



## **We Must Not Let Antisemitism Poison the Movement**

*There's no place for antisemitism in movements to build a just, loving and sustainable future. Collective liberation means everyone. And the only way to grow in empathy is by encountering one another, so let's stop grandstanding and get to work.*

Parashat Vayera 5782 – October 30, 2021

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A few years ago, I shared on Yom Kippur that I had just returned from an extraordinary gathering in Jerusalem convened by Israel's former President, Ruvy Rivlin. It was a small, diverse gathering of Israeli and diaspora Jews—rabbis, professors and activists—from Tel Aviv and hilltop settlements, from Los Angeles, Paris, Hong Kong, Buenos Aires and Budapest. It included, among others, two Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) settler rabbis and three women rabbis.

We were brought together to consider what, if anything, unites us as a Jewish people, particularly in these polarizing times. On the last day of our convening, I was invited to address the President, to share an American Jewish perspective on these matters.

I expressed my wonder and gratitude for the miracle of Israel, a place of refuge for Jews from around the world, a homeland and a heartland for our people after generations of exile, persecution and genocide.

And I shared that I—like many American Jews—was deeply distressed by Israel's continued military occupation of the West Bank, denying the basic rights of millions of Palestinians with policies that threatened to make a mockery of both Jewish values and democratic norms.

I was particularly pained, I said, as a rabbi, to see some of those who call themselves 'religious' use our sacred texts to justify policies of oppression and acts of violence toward our Palestinian neighbors.

After my talk, an Ultra-Orthodox rabbi and leader of the settler movement confronted me in great distress. He accused me of spreading lies and maligning him and his community.

Several people gathered around us to witness the exchange as it heated up. Then I heard him say that he was not only angry. He was hurt.

His admission of vulnerability was so unexpected that I asked if he'd be willing to sit with me, to help me understand more. And something extraordinary happened: he, his wife and I sat down for lunch together and talked for nearly three hours.

We talked about the settlement enterprise, which he saw as a fulfillment of the Biblical promise for a displaced people to inherit the land, and which I saw as an engine of human rights abuses and a danger to the State of Israel.

We spoke about restrictions on the freedom of Palestinians, which he saw as necessary for Jewish Israelis' security and I saw as violations of basic principles of both Torah and democracy.

We shared our understanding of the Bible's 36 commandments regarding the treatment of the stranger, which he deemed largely inapplicable to the current political reality. I saw them as the very essence of our religious commitment—aspirational principles that demanded concrete moral action.

He argued that violent Jewish extremism existed only in rare, isolated incidents; I argued it was far more pervasive than he was admitting, a desecration of God's name that demanded not weak-kneed justifications but unequivocal opposition.

And we spoke of the growing rifts between religious and secular, right and left, Israeli and diaspora Jews that threaten to tear our people apart, which concerned us both.

The conversation ended with him inviting me to spend shabbat at his settlement, and me inviting him to spend shabbat here at IKAR. (We both respectfully declined). But we hinted we'd be willing to meet again for coffee next time I was in Jerusalem.

I want to tell you that my hands trembled for two days after this meeting. Not only did we disagree, but I found his positions dangerous, and I'm certain he felt the same about mine. But I could see his earnestness, his concern for his children and community, Torah and the Jewish people. I walked away with a strange feeling of tenderness toward this man.

This meeting has been top of mind this past year, through the election and insurrection, through pandemic and climate devastation. We increasingly see those who hold opposing political views not only as ideological foes, but as existential threats. And it's hard not to... there's just so much at stake.

Of course this has made it hard for us to maintain friendships and even family relationships with those on the other side of the ideological divide. It's hard to even go to shul together or share a meal.

So naturally we self-segregate into ideological bubbles, we have close social relationships predominately with people who share our perspectives. You don't need me to tell you this—I'm sure you've seen it in your own social lives. I surely have.

But here's the problem: people with more robust social ties to people outside their immediate racial, ethnic or religious groups tend to be more openminded and less rigid in their thinking.

Turns out it's much easier to empathize with another person or community's struggles if you talk to or get to know them.

I remember after the 2016 election, our beloved Rabbi Barbara Zacky announced that she wanted to go to the reddest county in the reddest state, to sit in a cafe and buy a coffee for anyone willing to explain their views and votes, which she found not only morally repugnant, but incomprehensible. A few other people made similar plans.

