



SEEING IT DIFFERENTLY

At school, you have been helping organize a protest against a powerful politician in your country. Planning the protest has taken over your week, and this work feels important to you, since you disagree with many of his domestic policies.

On Sunday morning, you have your weekly video call with your family in Israel. Most weeks, it is lighthearted; your aunt shows you the tomatoes she is growing on her balcony, and your cousins tease you about your accent. When the call begins, your Israeli family is buzzing. They are talking excitedly about a decision that very same politician made. He strongly supported Israel at a moment when it mattered. Your aunt calls it a rare sign of clarity from the international community. Your cousin says that people in America do not understand how reassuring it is to have someone in power who stands with Israel so openly. You listen, unsure how to respond, as you see the politician so differently.

The politician's decision was significant for Israel, but his politics have harmed people in your country. The two truths sit side by side. In a warm and expectant tone, your aunt says, "You must be happy about this, too, right?"



Do you tell them you appreciate what he did for Israel, or do you hold back because even agreeing a little with this politician feels like a betrayal of your core values?



ISRAELI COMPASS

Israelis have been so battered and isolated in the international arena, and for so long, that they love it when **foreign leaders or celebrities** give them a warm hug. American Presidents, religious leaders, actors, and musicians who publicly support Israel are well-regarded. They are troubled less by what these people do or say elsewhere. It's their view on Israel that matters to most Israelis.

Politics inside Israel works very differently from politics in the United States. In recent elections, more than forty political parties ran for seats in Israel's parliament, and no single party wins enough support to govern alone. As a result, parties with very different values often have to join together in **coalition governments**. These partnerships create strange alliances, but they are often seen as necessary to move forward on issues that matter. Israeli voters know how to "hold their nose" and align with others who do not share their values in order to pursue their preferred policies.

Coalitions require a willingness to value progress over perfection. How do you decide when compromise is a step forward and when it asks too much of your principles?

BIG QUESTIONS. DEEP VALUES. BOLD CONVERSATIONS.

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YOUR FIRST ELECTION

It's election season, and everyone's talking about it. One candidate, who's become really popular among young voters, stands for almost everything you care about, including affordable housing, climate action, and equity. You've liked her posts, shared her speeches, and you're proud that your first vote could go to someone poised to enact real change.

Then, during a livestream, you hear her talk about Israel. She describes it as an apartheid state and calls for cutting U.S. aid. The comments are full of cheering emojis and hateful messages that make you cringe. You know you're voting in the U.S., not in Israel, but hearing your candidate talk that way about the world's only Jewish state hits you hard.

At home, your parents are having a debate about this very issue. One says that Israel matters more than ever right now, and we shouldn't support anyone who undermines it. The other says we have to prioritize local issues in a local election, as our vote affects our community here.



How do you vote?



ISRAELI COMPASS

Rabbi Dr. Yosef Burg belonged to the National-Religious Party. He was a minister in various Israeli governments for decades and was sought after for his wisdom. He was committed to Jewish law and to worldly knowledge and the Zionist movement, which is a unique mix that isn't held by many ministers. Burg was asked which is more important in the national-religious party: the national or the religious? His answer: the hyphen! He believed that healthy humans carried much within them, and at different times, different sensibilities take precedence.

Avrum Burg, Yosef's son, has been a peace activist, Knesset member, Chair of the Jewish Agency, and Speaker of the Knesset representing Israel's Labor Party. As of 2025, he had renounced Zionism, joined the Arab-Jewish party, and spoke widely about the impossibility of having a democratic state that institutionalizes a privileged position for Jews. He marshaled his knowledge of Jewish law and lore, calling for a worldwide Jewish movement to commit to the values of humanistic Judaism, basic moral decency, and collective responsibility.

When your identities point
in different directions, which
one guides your vote?

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THE RABBI'S SERMON

At Friday night services, you sit beside your best friend in the pew. A synagogue is a place where you can sing, reflect, and step out of the noise of the week. That is why the rabbi's sermon surprises you. It opens with a direct reflection on events in Israel, which you appreciate. You like when Judaism feels connected to real life.

The rabbi grows specific, naming Israeli policies and taking a clear stance. The sermon becomes a call to action. You find yourself nodding. It feels honest and brave, different from the usual universal messages. Then you glance at your friend. He looks uneasy. On the walk home, he explains that the synagogue is the one place where he does not feel pressured to take a political side. Tonight's sermon made that space feel less certain.

Later at dinner, your mother mentions that recent legal changes allow rabbis more freedom to speak politically. She admits it worries her. She misses when the synagogue felt like a place where people with different views could sit together without tension. You want your rabbi to speak with integrity and address real issues, but also want your friend and others to feel they still belong.



Do you support the rabbi speaking politically, or should the synagogue remain focused on spiritual connection?



