

Ep #21: Navigating the Israel Conversation with the Next Generation



Full Episode Transcript

Presented by

Hebrew College

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Welcome to Speaking Torah. I'm your host, Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal, spiritual leader of Temple Beth Shalom in Melrose, Massachusetts, and 2019 graduate of Hebrew College. In this podcast, Jewish leaders from around the world, Hebrew College faculty alumni, and students discuss how Torah can help us navigate the most pressing issues of our time. Together, we explore the way Torah can help us approach the world with creativity, healing, and hope.

This year, Hebrew College launched a renewed and expanded set of adult learning programs under the name Tamid. The Hebrew word Tamid means perpetual or eternal, and we chose it because we believe that lifelong Jewish learning connects us to an enduring sense of meaning and purpose. It honors our past, uplifts our present, and inspires us to face the future with a spirit of creative possibility and hope.

In this season of the podcast, we are focusing on some of these experiences. This week, we are pleased to talk to the Hebrew College Provost Rabbi Dan Judson who is teaching the Tamid Adult Learning course Israel the Generational Divide, a course for parents struggling to understand their children's perspectives on Israel. Over the past year the subject of Israel has been incredibly difficult for families.

The reality of Israel looks different for different generations. Rabbi Judson's focus on this emotional issue is greatly needed right now.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Why do we need this class right now?

Rabbi Dan Judson: I want to begin by just thanking a particular person whose idea this class was. Laure Garnick, who's a member of the Hebrew College Board, came to Sharon Cohen-Anisfeld, the president of Hebrew College, and I with an idea for having this class. And as soon as she said it, I think Sharon and I both felt this was a fantastic idea. I can't think of one person I've talked to about this idea who hasn't said, oh my god, people really need this class. This is really important. I'm glad you're doing it.

As I go around Boston, people are usually not asking me about my Tamid classes and people send me things just random, you know, Professor

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Brandeis, who's done research on the question of kind of what's going on in college campuses, just sent me their research, just say, hey, I heard you're doing this class, random rabbis stopped me outside of shul and say, oh, good luck with the class. I hope the class goes well. I mean, people, anyway, so there's a lot of energy and ideas behind the class. I think people recognize it as a really important idea.

What most people who are looking at this are saying, and I agree, is, one, you've got a terrible, just on the surface, you've got just a tragic situation. Israel's attack on October 7th, and subsequent response, and the countless lives that have been lost, tragedies on all sides, just the sheer existential terrible situation we find ourselves in, of course, gives rise to debate and disagreement.

So there's a generation who've been raised on the notion of tikkun olam as the primary and essential Jewish value and universalism as what Judaism proudly stands for and participates in. And I think you have an older generation that doesn't disagree with that. They were the ones teaching it, but also has a much more felt experience of the need for particularism, the need for the sense of Israel was founded as a result of violence and pogroms done against Jews.

And we have a generation for whom that experience feels so very foreign to them that it doesn't come to their mind, it's not their first thought when they think about Israel. And as others have well noted, this is a generation, many of whom who've only had one prime minister in Israel, and it's a prime minister who doesn't speak to a large swath of the American Jewish culture right now and stands opposed to it in many ways.

So if you've got 72% in the latest polls of American Jewry, you're going to vote Democratic in this coming election and you've got a Prime Minister in Israel who stands sort of in opposition to that, of course you're going to have, and that's the only Prime Minister people have known, of course you're going to have this sense that Israel is foreign, Israel is different, Israel is other.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: How does this compare to other generational divides in other points in American history?

Rabbi Dan Judson: Obviously, people looked at the 1960s as a flashpoint of generational divide. And I think the Jewish community participated in that in American life. And so I think you'd look there and you can see in the 1960s where that ferment comes to the surface. There's students who demand to be heard at the National Gathering for the Jewish Federations. And there's a kind of famous moment where young Jews are demanding more of a say in how Jewish philanthropic dollars are spent and an emphasis on Jewish education.

