

Am Chofshi B'artzenu

Case Studies



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Am Chofshi B'Artzenu:

Case Studies

As Spiderman is famous for saying, "With great power must also come great responsibility." When the Israeli national anthem declares its hope that Israel will give rise to an "*Am Chofshi B'Artzeinu*" or "A free people in our land", the question of what that actually means is asked everyday in the modern state of Israel. How these aspirational words play out on the street, in the political arena, and within society is hotly debated.

Below you will find three case studies that grapple with this concept.

The first one examines the issue of **religious freedom in Israel**.

(How) Should Israeli society recognize that the Jewish "*Am*" is free ("*Chofshi*") to practice Judaism in different ways, and how should access to its sites of religious significance in our Land ("*b'Artzenu*") be administered?

The second case study looks at how Israel deals with the thousands of **African refugees** illegally streaming into Israel across the Egyptian border.

For Jews who remember how being denied access to countries during the war cost them their lives, how should Israeli society decide when the borders to "*Artzenu*" or "Our Land" should be open, as a place of refuge to those in need, and when such openness ("*Chofshi*") might threaten the Jewish majority ("*Am*") of the state?

The third case study looks outward to the role that Israel plays in **international humanitarian crises** like the earthquake in Haiti. Indeed it may only be when the Jewish people are free, and settled in their own land ("*Am Chofshi b'Artzenu*") that they can actualize the highest values of the Jewish people.

For each of these case studies, read through the texts and consider several of the questions for discussion.

Case 1:

Women At The Wall

Text 1: Background

Women of the Wall (WOW)... is a group of mostly religiously observant women who believe that women should be allowed to pray as a group at the Kotel, read from a Torah scroll and wear tallit. Currently, Israeli law does not permit women to perform these acts at the Kotel, and those who do so anyway are subject to a fine and up to six months in jail.

Once a month on Rosh Hodesh, WOW members come together to form a minyan and pray at the Kotel. They complete the shacharit service and Hallel in front of the Wall and then move to a nearby archaeological area in order to read Torah and conclude the service...

Sara Szymkowitz

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/WOW.html>

Text 2:

Arrest at the Kotel

November 2009

Police on Wednesday arrested a woman who was praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, due to the fact that she was wrapped in a prayer shawl (tallit). The woman was visiting the site with the religious women's group "Women of the Wall" to take part in the monthly Rosh Hodesh prayer.

Police were called to the area after the group asked to read aloud from a Torah scroll. Police said they arrested the women in the wake of a High Court ruling, which states that the public visiting the Western Wall is obligated to dress in accordance with the site's dress code.

Western Wall Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz said the act was a provocation meant to turn the wall into a fighting ground. "We must distance politics and disagreement from this sacred place," Rabinowitz said...

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, associate director of Israel's reform movement, said that all over the world women are entitled to wear the tallit, and only in the land of the Jews are they excluded from the social custom and even arrested for praying...

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1129040.html>

Text 3:

The Limits of Pluralism

Many non-Orthodox American Jews regard Jewish religious pluralism as a blessing they seek to share with Israelis, and are not offended in the least at the thought that the "Women of the Wall" might be advance troops for Conservative and Reform and Reconstructionist services at the Kosel* (or even, for that matter, for "Messianic" services, as one spokesperson for the group actually intimated).

Those of us, though, who see the issue in a different light, need to see the "Women of the Wall" for what it is as well. Not a mere bête noir but a veritable Trojan Horse, praying words of worship, and stuffed solid with the "gift" of Jewish religious pluralism, packed with the seeds of manifold standards for things like marriage and conversion and, *Rachmona litzlan* ◇, a multiplicity of "Jewish peoples" in the Jewish State.

*Western Wall: Kotel

◇ May the Lord save us

R. Avi Shafran, 2000

<http://chateamezcal.com/r'avi/trojanhorse.htm>

Women At The Wall – Overarching Questions

- Is this issue one of conflicting conceptions or claims about “*Am Chofshi B’Artzenu*”?
- How would each side of this debate define the terms *Am* (People) *Chofshi* (Free) and *B’Artzenu* (In Our Land) differently?
- As a self-proclaimed “Jewish democratic state” (Basic Law Human Dignity 1992) whose Scroll of Independence “guarantees freedom of religion” (1948), how should the State manage public Jewish sites when there are competing claims of “freedom of religion”?
- Do you see this controversy over worship at the Wall as something that weakens the Jewish People, or enlivens it?
- Do you see this controversy over worship at the Wall as something that damages the place of Jerusalem at the heart of the Jewish People, or strengthens it?