ISRAELI COMPASS

Rabbi Benny Lau, an Orthodox Israeli rabbi, public intellectual, and former congregational rabbi in Jerusalem, teaches that Jewish leadership must engage the moral questions shaping public life. He emphasizes that leaders must speak honestly while remaining rooted in care for their congregations, trusting that Jewish learning can hold disagreement without tearing communities apart. For him, guiding a community means navigating complexity with both moral clarity and responsibility.

Lucy Aharish approaches public speech with similar seriousness, shaped by a different lived experience. She has described herself as Israeli, a woman, Arab, and Muslim, in that order. Growing up as the only Arab in her class in the mostly Jewish town of Dimona, she learned how public speech can determine who feels at home in a space. As a television presenter, she has spoken about moments when restraint preserves trust. For Aharish, responsibility includes noticing when speech risks turning shared spaces into places people no longer feel they can stay.

When a leader speaks in a space people depend on for belonging and meaning, where should the line be drawn?

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THE VISITING MK

An MK, a member of Israel's parliament, is scheduled to visit your city, and your synagogue is debating whether to invite her for a public conversation about Israel. She is known for holding firm political views that inspire strong reactions across the Israeli spectrum. Supporters see her positions as principled and grounded in a clear worldview. Critics worry about the broader implications of what she advocates. What is clear is that she speaks with conviction.

Within the synagogue, the question centers on whether this is the right space to host her. Inviting an elected official feels to many like a basic expression of respect for Israeli democracy and a willingness to engage seriously with Israel's public life. Others worry that offering the synagogue's platform could feel like affirming positions that might not align with the community's values.

Synagogue leadership asks the youth group to share their perspective before making a decision. That evening, the group gathers around the table. Opinions split. Some teens say communities should hear from a range of Israeli voices, even difficult ones. Others say the synagogue has values of its own, and not every public figure fits the space. Sitting in the circle, the group turns to you next, waiting to hear your take.



What guidance do you offer about whether the synagogue should host the MK?



ISRAELI COMPASS

Zionism has long included sharply different political visions. That openness was tested in the 1980s, when Rabbi Meir Kahane was elected to the Knesset on a platform that openly promoted racism and the expulsion of Palestinians. His election forced a reckoning. In response, the Knesset amended one of Israel's Basic Laws governing elections, empowering **Israel's Central Elections Committee** to bar candidates who, under Israeli law, reject Israel's Jewish and democratic character, incite racism, or support armed struggle against the state. Kahane's party was later disqualified under this standard.

Applying these limits has remained difficult. Challenges must pass legal review by the **Attorney General and the Supreme Court**, which have set a high threshold. In recent years, candidates were challenged under the racism clause, including Itamar Ben Gvir, a longtime activist associated with Kahane's ideology. Although his record raised deep concern for many Israelis, the Court ruled that the evidence did not meet the standard for disqualification, allowing him to run and serve.

In a democratic and pluralistic society,
how do communities decide which
voices deserve representation, and
which cross an unacceptable line?

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THE EDGE OF TOLERANCE

During your family trip to Israel, you keep hearing about the draft exemption for parts of the ultra-Orthodox Haredi community. Haredim, who devote their lives to Torah study, see their learning as a form of service that protects the Jewish people. Some describe it as spiritual defense, just as essential to the survival of the state as physical defense. Meanwhile, you cannot ignore that many use the exemption to avoid army duty altogether, while reservists are called back to serve again and again, carrying an unequal burden and putting their lives at risk.

It feels unfair. But the more you learn, the harder it becomes to draw a simple line. You believe something in the current system needs to shift, yet you also know that respecting difference means creating space for the commitments of people who live very differently from you.

One evening, your Israeli cousin, who serves in the reserves, asks if you want to join a rally calling for Haredim to enlist. You agree with the general premise, but also see that the rally will target a community whose worldview you don't fully understand. You wonder if it is fair to weigh in on this societal debate as, whatever happens, you will not be the one drafted.



Do you join the rally or step back? What is your role as an outsider weighing in?



ISRAELI COMPASS

After Israel's founding, Haredi leader the **Chazon Ish** was aware of diverging visions for the state, and was determined to rebuild a Torah-committed world. The Haredi community was greatly impacted by the Holocaust, with 80% of yeshiva students and 90% of rabbis murdered. The Chazon Ish wanted to show that Haredi Judaism carried sacred value, in contrast to secular Zionism, which he viewed as empty.

David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, was secular and believed in the power of human beings to make life better. For the Jewish people to flourish, new institutions were needed: universities and cultural centers, hospitals and welfare agencies, and an army. For Israel to survive and thrive, it needed all able young people to serve in the army. It was surprising, therefore, that Ben-Gurion agreed to exemptions for up to 400 Haredi yeshiva students from army service. He did so out of a belief that ultimately, Haredi Jews would see the benefits of secular society and shed their opposition to the state.

How should a diverse society balance the expectation that everyone contributes in the same way, while making room for deeply held differences?

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