And obviously young Jews and perhaps in the civil rights movement in the 60s is pretty clear, and that story's been well told again and again. So I think you have something of this in the 1960s, but the question of Is there a kind of Jewish issue or is Zionism ever been? It's hard to think.

I think in Zionism and it's earlier, you know, even before the state, well, you know, in the early 20th century, you probably had on the opposite where you had young people making their way to Palestine or being involved in Palestine in efforts to create a Jewish state and an old generation saying, what are you doing?

Right, there's a famous story. I love, this is one of my famous, I begin many of my Jewish history classes with the following story that kind of makes no sense. And I think that's why I love it so much. But in Gershom Scholem's autobiography, Scholem, the great Jewish thinker, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, grew up in Germany in the early 20th century.

His parents, for Christmas, got him a framed picture of Theodor Herzl. This story makes no sense unless you understand history is much more complex and gray than anybody would imagine. His parents were observing Christmas as sort of assimilated Jews who still very much understood that they were Jewish. And their child in his teens was deeply in design, which they, the parents, were not, but to please their child and

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they knew it would be happy for him to get a framed picture of Herzl from them. So they got him a framed picture of Herzl for Christmas.

I begin a lot of my Jewish history classes to say that history is never quite as black and white or simple as we think of it, which is important to keep in mind right now when we're talking about Israel. But the story here, I just use as an example where Scholem in the early 20th century, as a German Jew seeking new way to be Jewish, just turned down to Zionism. And his parents are, they're not interested. This is not their thing.

So I think the only thing I can think of is the early stages of Zionism where, you know, the young people moving to Palestine and the parents were not.

The class was actually publicized just for parents. I think part of the idea was give parents an opportunity to come together. The class is not meant to solve this problem of generational divide. The idea is neither that I'm going to arm parents with information to convince their children, nor am I going to try and convince parents that what their children are saying and doing is okay. Neither of those things are meant to be happening.

The idea is, if we can come together and look openly, thoughtfully, critically, not necessarily critic in meaning criticizing, critically kind of as well, does this make sense from a historical perspective, from a well-meaning perspective about both Zionism and anti-Zionism? Can we come together and kind of have that open conversation? That within a shared environment of parents who are all going through the same kind of thing, potentially that there'll be an opportunity for parents to metabolize, to think, to study, to learn, and be able to talk to their children.

If they've spent five sessions talking about Zionism and thinking about anti-Zionism as well, they then come to their child and be able to say, look, I care about you. I've spent time thinking about this. This isn't some major thing in my life. Let's have a conversation about this. That's my vision.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: How do you do that?

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Rabbi Dan Judson: One of the sessions will be with a social worker who has spent time with families working on communication skills. And the person who I've asked to come in was telling me that they have a, they don't, not a specialty as in like it's not on their credentials anywhere, but they feel like they've got a specialty in translating Israel matters from one generation to the other. So we're having somebody come and talk about family communication around Israel.

But the other part, we're going to be presenting some history, some present-day material with the hopes of education. My hope is that if we can think, again, if we can think together critically about Israel, that looking at it through a bit of an academic lens will allow people some potentially less emotional space to be able to have a conversation, to be able to think for themselves, and then potentially to have a conversation with their child, because it's incredibly fraught.

So fraught. If you've committed your life spiritually and activist-wise to Israel, and it's been something you've cared about your life, and you go, and you visit, and you give money, and you've got a child who doesn't feel that way at all, and may be saying incredibly critical things, of course, cuts to the core, and it's going to be so emotionally fraught for you.

So the idea is, will this class provide a little distance to be able to think both again for yourself and as you're talking to your child, with a little bit of ability to cool the emotional tension of it, and maybe encourage their children to cool the emotional tension of it and try and find places where there might be agreement, find places where... what I would hope is that both sides are interested in this thing called the Jewish people and perpetuating this thing called Judaism. And so that doesn't mean that, oh, it all can just work out in some... if we just recognize that it'll work out in some sort of overly idealistic way. I don't believe that for a second.

