

TWEETING ISRAEL

A Jewish Federation CEO is in the eye of the storm following his viral tweet about a right-wing Israeli politician not being welcome in his community.

It had all happened so fast. One minute we hear that this right-wing religious Israeli politician is coming to visit our community, without telling us in advance. Next minute, before we can coordinate a response, Steve has already sent out a tweet from his personal account. In English and in Hebrew.



I reject the abominable views and hateful ideology of this Israeli politician and call on all members of our Jewish community to show him the door. Get back on the plane sir, and be remembered as a disgrace forever. You are not welcome here in our community.

I'm not sure what was more challenging. The fact that he'd not consulted with anyone, the fact that he was publicly attacking an Israeli Member of Knesset, or the fact that he is the CEO of our Federation.

My cell wouldn't stop ringing. The tweet had gone out half an hour ago, and it had already gone viral. I was getting calls from donors, from the press, and even from the press in Israel. Most of the questions were pretty similar. They were either asking me when I was going to fire Steve, or why hadn't I already fired Steve.

I turned off my cell, ready for Steve to come in. As President of the Federation, it was my unenviable task to face him down.

Without knocking, Steve strode in. He'd spent a year or two living in Israel, and it often felt like the only things he'd learned there were to speak Hebrew and to ignore manners.

"I don't even understand what the fuss is about," he blurted. "Do you know what this man believes?"

I was used to Steve's temperament. Before saying anything I had him sit down, and slowly poured us both a coffee. Then I stood up again and brought over some cookies. I waited until he had his coffee against his lips, and then I began to talk:

"Steve, you sent out a tweet without consulting any of us."

"It was from my personal account."

"Your personal account whose profile happens to mention that you are the CEO of our Federation."

He nodded in acknowledgment. Strike one to me. Emboldened by this little victory, I toned down my voice even softer, and asked more in care and concern than in accusation:

"How could you think that was okay, Steve?"

To my surprise, Steve smiled at me calmly, and answered in a similar manner: "How can you think that it's not okay, Liz?" And before I could even show my surprise, he continued, "Aren't we here to look after the Jewish community? The whole community - Orthodox, Reform, Hasidic, Conservative? No matter their gender, orientation, skin color?"

"Of course we are. We're the Jewish Federation."

"Right," said Steve, "and in order to keep our community safe from antisemitism we have to fight racism and maintain alliances with as many anti-racists as we can, correct?"

"Within reason," I assented, "within reason."

"So," said Steve, spreading his hands, "how could I have responded differently? This is a guy who calls himself a "proud homophobe". This is a man who says that Reform Judaism is a "fake religion". And he says the most disgusting things about Arabs. That their political parties should be outlawed, and that they shouldn't share maternity wards with Jews. Here," he pulled out his cell phone to read, "Here's a direct quote - "It's natural that my wife wouldn't want to lie next to someone whose baby son might want to murder my son," I mean, how can we possibly keep quiet about such a person?"

"But you didn't check with us first, Steve," I insisted.

“Why would I need to check with you? I respect you Liz, and I don’t want to be rude, but surely this is a no-brainer? As CEO of the Federation of course I should distance us from a homophobic racist who hates progressive Jewry. What’s there to check in about? If any antisemites were to –“

“Hear how the head of a Jewish Federation publicly disdains Israel?” I interjected.

“How is that going to play among Israel’s haters? And what about the Federation’s mission statement about Israel? You’re quite right about our role in the community, but that role also includes our love of Israel and our support for Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State. How does that square with your very public humiliation of an elected representative of Israel’s government? Are you trying to say that the Federation’s support of Israel is conditional on Israelis voting the way we want them to? Do you think that it’s okay for Israel to disdain our Jewish leaders?”

“This man is going to dismantle Israel’s democracy,” growled Steve.

“This man was elected according to Israel’s democracy, Steve. Are you going to tell me there was a Big Steal over there too?” Steve shrugged a grudging “no”. “Or are we only in favor of Israel being a democracy if we judge it’s making the right choices? How arrogant do you want us to be?”

