

Eyes on the Prize



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This is one of those occasions when I am not sure what to write about. There are many issues and events coming up that demand attention. And, as I am writing this, we are just learning more about the attempted hijacking of a plane full of Israelis, which is both fascinating and scary as we learn more.

I will start with that issue, raise a few others, and then try to connect them by the time you get to the end of this column. □

First...one of the most amazing vignettes from this flydubai incident was how calmly and matter-of-factly several Israelis on the plane stepped up. They saw a problem, knew they could help, and then just did what needed to be done to stop the hijacker, level off the plane, and address the situation. One of the most iconic heroes from this incident was a plumber

who learned how to level a plane from watching one of those "air crash" series. (BTW, the one on National Geographic is actually one of my go-to background TV shows while I am working. I can't wait to see when they come out with an episode about this!)

Many in Israel are both laughing at and appreciating the response of their fellow Israelis at the same time. While this was an extraordinary circumstance, I don't think most Israelis are particularly surprised by what happened...because this is how Israelis see themselves. They are ordinary people trying to live their lives in peace. When a challenge arises, they deal with it. All the labels, accusations, and verbal attacks on Zionism and Israel are ultimately just noise. The haters are going to hate regardless.

The reality is much simpler. Israelis are focused on surviving, looking after one another, and living normal lives. They have had to develop that mindset over decades of very real threats and very real enemies. You can debate politics, intersectionality, lived experience, and a hundred alternative narratives, but when something actually happens, Israelis tend to focus on some very simple questions: What needs to be done right now? How can we solve the problem? How (and when) can we get through this and get on with our lives?

There is an important lesson here about priorities and perspectives. Which brings me to another issue that has been in the

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news and on my mind of late: this whole brouhaha about whether we should use the word Zionism.

OK. The word is misunderstood. Studies and surveys have shown that many do not know what this word means or represents, especially within the Jewish community. These also show that there are ways to describe both Israel and Zionism that resonate more and register a lot more support.

I think there are a few takeaways here. One is that those of us actually within the Jewish community should probably learn more about our own history, struggles, and connection to the land and people of Israel. (One reason for our pop-up L'Chaim: Israel e-newsletter!) The second is that we should probably use other ways and descriptors to describe Israel and Zionism. Talking about the historic connection of Jews to Zion (i.e., Israel) and the right of the Jewish people to have a homeland conveys more substance, and engenders more support, than simply using the word Zionism.

Which brings me to point three. What I just described in point #2 is a tactic that we, in the Jewish community, should

probably use because it is more effective. However, it shouldn't be up to anyone else to define who we are or what words, labels, or framing we use to define ourselves. Zionism has a long, complex, and colorful history, which is amazing. And it is ours to continue exploring, wrestling with, and developing. Every other group gets to define themselves and "own" their labels. We damn well better have that right too.

And now, for the third related topic... we may be our own worst enemies. We have this legacy of values, traditions, stories, communities, dreams, dramas, and history, which many of us know so little about.

To defend the principle of using a word like Zionism is less relevant if we don't know what it means or if we don't do anything that connects to it. Like connecting with each other. Like doing Jewish things. Like learning more about Israel and Judaism. Like coming together as a community to commemorate, argue, make a difference, and celebrate. We don't do that enough.

I was struck by this recent piece from The Free Press TGIF column, which is excerpted below. It talks about a worrisome trend in American society, which of course applies to the Jewish community, BUT we also have a built-in fix for this. And that is coming together as a community to do the things we do.

Continued on page 7