And family conversations are the hardest ones to have. But I do have some hope that with some learning and some bit of historical thinking and some bit of remove, people might be able to have these conversations in a better way.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: How much are you approaching this course as a problem of communication between generations versus disparities in the knowledge people hold?

Rabbi Dan Judson: It's both. An issue is whether I'm thinking about the course as simply, oh, if we can all communicate better, then it will potentially solve this generational divide, or, you know, if people just had more education, potentially we could solve this generational divide. And I really think of this as both. And so there are situations where there's no solving a generational divide.

You know, I've been thinking about the work I do with our students in talking about estrangement. And many not, you know, I think most of the people coming to this course are not estranged from their children. They're coming to this course, Davka, meaning particularly because they don't want to be estranged from their children and they're not estranged and they want to have a line of communication.

But I speak to our students in their pastoral care class about estrangement. And as a rabbi, I always would encourage people to, when possible, be in relationship with the other people in their life, who family... but there are also situations where that's just not possible, where the estrangement is too deep and it's too strong. And I don't know, we may come across people in this class who it's just not healthy for them at this moment to be talking to their children. Or the right thing is you build a wall that says, we love you, and we are just not going to talk about it.

Like there's definitely not a one size fits all. There's I'm also not coming this with I can solve this problem for you if you just I don't believe that Jewish education will solve this problem. I don't believe that just better communication skills will solve this problem. My hope is that maybe for some families better communication, maybe for some families that you know, some more education so that it's just more learned conversation.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: How much is this course oriented around Zionism or anti-Zionism in American Jewish diaspora community?

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Rabbi Dan Judson: So the question about whether this is a story of Zionism versus anti-Zionism, or a question about how American Judaism is relating to Zionism at this moment is a fascinating and I think really important question. And I know this is going to shock you from all of the black and white stances I've taken up until now, but it's clearly both.

Your question before about whether we're seeing this in Israel, and the answer being not really, means that this is, by definition, that this is an American Jewish issue. So of course there's all sorts of American Judaism that is embedded in this. And it's American Judaism's historical relationship with Israel that's embedded in this. And it's American Jews who are not living and breathing in the land of Israel right now and are not serving. Although many are connected, second and third ways, with hostages, but it's not their life that they're predominantly in.

So this is clearly an American Jewish issue. And it's certainly a story about Zionism and anti-Zionism, what we're seeing on college campuses, and what we're seeing, I think, in people's families. It does trace itself back throughout Jewish history. I mean, this question about being a Zionist and what that means, I immediately takes me to, you know, 1948, and takes me to 1905 before then and takes me to 1896 before then.

And how was this country founded? Why was it founded? I mean, as a historian, it feels like it's one of the rare moments where I don't have to prove the worth of history. Why would you take a course on Zionism? Well, the New York Times magazine just a few months ago, the whole magazine was just devoted to what happened in 1948, and had Palestinian historians and Jewish historians too. Palestinian historians were taking, as it were, a pro-Palestinian side, and Jewish historians were writing from the kind of Jewish perspective on what happened. Well, if the New York Times is devoting an entire magazine to what happened in 1948, I don't have to sort of prove that what we're doing here by saying history is important. It's important.

You only need to scratch the surface to where, I think the question, for example, that so is such a part of this narrative about Zionism and anti-

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Zionism is, is Israel a settler colonialist enterprise, right? Something like that is a historical question. They're fighting on college campuses about what is a historical question. When I sort of mentioned before, some of what is saying on college campus, I really just as a historian, I just drives me a little crazy like that drives me crazy. But it's an important question. And one that in this class, and actually hope we get to look at, and I'm going to try and do it with as much... neutrality is not the best word, because I am not neutral, but openness, generosity to that question.

Because it was a question, actually it was a question in the 1910s and 20s, they actually were having a conversation about whether Israel was a colonial enterprise. That's not a new question. I think the issue of whether what's going on in Israel now similar or the same as what's going on in America in terms of the way that America has historically treated its minority African-American folks in particular who have identified with the Palestinian cause.