I did not share that desire. I didn't want to schmooze with the people I felt were jeopardizing our safety and our future. I wanted a reckoning.

At the heart of the political rifts in this country is real ideological disagreement, much of it rooted in conscious and subconscious conditioning around white supremacy. I believed our most urgent task was to expose and dismantle unjust systems, not to spend our time trying to better understand a movement openly fueled by ignorance, racism and fear. Supremacist thinking must not be accommodated, I preached here, again and again -- it must be eradicated. The real problem is not polarization, it's injustice.

Even still, I couldn't ignore the overwhelming insistence in our tradition that we take the Torah of openhearted disagreement seriously. There must be a reason we're called, again and again, to stretch ourselves to engage and learn from those who see the world differently.

Our tradition lifts up the model of Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan, two perfectly matched scholars who knew that challenges and disagreements would only strengthen their own arguments until the truth was ultimately uncovered. Our Rabbis instruct us to strive to be like them, and their colleagues in *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, in contrast to the scholars of *Bavel*, Babylon, who sought not only victory, but injury when they disputed over legal matters. (Sanhedrin 24a)

R' Elazar ben Azaria teaches that the Rabbis would gather in *baalei asufot*-- complex, dynamic groups of scholars holding different perspectives-- in order to learn from one another, so that they'd not simply have their own positions reinforced. Make your ear כְּאֵזְרָא לְמִנְיָן like a funnel, we're taught, וְיִקְנֶה לָךְ לֵב מְבִין-- and try to cultivate an understanding heart. Try to see the truth, even where it's not obvious to you. (Hagigah 3b)

What's the virtue in this kind of thinking? The Maharal of Prague, 16th century mystic, reminds us *ain ha'olam pashut* – the world is not so simple. Life is complicated. This is not an invitation to moral relativism; it's an invitation to train our hearts to be discerning, to learn from everyone. To seek out *greater truth* (Maharal of Prague, *Be'er haGolah*).

Well, my meeting with the rabbi was again top of mind this past week, when the DC branch of a youth climate action group, Sunrise DC, publicly disengaged from a Freedom to Vote rally because they were unwilling to fight in same trenches as "Zionists." They also said they would no longer join coalitions with Zionist organizations, naming three prominent progressive Jewish organizations that have worked for years to build a just, inclusive, multi-racial democracy: the

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC), the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and the Jewish Council on Public Affairs (JCPA).

In doing so, they dangerously shifted the Overton Window, holding Jewish organizations to a different standard than any other, and treating Israel unlike any other state actor.

Their thinking requires two logical leaps: first, the absolute and categorical alignment of Israel—and all Israelis—with villainy.

And second, the notion of villainy by association. Any Jew who doesn't actively distance from Israel is responsible for its worst policies and positions. This, to be clear, would mean that about 90% of American Jews—including many in this community—would be expelled, expunged, excommunicated from their movement.

This is obviously antisemitic. And it's not only antisemitic, it's profoundly self-destructive. As Rep Jamie Raskin so perfectly said: "For the life of me, at a time when racism, antisemitism, and right wing authoritarianism are on the march in the United States and all over the world, I cannot comprehend the political or moral logic of this statement from a progressive group committed to saving humanity from climate disaster."

Antisemitic. Self-destructive. And reflective of the same kind of narrow thinking that has made public discourse in our time so toxic.

I say that today with great sadness—this is personally painful for me and for many of us to see. I say this in the hopes that speaking honestly about antisemitism will awaken a sensitivity among friends and allies that is now sorely lacking in many of these spaces.

Many of the most well-known, epic stories of the Torah appear in this week's parasha. In one episode, Abraham famously stands before God and argues, on the strength of his moral intuition, that the people of the wicked city of Sodom should be saved.

If you read the text closely, he actually engages in a sophisticated moral sleight of hand: first, asking God to save any innocent who lived there, then demanding that God save the whole city on behalf of those innocents.

My dear friend, Rabbi Claudia Kreiman, has been lifting up the teaching of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Ladino rabbi named Yaakov Kuli, who writes in Yalkut [Me'am Lo'ez](#):

*Abraham understood that God wanted to judge the entire Sodom area without paying attention to individuals. He found this hard to take, saying, 'Will you actually wipe out the righteous along with the wicked? You wish to measure good and bad in these cities, and if the evil outweighs the good, You will destroy them all. I beg you: judge each individual by himself. And if there are ten righteous people, nullify the decree for their sake.'* (Yalkut Me'am Loez to 18:24-25)

Abraham's assumption: if there are *any* decent people in a place, that place cannot be all rotten. Even just a few good people can transform a society. That's one of the most hopeful outlooks. It's never too late!

