

Rabbi Charley Baginsky and Rabbi Josh Levy:
A time for moral clarity on Israeli settlements

1 September 2026 – 19 Elul 5786 | [Israel](#), [Progressive Co-Leads](#), [Thought](#)

Judaism has a word for the difficult truth spoken within a relationship: *tochecha*, rebuke. “You shall surely rebuke your fellow,” Torah teaches, placing that command alongside the prohibition against hating another in our hearts. Jewish rebuke is not denunciation from a safe distance, it is what we owe people to whom we remain bound.

This is written in that spirit, as a reflection from within our own community and with the recognition that we are not innocent of the habits we describe.

We know the instinct to close ranks when Israel is attacked, the fear that criticism will become delegitimisation and the knowledge, born of bitter experience, that antisemitism rarely remains rhetorical.

Love without the capacity for rebuke is not loyalty. It is abdication.

Many British Jews were not silent when Israel’s government came for the courts. We carried Israeli flags through our streets because we understood that loving Israel did not require defending its government. Sometimes love demanded precisely the opposite.

We need to recover that moral clarity now.

Mickey Gitzin of the New Israel Fund recently wrote about witnessing the dispossession of Palestinians in the West Bank by Jewish settlers, sometimes actively or passively backed by the army: “I am angry, I am ashamed.” Those words are not comfortable and nor should they be. They model the profoundly Jewish refusal to look away from wrongdoing committed by our own people, or to imagine that acknowledging it makes us less Jewish or less Zionist.

E1 is no longer a distant planning argument. The Israel Lands Authority has published tenders for 1,234 housing units there. Daniel Seidemann, the Israeli lawyer and Jerusalem geopolitical expert, describes E1 as driving a wedge through the West Bank and fragmenting the territory of a future Palestinian state. Whatever language we use about our commitment to two states, these actions make such a future harder to achieve.

Faced with the possibility that Britain might impose consequences for settlement expansion, much of our communal discussion has understandably focused on the risks of boycott, antisemitism and the danger of measures extending beyond settlements.

We share those concerns. We have both spent years confronting antisemitism and know how quickly criticism of Israel can mutate into something much uglier. We oppose BDS. We would resist indiscriminate measures that delegitimise Israel, harm Palestinians alongside Israelis or obstruct Jewish access to our holiest places.

We must be careful that these real fears do not release us from confronting the policy itself. If every attempt to impose consequences for the actions of the Israeli government is translated immediately into a threat to Jews, antisemitism becomes a word that ends the argument. In doing so, we risk weakening the very language we need when Jews really are threatened.

We must also be careful not to suggest that domestic political considerations are driving foreign policy, we know how quickly that kind of insinuation can become poisonous.

The harder Jewish question is not only what others intend towards us. It is what Judaism requires of us when Jews possess power.

Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, has returned to David Hartman's understanding that Jewish power is the necessary answer to Jewish victimhood. However, Hartman also recognises that it becomes dangerous when vulnerability creates a permission structure in which moral responsibility recedes whenever Jewish security is invoked. Rather, sovereignty must be tethered to covenant, power must be accompanied by obligation and Jewish history cannot be an exemption from judgement but as a summons to it.

This is not an argument against Jewish power. We fought for a Jewish state because Jewish powerlessness was deadly, and Israel's security remains essential. It is an argument about the purpose and discipline of that power.

Fania Oz-Salzberger has written that Israel now requires "moral and political reconstruction" for which Israelis must "assume full responsibility". Responsibility is the vital word. It does not mean abandoning Israel, feeling shame at Jewish sovereignty or wishing ourselves back into powerlessness. It means accepting responsibility for what is done with Jewish power and in the name of Jewish security.

The Zionism we want to inhabit is one strong enough to confront dispossession rather than provide moral cover for it; one able to hear Palestinian vulnerability without denying Jewish vulnerability; one capable of condemning Kahanism, settler violence and settlement expansion not only in principle, but when that condemnation carries consequences.

Here, too, *tochecha* must be honest. If proposed British measures are indiscriminate, we should challenge them. If they become BDS by another name, we should oppose them. If they harm Palestinians alongside Israelis or threaten Jewish religious life, we should say so clearly. If every meaningful consequence is unacceptable, however, we must ask whether our support for two states remains a political commitment or has become a comforting piece of communal liturgy.

Tochecha must begin with ourselves. Have we sometimes spoken too cautiously because the communal cost of doing otherwise felt too high? Have we allowed fear of those who attack Israel in bad faith to inhibit necessary criticism offered in good faith? Have we been clearer about the dangers facing Jews than about the dangers faced by Palestinians under occupation? These are not questions we pose from outside but questions we face alongside our community.

Jewish leadership must continue to ask what threatens us. It must also ask what is being done with Jewish power, what is justified in the name of Jewish security and what we have become willing to tolerate because those responsible are part of our own people.

Tochecha is painful precisely because it takes place within a relationship we refuse to abandon. We offer it because we remain bound to Israel, to Zionism, to our community and to one another. The question before us is not only what kind of Israel will emerge from this extraordinary and frightening period. It is what kind of Jewish people we are becoming together and whether we still have the courage to rebuke one another because we care too much about that relationship to look away.

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