I'm thinking about Ta-Nehisi Coates' new book, which I admit to having not read, but I just heard an hour with him where he's interviewed about it. And there's a lot to be said about that. It's inevitably historical conversation. And one of the critiques right away of what he was saying is he's approaching it almost explicitly from a de-historicized perspective. That is, this entire situation began like five years ago, as opposed to this situation began much longer than that. You cannot de-historicize this moment.

So it's a long-winded way of saying that history now is so important and crucial in how you make that, what you make of that history. It's really hard to get the history nuanced and right. So one of the things I also want to try and do is try and get the history nuanced and right, which means looking in both ways. I'm tired of the way in which history has been used recently against Israel without a full rendering or understanding.

And I'm equally tired of some of the kind of classical myths, but the notion that, you know, that 48 was somehow a kind of unimpeachably beautiful event of which Israel just defended itself and there was no wrongs in the past committed. Well, we can put both of those things aside and actually

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talk about the grayness of 1948 and the grayness of what was happening in earlier periods when Jews were coming to settle, escaping pogrom to settle in Israel. That was gray. It was gray in 1948, it was gray then, and dare I want to say it's gray now.

Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: We have a bonus for you. Dan is now halfway through his course and was excited to share a few takeaways from this experience.

Rabbi Dan Judson: In some ways it's exceeded my expectations as to what the class was going to be. And the reason it's exceeded my expectations is because the group of people that signed up to take this class are really extraordinary. It's parents who have come with an open heart and an open mind and who clearly love their children and are taking the class not to figure out how they can convince them necessarily of one thing or another, but are taking the class really to think for themselves, both about what Zionism means, but also how to be with their child who is rejecting this part of their life.

And as difficult as that is for them to think about family and the communication dynamics that go along with having such a rupture. I think one of the things about this class is, you know, we said it wasn't going to be a support group, but inevitably it is, you know, 16 people or whatever who are around the table, all of whom, all of whom have a child that is rejecting Zionism in some way, and a deeply felt experience for their parents.

And parents are feeling, as they themselves admit, either guilt, or what did they do wrong, or just disappointment, or also just feeling like they wanted their child to be more open and more flexible. And so how did that happen? And so I want to say that one of the things about the class has been just parents to be able to come together and hear each other, have that conversation.

It's not a surprise, right? I left the class last night at 8:30. I had some work to do at Hebrew college, classes at Hebrew college. I walked up to my

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office. I came back down at 9:00 to leave and half the class was still there having a conversation with each other.

Now, I'd like to say that my classes on obscure Zionist thinkers or American Jewish history leave people in such a state that half an hour later they're still having a conversation with each other. But alas, I think that would be a lie. I've never walked down after half an hour and seen people in my class still very much engaged with each other. And I think that giving parents, allowing parents to see they're not alone, allowing parents to see that this happens, allowing parents to see that they're not alone, that this is something a lot of parents are struggling with. There's nothing to be a kind of, needs to be kind of a quiet or a shame or anything along those lines, clearly. So I feel good that we've done something here at Hebrew College and allowing parents to see each other, to giving them some skills, things to work on, and hopefully helping lots of families become more whole.

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Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal: Thank you for joining us for this episode of Speaking Torah. We want to thank Emily Hoadley for our logo and Hebrew College Rabbinical graduate and composer Rabbi Jackson Mercer for our theme music, Esa Einai. To learn more about Hebrew College, please visit hebrewcollege.edu/podcast. And remember to subscribe, like, and rate Speaking Torah wherever you listen to podcasts. We'll leave you this week with Hebrew College Rabbinical School students Yitzhi Gittelsohn's musical version of Psalm 23:6, Goodness and Kindness Will Pursue Me All the Days of My Life, which we shared in our series called From October 7th to Simchat Torah, to mark the one-year anniversary of the October 7th attacks in Israel. You can view all those offerings at hebrewcollege.edu/october7.

I'm your host, Rabbi Jessica Lowenthal. Thank you for joining us on Speaking Torah.