

Dear Sara,

It's been years since our conversation about Israel and yet, I remember it so clearly. We were in the dining hall having lunch. You were a senior, on the verge of graduating, and I was a newish Hillel Director. I'd realized students rarely talked about Israel and I asked you what you thought. Was this because they weren't aware? Didn't care? No, you said, speaking only for yourself in your wise and thoughtful way. "I understand Israel and I do care. I just don't have the confidence to talk about it." With those words, you spoke for many, including me.

Inspired by our conversation, I began to seek out opportunities to more deeply learn, discuss and travel to Israel in order to build up my own conversational confidence. Months later I was in Israel, seated at a conference table at the Shalom Hartman Institute. "Introduce yourself by sharing your relationship with Israel," the facilitator of our cohort said and then introduced one caveat: "You can't say it's complicated."

Not complicated? How could that be when the more I learned, the less I understood and the farther from confident I felt? I longed for the assuredness I'd had the first time I was in Israel in 1989. My dream to travel there had come true in the form of a one-month college graduation gift and I soaked up every bit. In Israel, way back then, I felt at home, I belonged. And when that trip ended, I returned home, comforted by the belief that I'd soon return.

And now, 30 years later, I was finally back in Israel seeking an "it's not complicated" explanation. Israel had grown up, I had grown up, we had moved apart, and I was struggling to recognize her. Who was this Israel who was moving so far to the right? Who was this country that acted with offense as much as defense? Where were the democratic principles I'd believed were at her core? (Though I'm sure I took democracy for granted in 1989 in ways I no longer do.)

Though I don't remember how I responded to the prompt, I do remember experiencing a glimmer of hope. Perhaps there was an easy, uncomplicated way to understand and talk about Israel. Maybe I was close to finding it?

I wasn't. The picture only grew more complicated. Four years later, I was scheduled to return to Israel as part of the Mandel Executive Nonprofit Leadership program and found that my doubts overshadowed any sense of connection with Israel. My commitment to confidence was fading. Who was I to try to accept Israel's actions enough to be able to explain them to others? Who was I to defend Israel?

Wait, accept? defend? That's when I realized how off-base my definition of confidence had been. I had not been looking to build true confidence through trying to understand the complexities of Israel. Rather, I was seeking ways to feel comfortable enough with her actions to simplify and confidently explain them.

This is the mindset I brought with me to this most recent trip to Israel with the Mandel Fellowship. I was done defending, dubious about Israel and not at all sure where I was in terms of our relationship.

And then, while with the Mandel cohort, we peeled back the layers, spending 8 days diving into Israeli society, hearing from the Haredi, religious Zionist, secular Zionist, and Arab Israeli communities. We talked with community leaders, journalists, local and national government representatives, sheikhs, protest leaders, rabbis, educators, kibbutz members, students, parents, Israelis from all over the country

who had come to Israel from all over the world. We held flags and broke bread while we learned of the deep frustrations about the actions, or lack of actions, taken by other Israelis, the burdens carried, the unchecked assumptions held, and the hope that keeps burning.

Not one Israeli asked us to defend their country, to accept it without reservation. They honestly shared the challenges, nuances and the complexities and asked only that we listen with open minds.

I came home with the kind of understanding of Israel I didn't know I was looking for until I found it in honest conversations, assumption checking, frustration venting and hope kindling. I brought home the truths that were shared and am ready to do the exploring, challenging, struggling, questioning and listening it takes to confidently understand the many layers that make Israel, Israel.

Sara, I look forward to the day when we can pick up where we left off and discuss our feelings about Israel, with honest, actual shared confidence. In the meantime, I thank you for the simple conversation that prompted this complex journey.

Betsy