

Thirteen Tips for Talking About Israel in Interfaith Families

During times of conflict in Israel, interfaith couples may find themselves under strain. The key thing a Jewish partner in an interfaith relationship has to remember is that his or her partner probably does not have, nor should he or she be expected to have, a strong attachment to Israel. The key thing a non-Jewish partner has to remember is that Israel is often a dormant, but rarely wholly absent, component of Jewish identity. While it may seem strange to see somebody who's never been to Israel or rarely goes to synagogue all of a sudden become an impassioned supporter of Israel, respect your partner's position. It comes from a deeply ingrained emotional place.

InterfaithFamily.com has compiled this series of tips for interfaith couples on how to talk about Israel. The first seven tips are for Jewish partners, the second six tips are for non-Jewish partners.

Tips for Jewish Partners

- 1. Be willing to talk about your feelings for and about Israel and why Israel is so important to you.** For many Jews, an attachment to Israel is something they're conditioned to feel from a very early age. As such, it may be difficult--or seem strange--to have to explain your feelings about Israel to a close loved one. But remember: very few non-Jews were raised with pride in Israel. It's not that they're anti-Israel, let alone anti-Semitic, they just have no particular attachment to, or knowledge about, Israel. Share how your parents and grandparents were committed to Israel as a homeland in a world full of anti-Semitism. Explain to them how Israel was created in response to the Holocaust.
- 2. Don't get angry with your partner.** The Jewish cultural reflex to defend Israel during times of trouble may strike your non-Jewish partner as strange, even irrational. Don't back down from defending Israel, but don't get angry just because your partner doesn't share your passion.
- 3. Explain your desire to make visible displays of support for Israel.** As a Jew, you may feel a need to publicly demonstrate your support for Israel by attending a rally, wearing a pro-Israel sticker or hanging an Israeli flag. These are all valid demonstrations of your support, but respect the fact that your non-Jewish partner probably won't be as passionate. Talk to him or her about why you want to show your support, and explain how important it is to you.
- 4. Share educational materials with your non-Jewish partner.** The surest way to engender sympathy and support for Israel is to teach about Israel. Suggest books like Alan Dershowitz's *The Case for Israel* or the website www.jta.org, for a good update on what's happening in Israel as well as insight into the historical context of the current conflict.

5. Invite your partner to join you in expressions of support for Israel. Whether it's donating to an Israeli charity, attending a rally or buying an Israeli flag, invite your partner to participate with you. Nothing breeds commitment like shared experience. But if your partner chooses not to attend, accept that.

6. Put into perspective what may appear to be a disproportionate response. Some people don't know what to make of Israel's counterattacks on Lebanon. Ask your partner how he or she would feel if American soldiers were kidnapped on the U.S. border or if missiles were being launched at a major U.S. city. Explain that terrorist groups like Hezbollah hide among civilian populations and use civilian facilities, like the Beirut airport, which forces Israel to attack civilian areas.

7. Point to Israel's record on human rights. If your wife or female partner is not Jewish, she may be aware of the traditional Jewish law followed in Israel that her children are not considered Jewish. She may be resentful of this fact, and hence be less sympathetic to Israel. Acknowledge the validity of her feelings, but remind her that despite some unfair quirks, Israel has by far the strongest record on civil rights of any country in the Middle East. Israeli Arabs are not persecuted, secular Jews live side-by-side with religious Jews, gays live openly and freely, everyone is free to criticize the government with no fear of repercussions.

Tips for Non-Jewish Partners

1. Respect your partner's attachment to Israel. To a typical American, showing devotion and solidarity to two different countries may seem unpatriotic. But it's very common for Jews to be as passionately supportive of Israel as they are of America. Respect that attachment.

2. Put yourself in your partner's shoes. For many Jews, their support for Israel is wrapped up with their anxiety over anti-Semitism and the survival of the Jewish people in light of the Holocaust. Be sympathetic to these historical reasons for Jewish support of Israel.

3. Don't be afraid to ask questions. If you don't fully understand why your partner feels so strongly about Israel, ask him or her.

4. Be willing to compromise. During times of conflict, a Jewish person's attachment to Israel can become very emotional. It may be that the last thing he or she wants to hear during this time is criticism of Israel. Unless you feel like you're betraying your principles by not speaking up, accept that your partner may want validation more than debate.



5. Educate yourself about Israel. Your partner may know a lot about Israel but you may know very little. Learning more about Israel, and sharing your knowledge with your partner, can be a good way of demonstrating your support for him or her.

6. Show your support. Your partner may not be saying much about Israel because he or she feels like he or she can't talk about it with you. If you show your support for Israel in some way, perhaps by suggesting attending a rally, or making a donation to an Israeli cause, it can be a powerful gesture.