Case 2:

African Refugees

Text 1: Background

Since 2003, an estimated 10,000 non-Jewish immigrants from various African countries have crossed into Israel. Some 600 refugees from the Darfur region of Sudan have been granted temporary resident status to be renewed every year, though not official refugee state.

Another 2,000 refugees from the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia have been granted temporary resident status on humanitarian grounds. Israel does not recognize them as refugees. (Some explain that Israel does not wish to offend Eritrea and Ethiopia, yet Sudanese arrivals, who are from an enemy state, are also not recognized as refugees.)

In 2007, Israel deported 48 refugees back to Egypt after they succeeded in crossing the border, twenty of which were deported back to Sudan by Egyptian authorities, according to Amnesty International.

In August 2008 the Israel Defense Forces deported at least another 91 African asylum seekers at the border. Throughout this year, Egyptian police have shot dead 20 African asylum seekers attempting to enter Israel. A Knesset bill entitled the "Anti-Infiltration Law" would allow the continuation of deportation back to Egypt within 72 hours.

The problem of economically-motivated migration has become a flashpoint in Israeli politics outside of the country's shaky relationship with the Arab and Islamic world, with growing concerns over maintaining the Jewish character of the state against the cultural influences of the migrants.

The current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has called for a patrolled fence to be built on Israel's border with Egypt to keep out illegal immigrants, who are derided by nationalists as "infiltrators".

Source: Wikipedia

Text 2:

The Problem With Refugees

July 17th, 2010

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday that the recent "flood of illegal workers infiltrating from Africa" into Israel was "a concrete threat to the Jewish and democratic character of the country."

Speaking at a meeting aimed at formulating Israel's immigration policy, Netanyahu said that most Western nations have already taken action to prevent similar dangers. "It is inconceivable that Israel, the one country that faces more threats than any other in the Western world, has no defined immigration policy to protect our national and security interests. The issue has been ignored for many years, and my aim is to bring it to an orderly and responsible legislation by the end of this year, during the winter seating of the Knesset."

Six months ago, Netanyahu visited the area near the border between Israel and Egypt in order to examine the possibility of an Israeli fence along the border to prevent infiltrations. Netanyahu said this trip highlighted the need for such a fence. "The situation, from the point of view of terrorism and infiltrations, is more severe than I thought," he said.

"We must man the region, and then it will be possible to minimize the terrorist infiltrations, as well as the smuggling of drugs and illegal workers," the prime minister went on to say. "If we don't move forward with construction of the fence, the problem will only get worse."

"Infiltrations [into Israel] have become an entire industry," Netanyahu added.

"The Egyptians are doing what they're doing, but we can't rely only on them. Egypt doesn't oppose the construction of the fence and everything is settled under the framework of the peace treaty [between Israel and Egypt]. A country's borders can't be penetrable – it is a national threat," Netanyahu concluded.

Source:

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/netanyahu-illegal-african-immigrants-a-threat-to-israel-s-jewish-character-1.302653>

Text 3:

Moral Imperative

*Alma Zohar is
is a critically
acclaimed
Israeli musician
and singer.*

תמיד יש מלחמות באפריקה
מזל שהיא רחוקה
שלא רואים ולא
שומעים אותה מכאן

There is always war in Africa
Lucky that it is far away
So we don't see or hear
It from here

גם אני הלכתי
פעם בנתיב היסורים
ממצרים לירושלים
במדבר ימים רבים
בלי מים, בלי מים
עם אותה שאלה
בעיניים

I too once walked
On that painful path
From Egypt to Jerusalem
In the desert for many days
Without water,
With the same question in my
eyes.

