

Chicago's Rebel Rabbi Standing with Palestinians: “We Must Stand with the Oppressed and Call Out the Oppressor”

An Interview with Brant Rosen

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If you've heard of Rabbi Brant Rosen, chances are that you know about his vocal and principled stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rosen has been on a personal journey ever since Israel's 2008-2009 Operation Cast Lead, the brutality of which compelled him to question his beliefs about the State of Israel and Zionism. Much of this journey unfolded in public as Rosen courageously wrote about his evolving views on Israel/Palestine in his well-read blog, [Shalom Rav](#). These blog posts and some of the responses to them formed the basis for his 2012 book [“Wrestling in the Daylight: A Rabbi's Path To Palestinian Solidarity.”](#) Rosen is the founder of the [Jewish Voice For Peace Rabbinical Council](#) and for 17 years he was the Rabbi of the [Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston](#). He stepped down from this pulpit in September and took a position as the Midwest Regional Director of the [American Friends Service Committee](#). On July 5th, he announced the founding of a new community called [Tzedek Chicago](#). I contacted Rabbi Rosen earlier this week to learn more about his politics, identity, and new community.

When did unquestioning support for the State of Israel become a centerpiece of Jewish identity in the United States? Why did this happen?

Israel became a centerpiece of Jewish identity following the trauma of the Holocaust – an identity which became more or less solidified following Israel's military victory in the Six Day War. In retrospect, it is staggering to contemplate how quickly and thoroughly this new narrative has taken hold of the Jewish community. In a nutshell, it is a narrative that teaches that the traumas of the past will inevitably become our future unless the Jewish people embrace the ways of empire, nationalism and militarism. I do believe that this narrative is in many ways a betrayal of a central narrative that has sustained the Jewish people for centuries: the story of a people born out of the ashes of a Temple destroyed by the world's mightiest empire – who responded by creating a tradition rooted in an allegiance to a Power yet greater than any human power.

We have integrated this new narrative so thoroughly that we rarely stop to consider its implications. There are so many examples I could point to; to cite but one simple instance: virtually every synagogue in America has a US and Israeli flag on either side of the *Aron Kodesh* [the cabinet in a Synagogue where the Torah scrolls are kept]. In other words, in our most sacred Jewish spaces, we are literally bowing down to physical symbols of national power. This is a powerful demonstration of how completely this new narrative has taken hold of post-Holocaust Jewish identity. To my mind, it is nothing short of idolatry – and

our inability to recognize it as such shows just how deeply we have bought into a religious mindset that radically values physical/military power over spiritual power.

What does solidarity with the Palestinian people mean to you?

By standing in solidarity with the Palestinian people, I believe I am fulfilling one of the central spiritual directives of my religious tradition – namely that we must stand with the oppressed and call out the oppressor. It's really that simple. Now of course, I'm not so naïve as to deny the enormous complexities that are raised when Jews stand in solidarity with Palestinians. I know full well that in the eyes of many in my community, standing in solidarity with Palestinians is a profoundly transgressive act.

Since so many frame this issue as a binary conflict between “us and them,” to stand in solidarity with Palestinians must mean that I am choosing not to stand with my own people. I reject this binary meme in no uncertain terms. I believe to my core that standing with the Palestinians is one of the most Jewish things I can do. In the end, my solidarity is not with Palestinians alone but with all who have suffered from prejudice, oppression and structural racism. Needless to say, this has historically included Jews as well. So in the end, I view solidarity as an act that defies “zero sum attitudes.” It is ultimately an act of love that will ensure a future of dignity and security for all.

How do you respond to people who claim that the BDS Movement is antisemitic?

I defy anyone to read the 2005 Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions and explain to me how it is rooted in anything other than values of equality and international human rights – and it is certainly not anti-Semitic to hold Israel to these standards. There is nothing anti-Semitic in the three essential goals of BDS: namely, an end to the occupation, equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel and a recognition of the Palestinian right of return. And there is certainly nothing anti-Semitic about the time honored nonviolent means by which the BDS movement seeks these ends.

Now I know there are those who claim that the “double standard” created by BDS is somehow anti-Semitic; in other words of all the odious regimes in the world, why is Israel being singled out for this treatment? This claim utterly misunderstands the nature of the BDS call – and of the nature of solidarity itself. The BDS call was a call that came from Palestinians themselves. It comes from a myriad of Palestinian civil society organizations and institutions that are asking the international community to give popular support to their cause. The BDS call was not initiated by campus organizers, Protestant church groups, or international solidarity organizations. On the contrary, these groups have made the decision, in many cases after considerable deliberation, to respond to the Palestinian call for support and solidarity. So the real question, it seems to me, is not “What about all these other horrible countries?” but rather: “In the face of international political inaction to solve this unjust situation, the Palestinians have put out a call and are asking for our support and solidarity. Do we believe their call is worth responding to or not?”

In September you announced that you would be stepping down from your pulpit at the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston. What precipitated this move?

I made the decision to resign from JRC because my activism on the issue of Israel-Palestine had created too much stress for my congregation – and for me as well. For the past several

years, I have become an increasingly high profile Palestine solidarity activist and we had been doing our best to manage this complicated reality for many years. To their credit, JRC's congregational leadership consistently and courageously supported my right and responsibility to speak my conscience on this issue even when most of them did not agree with me politically. In the end, however, I think my activism was just too painful for some members of my congregation. Last year, they became more vocal and organized in expressing their upset – and the atmosphere soon became so intolerable that it became impossible for me to do my job any more. I want to stress that my decision to leave was mine and mine alone. It was not easy for me to leave a congregation to which I had been devoted and that had been home to me and my family for almost twenty years. But if I'm truly honest with myself, I don't know that it could have ended any other way, given the circumstances.

Do you have any regrets about leaving?

I have great sadness about leaving JRC, but no regrets. Given my current path, I don't think it would be fair to the congregation – or to me – for me to remain there. While it was a traumatic break for us, I have incredible fondness for the congregation and its members and am proud of what we were able to accomplish there. I wish them nothing but the best.

What is Tzedek Chicago?

Tzedek Chicago is an avowedly non-Zionist congregation rooted in core values of spiritual openness, anti-racism, universalism and solidarity with the oppressed. It is a conscious attempt to create a Jewish spiritual community that celebrates Judaism as a global diaspora-based spiritual peoplehood. I will be serving as its rabbi part time while continuing to work in my full time capacity at AFSC.

Most liberal congregations describe themselves with words such as “open,” “inclusive,” and “welcoming.” Although it might sound odd to say, Tzedek Chicago is really not an inclusive community. We're an intentional community rooted in very specific values. We're not for everyone and we don't pretend to be.

At this point in my career, I'm not interested in creating another liberal Jewish congregation. There are plenty of them out there and some of them do wonderful, creative, important work. However, over the years I've increasingly met people who seek Jewish community but are kept at bay from congregational life because Zionism and support for the State of Israel assumes such a prominent role in virtually every American synagogue. I'm meeting more and more Jews who have no interest at all in enrolling their children in a religious school that considers a personal connection with the State of Israel to be a core Jewish educational value. Quite frankly, many Jews – particularly younger generations of Jews – are asking what this over-militarized ethnic nation state has to do with their Jewish identity.

Now for those who do place a high value on Israel and Zionism, there are a myriad of synagogues to choose from. But for those who do not, there really are no choices at all to speak of. Tzedek Chicago really is an attempt to create a Jewish congregational community for those whose Judaism is not dependent upon identification with Jewish nation-statism. And by extension for those who seek a Judaism rooted in sacred values of such as nonviolence, anti-racism and universalism.

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