

## What is a Liberal Zionist to do?

By Benji Berlow

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It seems that many political issues have become so polarized in this country that once someone is labeled a liberal or conservative, they are automatically placed into a pigeon hole on a whole range of issues, from the war in Iraq to global warming to abortion to gun control to GLBTQ rights and many others.

News programs tend to polarize the issues even more by reporting the views from the Left and the Right in the hope of trying to be fair and balanced.

While the “us vs. them” debate makes for entertaining TV, it tends to narrow opinions even more. The result is two sides that spin each story to fit their point of view, neither 100 percent right, but also neither 100 percent wrong.

In the fall of 2004, the host of Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show,” Jon Stewart, pointed out the problem with this format on CNN’s “Crossfire,” a television show where Left and Right pundits argued every issue in the news.

Stewart said, “It’s not so much that it’s bad, as it’s hurting America.” He then begged CNN officials to “stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America.”

With thousands of viewers and even more on the Internet, Stewart’s criticism of the show directly led to CNN canceling “Crossfire” a few months later.

Just as Stewart was upset with the pundits on “Crossfire” polarizing every issue, I am very concerned that there is little space in public discourse to talk about Israel in a way that is not polarizing.

I feel discouraged at many liberal gatherings where anti-Israeli rhetoric is used even when Israel is not the main focus. Similarly, I get frustrated at Israel programs where some people say the only solution is to bomb every Palestinian.

If I try to defend the other side, I may be accused of spreading anti-Semitic or Islamophobic thought just because my points do not meet the standards of the extreme position.

Unfortunately, one place where I am seeing the ugly nature of this polarization explode is on University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus.

Since the end of the fall semester, conservative and liberal student groups have brought extreme speakers to talk about the Middle East from the Right (Walid Shoebat and David Horowitz) and from the Left (Norman Finkelstein).

Although they have the academic right to free speech, I am reminded of Stewart saying “It’s not so much that it’s bad, as it’s hurting America.” These polarizing speakers are demonizing the other, resulting in disgraceful anti-Semitic and Islamophobic propaganda.

As a liberal Zionist, I believe both Israeli security and Palestinian liberty are important.

With an “us vs. them” point of view, these two ideas seem mutually exclusive. How can you support Palestinian liberty when they want to wipe Israel off the map? How can you back Israel’s military when it bulldozes entire villages?

The problem with these approaches is that they make broad generalizations about the other that spin the issues way out of proportion and distract people from acknowledging that there are some truths at both extremes which need to be addressed — truths like “innocent civilians being killed is horrible” and “exclusive historical narratives furiously offend people who are left out.”

We cannot continue to frame issues this way. As great scientist Albert Einstein said, “The problems that we have created by the way that we have lived cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that produced them in the first place.”

It was “us vs. them” thinking that led to an Orthodox Jew assassinating Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and the fatwah that approved Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat’s assassination in 1981. The very notion of a peace process under this level of thinking cannot work, because the other can never really be trusted.

How can we get to this next level of thinking? I think the key is to promote and engage in dialogue instead of debate.

Debating tries to prove that one side is right and the other wrong, but dialogue attempts to find common ground and points of intersection. In order to dialogue truly, you must question your own beliefs and see someone else’s point of view.

This is not easy because it requires people with different beliefs to be open to the possibility of being wrong. With more and more people being polarized about issues in the Middle East, very few people are open to take this radical step.

However, if it is done authentically, what emerges is a new understanding with combined truths, not generated by me or by you, but out of us.

My hope is that we will all develop the ability to explore this new level of thinking and the courage to stand up to extremism in all its forms.

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