גם אני פגשתי רשע
המכה בלי הבחנה
אנשים חפים מפשע,
אנשים בלי הגנה
בלי בית, בלי בית –
עם ילדים קטנים
בידיים

I too met with evil
That strikes indiscriminately
Innocent people
Defenseless people
Homeless
With small children in their
hands

והם דופקים לך בדלת,
הם בוכים בכי תמרורים
אל תאמר מה לי
עם אלה
אלה אנשים זרים

They knock on your door,
They cry bitter tears
Don't say, what do I have to do
with them,
Those strange people.

כי בכל דור ודור
חייב אדם לראות עצמו
כאילו הוא יצא
ממצרים

Because in every generation
A person must see himself
As if they themselves came out
of Egypt

שלא ישכח איך ברח,
הוכה, הושפל,
נרצח.
איך צעק
לשמיים.

גם אני חיפשתי כח להציל מה
שאפשר
לא היה לאן לברוח,
דמי היה מותר
אות קין, אות קין –
אנשים נופלים לברכיים

והם דופקים לך בדלת,
הם בוכים בכי תמרורים
אל תאמר מה לי
עם אלה –
אלה אנשים שחורים

כי בכל דור ודור...
אז שמור נא על כולנו ריבוננו של עולם
שלא נזדקק אף פעם לרחמים של בני אדם

כי בכל דור ודור..
תמיד יש מלחמות באפריקה
מזל שהיא רחוקה
שלא רואים ולא שומעים
אותה מכאן

תמיד יש מלחמות באפריקה
מזל שהיא רחוקה
שלא רואים ולא שומעים
את הצעקה

So as not to forget what it
means to flee,
to be hit, to be humiliated,
murdered,
What it means to scream to the
heavens.

I too searched for strength
To save what I could
When there was nowhere to run
to,
I was fair game to hunters
The Mark of Cain
People fall on their knees.

They are knocking on your door,
The are crying bitter tears
Don't say, what do I have to do
with them,
Those black people.

Because in every generation...
So watch over all of us,
Master of the Universe
So that we will never need
the compassion of Man.

Because in every generation...
There is always war in Africa
Lucky that it is far away
So we don't see or hear
It from here

There is always war in Africa
Lucky that it is far away
So we don't see or hear
The cry.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufW-Wb8F7NQ>

African Refugees: Overarching Questions

- How would each side of this debate define the terms *Am* (People) *Chofshi* (Free) and *B'Artzenu* (In Our Land) differently?
- Does the State of Israel have a moral obligation to these refugees? Why or why not?
- Should the obligation of the State of Israel to refugees be any different from that of the United States?

Case Study 3:

Israeli Relief Mission in Haiti

Background:

After the devastating earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, Israel sent one of the first medical teams to set up a field hospital to address the severe and immediate medical needs of the people in Haiti. The combination of Israel's military know-how and experience, national infrastructure, and desire to help, was a crucial combination.

Text 1:

After two weeks, Israel team winds down Haiti mission: Team set to return home and leave behind equipment; IDF reflects on complex Haiti operation

By Amos Harel (1.26.10)

The Israel Defense Forces team in Haiti is finishing up its mission and will return home on Thursday... Maj. Gen. Yair Golan, the head of the Home Front Command, returned to Israel last Friday after spending a few days with the Israelis in Haiti, commanded by Brig. Gen. (res.) Shalom Ben-Aryeh. The command and the IDF Medical Corps are now preparing for the next stages of their mission: closing up shop and leaving behind a large part of the equipment brought there as a final goodwill gesture to the people of Haiti...

Israel's main accomplishment was in the quick deployment of the field hospital in Haiti. "For five critical days, it was the best hospital in Port-au-Prince," said the officer. "We provided timely medical care to about 1,000 people, we conducted 300 operations and delivered 16 babies. In the past few days the Americans arrived and then you can put things in proportion and become more modest in the face of their airlift and the scope of their aid. You need to understand that those who will continue to treat the main suffering there are the Americans," he added.

The IDF has praised the cooperation with the Foreign Ministry and El Al during the mission to Haiti. The good public relations is seen as being of only secondary importance: "Our people went to Haiti to save lives, to provide the best medical care they can and to represent Israel. That is the proper order of priorities. They did not think constantly about the blue and white flag flying overhead," said the senior officer.