Steve mumbled something.

“I didn’t hear that,” I said.

He spoke more clearly, “I won’t apologize and I won’t retract.”

I was taken aback. “You won’t apologize for anything?”

He corrected himself, “If you ask me to, Liz, I’ll apologize to the board for sending the tweet without their prior knowledge. You’re right, I should have given you all a heads-up. I’m sorry for that. If you want, I’ll even set up a public event where community members can shout at me if they want. But I won’t apologize for the tweet itself and I won’t delete it. To be honest, I wish the tweet could have been sent from the Federation’s official account.”

He took a deep breath, looked me in the eyes and said, “The Federation can either reject this man, or fire me.”



GUIDING QUESTIONS

How do you relate to these extracts from the story?

- "Should I distance us from an Israeli elected politician who is a homophobic racist who disdains progressive Jewry?"
 - "The head of a Jewish Federation publicly disdains Israel. How is that going to play among Israel's haters?"
 - "Do you think that it's okay for Israel to disdain our Jewish leaders?"
 - "Are we only in favor of Israel being a democracy if we judge it's making the right choices?"
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- **Should the Federation fire or support Steve, the Federation Director?**
 - **Should the Federation send out an apology to the Israeli politician?**
 - **Is it possible/desirable to support Israel while rejecting its elected leaders?**
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BACKGROUND

This story is a fictionalized version of a true event.

All the quotations attributed to the "Israeli politician" were spoken by Betzalel Smotrich over the past few years.

In February 2022 then-Member of Knesset Betzalel Smotrich announced a trip to UK Jewish communities and organizations. The Board of Deputies - British Jews' representative body - responded swiftly.

The tweet read (in English and in Hebrew):

We reject the abominable views and hateful ideology of Betzalel Smotrich and call on all members of our Jewish community to show him the door. Get back on the plane Betzalel, and be remembered as a disgrace forever. You are not welcome here in our community.

The Board of Deputies is the only democratically elected, cross-communal, representative body in the British Jewish community. Established in 1760, it now comprises over 300 deputies directly elected by the synagogues and communal organizations they represent, from congregations to youth movements, and social welfare charities to regional councils.

The key difference between our story and the true events is that the public response of the Board of Deputies was fully coordinated, and was issued with the full knowledge and approval of its leadership. No one has been fired, or threatened with being fired.

Israel's President, Isaac Herzog, called the tweet:

...deeply inappropriate. The Hebrew version was downright insulting, and elicited great discomfort...

Just as Jewish communities correctly expect their leadership to be respected in Israel, similarly I would expect Israeli leaders to be treated with respect in the Diaspora...

I believe in dialogue, and I urge my dear friends on the Board of Deputies to take a pause and invite Betzalel Smotrich to a conversation. Sound your pain, express your views and reservations. Protest and debate. But do so as you sit down and talk. We cannot allow ourselves another rift in the Jewish People.

In a statement, the Board of Deputies said:

The Board of Deputies of British Jews firmly supports the State of Israel and has great respect for President Herzog. Like Israel, Britain is a democracy, which contains many different conflicting views. However, we believe that some views are not acceptable within the Democratic process. Democracy is fragile and needs to

protect itself from those who threaten its survival. We firmly believe that Betzalel Smotrich, with his comments about Arab citizens of Israel, Progressive Jews and LGBTQ people, falls into this category.

We understand that some people did not like our strong statement... We would note, however, that we have received a great deal of thanks for our stance from Jews in Israel as well as the UK and the wider diaspora.

We will continue to strongly support Israel, while opposing those who approach our community to seek backing for a message of division and hatred.

As of December 2022, Mr Smotrich is the leader of the Religious Zionists party which received 14 seats (just over 500,000 votes) in Israel's Knesset in the 2022 elections. He has been appointed rotating Minister of Finance/Defense Minister responsible for Judea/Samaria/West Bank.



QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Should a Jewish organization ever publicly shun a Jewish person?
- Should a Jewish organization ever publicly shun anyone?
- What might be the criteria for shunning someone?