful that any of the violent acts I've read about would result in the loss of my home, my livelihood, or my freedom.

"This summer in Israel, I experienced what a lack of peace is. I was standing outside Israel's Holocaust Museum when I heard a sound I had never heard before. It was a siren warning that a rocket was on its way to Jerusalem, and all the people throughout the city had just 90 seconds to seek shelter. Suddenly, the absence of peace was very obvious and very real. The world is not like my suburb of Boston. Once we arrived safely in the bomb shelter of the Holocaust Museum, I realized how lucky I was that there was a siren. In the same realization, none of the people in Gaza have a siren warning them to seek shelter; they only had the warnings and cell phone text messages sent by Israel. But even so they have no shelter to seek. I felt my heart break. This was the moment I knew peace was more important than anything. Ultimately, I want to make an impact. I want to work for peace."

Katie's Google search brought her to the organization Achvat Amim, Solidarity of Nations: a grassroots organization bringing Jews, Muslims, Israelis, Palestinians, and North Americans together to study, build, volunteer, and live together to foster understanding, relationships, and create real change in the immediate world around them. Katie is taking a leave of absence from her current job to join Achvat Amim for half a year.

Achvat Amim is just one of the many organizations motivated by such a mission. Further down the search page came Yad b'Yad: Hand in Hand—a Center for Jewish-Arab Education schools and communities. Jews and Arabs—learning together, living together, building together.

BioExplore: Palestinian and Israeli scientists and doctors discovering together and healing together. Shoreshim...Roots...Israelis and Palestinians adults and children evolving together knowing the other together. A leader of Shoreshim, Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger, writes of the beginning, "I opened the front door of my apartment and took a 20-minute walk that began to change my life. My wife asked me to reconsider—it might be dangerous, she said—but I went anyway.

"My heart beat just a little bit faster than usual as I walked through the Arab fields and vineyards that surround my home in the Judean Hills. Never before had I met a Palestinian as an equal, never before had I socialized with one or broken bread with one. I knew nothing about them. We live so close to each other, and yet we are so far apart. For us the Palestinians are the consummate other. The other that you ignore, that you never see. The other that you would never give a ride to, the other that you would never invite into your home; the other from whom you are completely distant, the other of whom you are thoroughly suspicious. For three hours or more I chatted with them and ate with them. I looked into their faces from up close, and saw—despite my prejudices—human faces. And I heard stories that were so different from my stories, stories

that created strange unfamiliar narratives from the same building blocks as my own narrative, but which I could not reject out of hand. The stories I heard—of deep connection to the land, of exile, of suffering, of loved ones lost in the conflict—were authentic and they were real. Never before had I heard such stories. And they affected me deeply.

“One Palestinian man—who turned out to be a very close neighbor, except for the high chain link fence separating our homes—told me of the fear evoked in the hearts of his children when they saw a settler with a big kippah and long beard like mine. I didn’t get it, until he explained that the kippah and beard were often accompanied by a rifle. And then I began to understand. I blurted out to him, “You say that you are afraid of us? No, we are afraid of you!” As it began to get dark and there were about 25 or 30 of us left, we sat around in a circle and heard the life story of Ali Abu Awwad, former militant turned nonviolent peace activist. Ali’s reality made its way into my heart, and I will never be the same. His truth has not made mine any less true, rather it has shown my truth to be only part of the complex web of the reality in which we live.”

All this from a simple search. I am not saying we all have to drop what we are doing and move to Israel. Rather, simply go further and dig deeper past the headlines and sensationalism; go beyond the first three letters of a Google search. Together we can engage with the moral and spiritual challenges, and feel empowered to build the Israel that can inspire us. At the same time, we can strengthen an Israeli society, which is engaged in precisely the same thing.

American Jewish author Cynthia Ozick put it well: “Israel is imperfect...Because she is imperfect, she is always building. Because she is always building, she is eternal.”

Every imperfection is an invitation to get involved. Thousands of Israelis are doing this everyday. Thousands of Palestinians are doing this everyday. Thousands and thousands of

human beings doing this everyday and they need our help. All of us here—we sit in temple during these High Holy Days thinking about our own imperfect lives, the mistakes we've made. We ask God and we ask people to give us a chance. We ask 'please don't check out on us, don't give up on us.' Perhaps we can grant Israel the same thing we ask for ourselves.

May this coming year be a good year and a peaceful year for us, for all Israel, and all humanity. Shana Tova.