<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/after-two-weeks-israel-team-winds-down-haiti-mission-1.265788>

Text 2:

While the humanitarian needs were at the forefront of the mission, praise poured in from throughout the world.

Bill Clinton hails Israel relief mission to Haiti: 'I don't know what we would have done without the Israeli hospital at Haiti,' Clinton tells Peres.

By Haaretz (1.29.10)

Bill Clinton, the former U.S. president and current UN special envoy to Haiti, told President Shimon Peres on Thursday that he was grateful for Israel's role in aiding victims of the devastating earthquake that rocked the Caribbean island earlier this month.

"Shimon, I don't know what we would have done without the Israeli hospital at Haiti," Clinton told the president during the Davos economic forum in Switzerland on Thursday. "The Israeli hospital was the only operational facility which was able to perform surgery and advanced tests."

"In the name of the aid workers that operated in Haiti, in the name of the people who live there, and on a personal level I want to thank, we all want to thank, Israel from the bottom of our hearts," Clinton said.

In response, Peres said Israel "will be happy" to help in the reconstruction of Haiti.

[Video: CNN reports from the Israeli field hospital in Haiti](#)

Text 3:

While humanitarian aid was delivered, the PR machines (Pro and Against Israel) were busy at work. Israel's own comedy show show, Wonderful Country, famously satirized what they saw as the exaggerated pride Israel was displaying:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRCmAnXuUhc>

Bashing Israel for saving Haitians

It is nothing short of racism to maintain, in Haiti and in general, that Israelis can do no right.

By Bradley Burston , Haaretz News 1.21.10

I'd like to say a word of honor and thanks and, yes, pride for the Israelis, paramedics, physicians, nurses, midwives, and medical imaging technicians, who went to Haiti to save lives.

That's it.

I believe that they are people, individuals, who went there to save limbs from gangrene and amputation, stanch internal bleeding, relieve crushing pain. To deliver babies. To risk their lives, using jackhammers and hydraulics and their hands to make crawl spaces under tons of concrete and silt, going in themselves to pull children and adults to safety.

For all the time that they've been working, however, people far away, snug in the comfort of their laptops, have been furiously busy as well, people who are enraged to the boiling point by news reports of the Israeli rescue mission. People who see it as their mission to tell the world exactly what's wrong with all of this.

Over the past week, the work of the Israeli medical team has become a kind of Rorschach for how people view Israel and Israelis. Most of the comment, it must be said, is supportive. Even on the part of those who cast the humanitarian misery in Gaza in contrast.

But for a shocking number of others, the bottom line is simple: Israel, and Israelis, can do no right.

...The contention is that Israel sent aid to Haiti on purely cynical motives, harnessing public relations to divert attention from the Goldstone Report, to divert attention from Gaza, to divert attention from its never-ending, always expanding internal crises.

The implication is that Israel, and Israelis, are constitutionally incapable of doing good for its own sake. Or that whenever they appear to do good, people of conscience should recognize that the evil designs behind it render any good that may be done, complicit in wrongdoing.

True, it is willful blindness to contend that Israel can do no wrong. But it is nothing short of racism to maintain, in Haiti and in general, that Israelis can do no right....

...Israelis, and Jews in the wider world, should not be forced to recite a catechism over how terrible, how flawed, how often mistaken they already know Israel to be, just in order to earn the right to feel and express their admiration, their gratitude, and yes, their pride.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/bashing-israel-for-saving-haitians-1.261838>

Haiti: Overarching Questions

As much as the State of Israel is commended for its humanitarian work, it has also been severely criticized for the way it handles other political issues that have humanitarian consequences like the Israel/Palestinian conflict.

Overall Questions:

- How did you feel when you heard about Israel's reaction to the crisis in Haiti?
- Can you imagine the Jewish people having as much an impact on the crisis, if the State of Israel did not exist?
- (How) can we both feel pride in Israel and be critical of some of its actions as well?
- (How) can we recognize that both the actions that inspire pride and the actions that warrant critique are two sides of the same coin of being a Free People in Our Land?