But to condemn an entire people because you despise the actions of some, to collectivize, rather than individualize... there is a word for that kind of moral failure: *racism*.

Think of how different Abraham's thinking is from today's increasingly normalized discourse.

You could argue that Sunrise DC was just a small, fringe group of leaders from a decentralized organization. What they wrote doesn't deserve our heartache or even our attention.

But I have been tracking the conversation move in this direction for years. I have heard the warning for a decade and a half: soon there will be no place for Jews who don't explicitly disavow Israel and identify as anti-Zionist.

And of course warnings like that, and statements like these, they only serve to push us all further into our silos. Who wants to be in a place that holds such disdain for our people?

And so, we respond with our own condemnations and restrictions.

Just yesterday, the Knesset declared six Palestinian human rights organizations, leaders in Palestinian civil society, to be terrorist organizations. But I'm not talking only about repressive government actions. Did you know that in 2010 Hillel International established Standards of Partnership that prohibit Hillels from co-sponsoring events with organizations or individuals deemed anti-Israel, even if the program has nothing at all to do with Israel/ Palestine? Critics of this policy—including many of my friends who are Hillel directors!—have said that these standards effectively cut off the possibility of real encounter and partnership with any Palestinians on campus, and with many other groups that could probably benefit from being in relationship with the Jewish community and vice versa.

Here's the problem: the only way we learn from each other is by engaging each other and listening, compassionately, even when it's uncomfortable.

There's a coda to my encounter with my lunchmate from Jerusalem.

In August, Israel HaYom, [Israel's leading daily newspaper](#), reported that this same rabbi issued a "bombshell" statement aggressively condemning violence in his community, and supporting of the rights of non-Orthodox Jews to gather and pray at the Western Wall without being harassed.

His most zealous supporters were left outraged and confused, reading his disapproval as a kind of betrayal. The rabbi explained that he felt compelled to publicly speak out against what he saw as a dangerous set of norms-- and even violence-- emerging in his community.

What caused this change of heart? His associates are quoted saying it was a couple of meetings he had, years before, with people whose perspectives differed greatly from his own. One of those encounters, they say, was the lunch he had with me.

To be honest, I don't know how pivotal our meeting really was in the development of the rabbi's thinking. Clearly he was already open to risking the opprobrium of his community by even showing up at a conference with secular Jews and women rabbis.

And yet, his growing openness to acknowledging the danger of violent extremism in parts of the religious and ultra-nationalist community feels significant.

From my side, our lunch has convinced me of something counter instinctual, which I need to be reminded of this week: we must not give up on one another.

I'm back to thinking about Rabbi Zacky looking for coffee dates in Boone County, Arkansas. I had clearly created a false binary, which I now regret.

The choice today is not between justice and human understanding. Clearly we need one to achieve the other. We may feel more righteous talking only to ourselves, but the only way to grow in empathy is by encountering one another.

Two caveats: Obviously in a society scarred by structural and systemic power imbalances, meetings like this can be not only fraught, but dangerous.

And sitting together is no panacea. My lunch mate did not change my views of the settlement enterprise, and I don't think he'd approve of the gay weddings I am honored to officiate.

But even still, I'm grateful that two years ago, two rabbis from different worlds could sit across a table and hear each other, neither of us walking away for nearly three hours. Because the just society we strive to build will have to make space for both of us. I hope Sunrise DC can hear that too: there is no collective liberation without us all. That doesn't mean capitulating to the views of our ideological opponents. But it does mean seeing one another not as enemies, but as flawed, striving, fellow human beings.

And it means remembering that the just, sustainable society we must build can only come about when we work together.

May we recognize that there will be no collective liberation as long as any form of racism—including antisemitism-- persists.

May we stay in the fight, even when we want to flee.

May we, like Abraham, judge each individual by her own merits, and may we remember that even a few good people can transform even the most corrupt environment.

May we continue to stretch open the conversation, even when our hearts want to close.

May we find a way to work, build and dream, together.