PROJECT MUSE®

Timeline and Transformation Of My Relationship to Israel: My
Journey to Becoming a Peace Activist

Judith Stern Peck

Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues, Number
6, Fall 5764/2003, pp. 67-71 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nsh.2004.0016>

➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/53356>

7. For an outstanding description of the oppressor planted deep within each of us see Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (California: Crossing Press, 1984), esp. pp. 110–113.
8. Barbara Booles and Lydia Swan, *Power Failure: Why Some Women Short Circuit Their Careers and How to Avoid It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).
9. The psychologist William Glasser has written several books on what he calls Reality Therapy and Control Theory. The ideas brought here are from a book on education, but they are central to all of his thinking. William Glasser, *Control Theory in the Classroom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
10. Michael F. Broom and Donald C. Klein, *Power: The Infinite Game* (Amherst, Mass.: HRD Press, 1995).
11. See S. Kreisberg, *Transforming Power* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
12. For a detailed discussion see my article, "Power and Politics as They Relate to Psychology and Education: A Critical Analysis for Dealing with Issues of Empowerment in Teacher Education from a Feminist Framework," in *Teacher Education in the 21st Century* (Brussels: ATEE, 2000), pp. 184–202.
13. Phyllis Chesler, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001).

TIMELINE AND TRANSFORMATION OF MY RELATIONSHIP TO ISRAEL: MY JOURNEY TO BECOMING A PEACE ACTIVIST

Judith Stern Peck

1950

As I approach the door, I feel my throat tighten. I clutch the JNF "blue box" tighter and bravely ring the doorbell. More than likely, the fear that my eight-year-old self feels at my first-ever attempt to raise money—to plant trees in the new State of Israel—is reflected in my face. As a yeshiva student, however, I have been taught about Israel, and the pride I've learned enhances my Jewish identity and stiffens my spine. I see a woman peeking out from behind the curtain and glance at my blue and white box. I believe that she is coming to open the door. I wait for the door to open, but she never comes. I am confused as I turn to walk to the next house. I do not understand what I have just experienced. Surely everyone must feel as I do about Eretz Israel!

Symposium

1960

I am a college student, and my parents take me on my first trip to Israel. We have an Israeli guide who spends ten days touring the country with us, exposing us to historical sites, recounting relevant biblical text or historical context, making our history come alive. The experience of being in a country where Hebrew is the spoken language and the weekly and yearly calendars are based on the Jewish time cycle gives me a deep sense of comfort and familiarity. The nation's success in transforming arid desert into agriculturally productive land fills me with pride. I feel the deep truth behind the expression that Israel is the "Land of Milk and Honey."

1973

Israel has won two wars since my last visit. I now have a family of my own. Though our extended families are quite intricately involved with Israel, my husband and I have never been there together, and after the Yom Kippur War he agrees to a trip. We tour the country as I had during my first visit in 1960, except that this time we are exposed to the army and its astonishing capability. Security and defense are the major focus of this trip. We talk about the Arabs and their hatred for the Israelis. We are shown schoolbooks used to teach Arab children that Israel is the enemy. In my mind, Israel remains the miracle, the power, and at the same time the "victim."

1975–1985

During this decade my children visit Israel. I go back with my new spouse, and very little shifts in my image of Israel. Actually, I realize that every time I visit Israel, I become more impressed with the development of the country and the energy of the people. My experience is always as a tourist, on a mission. I never get real exposure to the people or the culture, and so my perspective is always reinforced by what others want me to believe. My connection to the land and the people remains as visceral as it was in 1950.

1988

I am asked participate in an International Jewish Women's Conference in Jerusalem. The gathering brings together Jewish women from around the world to discuss women's issues. My community asks me at the same time to join our leadership in visiting with Israeli government dignitaries

to discuss the “Who is a Jew” issue. I am the only woman present at these meetings. I am stunned by the gap in understanding between the Israelis and the Americans. For the Americans, this is an issue that strikes at the core of our concerns, but the Israelis discount our apprehension as trivial. This is my first glimmer of realization that the nature of my relationship to Israel and Israelis has been narrow and uncomplicated. I leave Israel this time committed to exploring this issue for myself and reaching toward a deeper understanding of what this all means for me.

1989

The Intifada is underway. I am asked to host a meeting of Jewish women at my home in an attempt to explore different approaches to the resolution of this conflict. On the supposition that we could have real impact by mirroring a new and different process, it is suggested that we form a dialogue group with Palestinian women. I am thrilled to be asked to participate in this project and at the same time completely unaware of the contradictions that will cross my path along the way.

1989–1993

The dialogue project includes three weekend retreats and culminates in a joint trip to Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. What I learn from these many conversations is how much I do not know. My journey takes twists and turns as I read, converse, and visit new and old sites with different information. I am bringing a new lens to bear on my idealized views of Israel, and although I do not lose any love for the country, I learn so much more about its realities. The intersection between Jewish history and tradition and the modern Jewish condition becomes laden with contradictions. If I believe that Israel lives by a higher moral standard, why do I see evidence of behavior that reflects a lack of morality? If I consider an invitation to become a resource person for a mental health clinic committed to working with children and trauma victims in Gaza—an area I was then focused on in my professional life—why does a part of me believe that my community would perceive my doing this as a betrayal? My turmoil is palpable. I become more committed to working on peace and security for Israel. The Oslo Accords are signed. Our women’s dialogue group disbands. I am asked to take a seat on the board of a newly founded organization called the Israel Policy Forum.

Symposium

1993–2000

My position as a leader in the New York Jewish community leads to an offer, which I accept, to develop a program called Partnership 2000 for the international Jewish community. This means traveling to Israel three times a year for meetings with the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency. I meet Jewish leaders from around the world, and I also meet and interact with Israeli friends and colleagues. I travel throughout the country and am struck by the shift to a modern economy with twentieth-century infrastructure. I recognize the shift from an agrarian society to one based on technology, communication, and services. I talk to friends and colleagues about the contradictions. My optimistic side sees peace as the goal whose achievement will allow other issues to be tackled—such as the meaning of a Jewish state as it relates to democracy, Judaism as a religion and culture, and the reciprocity/mutuality of all Jewish communities worldwide. I visit Egypt and Jordan. All I can imagine is the vitality that peace could/would bring to the region.

2001

Intifada II breaks out, the Oslo accords unravel, peace begins to fade, and I force myself to redefine what peace for Israel might mean. Instead of a peace of friendship and commerce, I begin to imagine a “cold” peace. I wonder if Israel can survive in this toxic environment. Suicide bombings increase. The death toll rises weekly. Palestinians and Israelis are caught in a cycle of violence, and I wonder what type of intervention could arrest it. I am keenly reminded of the cycle of domestic violence. Helplessness and despair take over where joy, pride, and hope once existed.

My relationship to Israel continues to deepen and evolve. Having long passed from an eight-year-old’s idealization to a realistic vision informed by a comprehension of the problems and complexities of Israel’s situation, I move from hope to despair and finally to a grim commitment to survival. I have integrated the multiple perspectives that have surfaced throughout my journey, the disappointments and the realities. I have chosen during these last few years to make peace and security in Israel my first priority.

I believe that the only way I can make a difference is to articulate why peace is so important to us, the Jewish people. I fear that Israel’s survival as a Jewish, democratic state, to which I am ever more profoundly committed, is threatened by both internal and external forces. I often wonder whether

my grandchildren will ever know the Israel that I grew up with and loved unconditionally. Without that idealized beginning phase that would lead them to acceptance of the realities, I fear that they will not share my passion for the country. With deep sadness, I wonder what their land of “milk and honey” will be. What meaning will Israel have for them as adults?