

# Op-Ed: My daughter loves the miracle of Israel. It was time for her to see the other side

By SHARON BROUS  
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I didn't want to take my kid to the West Bank city of Hebron. A few years ago, a former Israeli paratrooper had guided me through the silent, "sterilized" streets of its old city, free of any Palestinian presence. I saw Hebrew graffiti triumphantly sprayed on sealed homes and shops, walked by the checkpoints that ensure complete separation of the Jewish and Muslim populations. Hebron is not an easy place to be — I wasn't sure my 14-year-old was ready for it.

My family and I travel to Israel as often as we can. Our kids' bedtime stories are tales of the struggles and triumphs of the Jewish people, our people. They have learned Hebrew as a living language. They love Israeli culture and food and they FaceTime their cousins in Tel Aviv nearly every day.

And we speak honestly and critically with them about what's happening in Israel, just as we do about what's happening in the United States. We talk about the miracles and the missteps, the dreams fulfilled and those unrealized. And now, at 9, 12 and 14, they're old enough to begin to understand the complexities.

*To love a place — Israel or the United States — does not necessarily mean to love its government.*

That's why it was important to us, on our latest trip to Israel this summer with the Ikar community, that the kids walked the vibrant public squares of West Jerusalem and the sweltering corridors of the Old City, experienced Yad Vashem and rafted down the Jordan River.

And, when our group went to Hebron with the Israeli anti-occupation organization Breaking the Silence, our 14-year-old came with us. She knew I was hesitant, but she insisted. She wanted to see the occupation for herself. "Trust me, Ima," she said. "I love Israel. I need to see the other side with my own eyes."

Our guide, a former sergeant in the Israel Defense Forces, showed us how 850 Jewish settlers, guarded by 600 Israeli police and soldiers, live among 200,000 Palestinians. We saw buildings once inhabited by members of the Jewish community massacred in 1929, and the homes of those trying to reestablish a Jewish presence, albeit an extreme and ideological one.

We witnessed the harshest effects of the occupation: roadways forbidden to Palestinians, abandoned blocks, Jewish settlements the world deems illegal. We saw the once-thriving Casbah, dead quiet now. All of this, the direct result of Israeli military policy.

My daughter, my Israeli brother and I wandered from the tour group and struck up a conversation with a settler named Aaron, originally from New York. He proudly showed us the newest Jewish settlement in Hebron, explaining that seizing Palestinian homes is a redemption for the Jewish people.

Aaron reveres Baruch Goldstein, who slaughtered 29 Muslims at the nearby Tomb of the Patriarchs. He told us the 1994 massacre was a heroic act, God's will.

"Baruch Goldstein killed a lot of innocent people," my brother said to him.

"A lot of animals," Aaron corrected him.

"People," my brother said again. "People, bowing in prayer."

Aaron's views were loathsome to me as they are to most Israelis, but I was glad my daughter heard them firsthand. Never would she be able to hear "religious extremist" and point only to "them," without also thinking "us."

If only Aaron and his cohort were the sole threat to Israel's Jewish and democratic aspirations. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's governing coalition continues to recklessly enforce its ideological absolutes, passing an anti-democratic nation-state law, denying surrogacy rights to LGBTQ Israelis, escalating personal attacks against the New Israel Fund and other progressive organizations, and detaining American journalists at the border, interrogating them about their political beliefs and associations.

As an American rabbi, I can't ignore the message the Israeli government is sending to diaspora Jews: Stick to the playbook. Send Israel your money, your youth, your tourists and your unquestioning loyalty. Don't talk about the occupation (now in its 51st year) or the millions of Palestinians denied equal protection, freedom of movement, the right to vote for the government that dictates their daily lives. Don't visit Bethlehem or Ramallah, where you might hear a Palestinian narrative. Pay no attention to Breaking the Silence, Parents Circle or any other group where Israelis and Palestinians speak frankly about the challenges and the possibilities for a shared future. And don't dare judge our willingness to cozy up to the scandal-ridden American president you overwhelmingly rejected. Stick to Fantasy Israel, *b'vakasha*.

The rising generation of American Jews is increasingly alienated from Israel. They say they're tired of the fantasy, a defensive story of half-truths. Yet many American Jewish community leaders, while wringing their hands over the lost generation, persist in the sanitized approach to teaching young people about Israel. They argue that it's simply not possible to instill a love of Israel while exposing its faults. They are wrong.

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Israel holds a multitude of truths. It is a Jewish state, yet moral leadership tends to come not from its official rabbinate, but from its artists, academics and activists. It is a proud, striving democracy that fails to uphold basic democratic norms for many under its control. It is a young nation of exemplary ingenuity, imagination and frankness that has failed to use that same creativity and honesty to seriously deal with what sovereignty means when one profoundly traumatized population holds great power over another.

My kid is still grappling with what we saw and heard in Hebron that day. But I don't regret taking her there because I trust her to grasp Israel's complexities. I trust she understands that to love a place — Israel or the United States — does not necessarily mean to love its government. In fact, it sometimes means precisely the opposite.

I don't know what she'll ultimately do with everything she has seen. I do know that she won't grow up and say to us, as so many young Jews are now saying to their parents, rabbis and teachers, "You never told me."

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