

September 09, 2006

An open letter to Richard Dreyfuss,

Two days ago you addressed over 1000 Jews gathered in my synagogue in Vancouver—a large group for any Vancouver Jewish event.

By your own admission, you helped to draw such a large crowd by virtue of the celebrity status that has been gifted to you. Without a doubt you also helped to boost a very worthy cause and an organization that serves both Israel and Vancouver very well. I cannot advocate for Federation strongly enough.

Yet I feel the need to respond to what you told the assembled community that evening. The central argument that you made was that healthy debate has been the life blood of the Jewish people; that the travelling intellectual heritage that is the temple of the Diaspora must be valued above all else. Furthermore, you suggested that the value of such a heritage mandates that critical evaluation of Israeli policies is more important to the Jewish state than Israel Bonds, or Federation or JNF gifts. To borrow your language “Israel has miraculously existed while forced to develop with one hand tied behind its back—that hand being the failure of the Diaspora public to be critical of Israel’s policies.”

On any given week when war or conflict or tension or terror emerges from Israel, many if not most of the congregations comes to the *Beit Kennesset* (Synagogue) to get, strength, wisdom, comfort or guidance from the words of the Torah. During issues like Oslo, the Disengagement, or prisoner swaps, many would come to the synagogue to hear the government of Israel criticized as traitors, or violating the principles of the Torah. They might expect the Rabbi to call for a new government or the resignation of the Prime minister.

I, for one, work very hard to avoid taking a critical stance on the elected government of Israel, regardless of whether the criticism is from the right or from the left and regardless of how warranted it might be. Mr. Dreyfuss you take the opinion that the Diaspora, by virtue of its experience, has greater wisdom than do the citizens of Israel. I, on the other hand, see the opposite.

In this weeks parsha we read a section that celebrates both the travail of Diaspora and the blessing of a secure homeland. This particular section opens with the words “*Ki Tavo el Ha’aretz*--when you come to the land.” Meaning that those who live in Israel—those whose lives, and crops and business are on the line—it is they that will engage in this ritual of the Bikurim, a declaration of thanks for the gift of security. When the ritual demands that these individuals speak, the torah says, “*vanita v’amarta*—And you shall answer and you shall say.” Answer who, answer what? There is no antecedent question in the verse, so how can one answer? Rashi explains the word used here, *veanita*, is not the language of answering, but rather of raising of one’s voice. The *Menachem Tzion*, a commentary by Rabbi Mendel Zacks, explains that only in Israel does the Jewish voice

become an authentic voice. Only those who have suffered the risks and travails of settling the land of Israel can speak with cogency and veracity about the land. It seems to me that it is not celebrity, a quality that attracts attention, but rather investment and sacrifice that give one an authentic voice.

I agree with you Mr. Dreyfuss that Jews must be self critical, and a state that has no self reflection will become a nation of cheerleaders for the latest power hungry patriot. I disagree not in the how, but the who. Americans, who do not send their children to the army, and who do not run to the bomb shelters have no right to criticize. We, in the Diaspora, who do not watch the Ketushah rockets fly over head and do not worry about being randomly targeted by snipers near Hevron, have no right to second guess. Be critical, yes, if you feel it warranted, but do so from within, not from without.

The Torah mandates criticism, in fact it instructs, that the people endorse or veto their leadership. Even the choices God makes need to be endorsed by the people. Betzalel the architect of the *Mishkan*, was chosen by God and had to be ratified by the people. The very concept of *Teshuvah*, repentance, the beating of the chest and the collective self evaluation of Yom Kippur mandate a critical attitude. Here I agree with you, Jews must examine their deeds on both a personal and national level.

You, Mr. Dreyfuss are a celebrity, which means people will pay attention to you regardless of whether or not you have credibility. So last night your status enabled you to speak at length about Yochanan Ben Zakkai, the great sage of the *Mishnah* who retooled Judaism to survive the Diaspora. You spoke of his efforts to create the academy of learning, and mentioned that the price for its creation was to reveal the passwords protecting Jerusalem to the Roman army. For your information, there are four accounts of the story of Yochanan Ben Zakkai in the Rabbinic literature. One in the *Talmud Bavli*, two, in different manuscripts of *Avot d' Rebbe Nattan*, and one in *Eicha Rabbah*. Not one of them suggests that he gave away passwords, not one of them suggests that he handed the Romans his brothers and sisters as a sacrifice to buy his academy.

The story is actually a little different. He was granted a request and he asked for Yaveneh and her wise men. He could have asked for Jerusalem to be saved, but he thought the Romans would consider such a request out of the question. He did have regrets on his death bed. He wondered if he should have, in fact, asked for Jerusalem. I agree he was self critical, but he would never have allowed the self criticism to compromise the welfare of his people.

When a celebrity Jew decides to be critical of Israel in the public eye, it weakens the political capital of Israel in the United States, in Canada and elsewhere. We would welcome you Mr. Dreyfuss as part of the collective brain that engages in *chesbon hanefesh*, self criticism. But we would welcome you more in the demeanor of a Yochanan ben Zakkai, who risked his own life, sat within his own community, and always doubted his own decisions. Ben Zakkai could have moved away, he could have travelled to the Jewish communities in Babylon, Alexandria, Spain or Ostia Antica., but he remained dedicated to a war torn Jewish community in Israel.

As you pointed out for centuries we have had internal debate, self criticism, even our own court system. This infrastructure of self governance and criticism has served us well. Among countries in the Middle East, Israel is the only to discipline and bring to trial its own politicians, citizens and soldiers who unlawfully harm their enemy. Israel also has a robust political debate which protects the lives of its enemies above its own military objectives and protects its foes from prejudices that might develop out of trauma. (To prove this to yourself engage in a simple thought experiment: dress in *kaffiah* and take a bus in Jerusalem, then wear a crocheted *kippa* and drive into Gaza City.)

We do feel betrayed when the entire world is invited to what you would describe as a family debate. The world has not always judged Israel or the Jew fairly. I assume your reference to (or connection with) the name Dreyfuss would convince you of that. By virtue of your celebrity, your opinions invite the media that made you famous, not the Jews who hunger for enlightenment. By virtue of your birth they mistake you for a stake holder in Israeli policy. The media is out to make money and internal controversy is an excellent seller of newspapers and of advertising--especially when the media has a celebrity endorsement who can be portrayed as an insider.

However, a people that has suffered as has ours does not have the luxury of relying on the enlightened opinion of a world community that has difficulty recognizing Hamas as a terrorist organization and Yasser Arafat as a murderer and a thief *par excellence*.

Furthermore, you criticize Israel even as you evoke the holiness and equivalency of the Diaspora. To truly be part of the process, you need to be more like Yochanan ben Zakkai, a real stake holder. Yochann Ben Zakkai stood with his people, among his people and suffered their criticism and ire—but never having sold them to the enemy or betrayed the sense of family.

Mr. Dreyfuss are you willing to be such a stake holder? To send the children you spoke of so lovingly to the IDF, to enforce the policies you suggest? Are you willing to move to Kiryat Shemonah, Sederot or even Tel Aviv to stand behind them, or are you content to live in the holy city of Los Angeles and to judge from afar.

As a Rabbi in the Diaspora, my *cheshbon hanefesh*, my own self criticism will be more internal. I will ask my self why I have not yet moved to our homeland, why I have not done more for the struggle of our people to live freely and peacefully. Why am I not a better Zionist?

Sincerely,
Rabbi Andrew Rosenblatt