

ikar|עיקר 
THE TEARS OF ZION

*Israel is barreling toward an unrecognizable future.
Let us not sleep through the revolution.*

February 4th, 2023 — Parashat B'shallah – Rabbi Sharon Brous

I have to say some things today that I know will upset some of you. I don't like upsetting people, and I especially don't like upsetting people I love. So, I hope you understand that everything that I say today comes from the deepest wellspring of love in my heart.

I spoke this week with a very dear friend of mine in Israel. She was born and raised in Jerusalem. She was at the protests last Saturday night, when 100,000 Israelis took to the streets as they have every *motzei Shabbat*, every Saturday night, for the past several weeks, protesting Israel's new government—an anti-democratic, ultra nationalist regime. My friend, like so many people in Israel, has been living with an increased sense of fear and concern, shame and dread as people once deemed so extreme that they weren't even permitted to serve in the IDF or form an official political party are now solidly in the mainstream.

My friend is at the protest, and she's listening to the speakers. It's a lot like the feeling in our country after the election that awakened many of us to the imminent danger to our democracy... it feels like a national *shiva*. But then my friend looks over and she sees her parents not far away, participating in the protest. She's stunned... her parents are hardly activists. They were born with the state. Her father was an IDF commander in two wars. Her brother died as a soldier in the army. *Ein lehem erez aheret*. They have no other home. No other loyalty but to Zion.

My friend weaves her way through the crowd. She approaches her folks, and sees that they're weeping. "These are the tears of Zion," they say.

Aside from the young people in the street these last several weeks, aside from the *high tekkim* and the *smolanim* and all the activists, there's a whole generation in Israel that is mourning today. These are the ones who dedicated themselves to building the state—so precious, so beautiful, so fragile. And they see what they've built being transformed before their eyes into something utterly unrecognizable.

But over on this side of the sea, it's a bit of a different story, isn't it?

Even the great awakening among our family in Israel has failed to shake the American Jewish community from our Israel-slumber.

It's true: some of us have made public statements declaring that we will not welcome into our synagogues, our institutions or our schools any representative of this regime. We've seen progressive organizations like the New Israel Fund, Truah, J Street and some others offer strong denunciations. There have been some powerful op eds. There was a pro-democracy Israel protest in New York City last shabbat. (I wish it had been after shabbat, so more people could have participated.)

But still, what we've mostly heard over the last couple of months has been a chorus of tepid voices praising Israel's vibrant democracy and promising that they look forward to working with the new government, even as some offer careful, cloaked expressions of concern about "past statements of some members of the governing coalition." We've seen a lot of *Let's wait and see. Let's not jump to conclusions. Let's not be alarmist.*

In his commencement address at Oberlin in 1965, Dr. King told the story of Rip Van Winkle. You know that I love this story. Here's what Dr. King said:

"The thing that we usually remember about the story of Rip Van Winkle is that Rip slept for 20 years. But there's another point in the story that is almost always completely overlooked. It was a sign on the inn in the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountain for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. By the time he came down, 20 years later, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first President of the United States. It's not that Rip slept for 20 years that's interesting. It's that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up on the mountain," Dr. King said, "a great revolution was taking place in the world. Indeed, a revolution which would at points change the course of history. And Rip Van Winkle knew nothing about it because he was asleep."

Dr. King closes the story by warning: "there are all too many people who, in some great period of social change, failed to achieve the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands. And there is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution."

I want you to hear me. There is a revolution that is happening, and this moment demands an awakening on both sides of the sea, an honest reckoning.

I understand the fear that prevents that kind of conversation from taking place here in our American Jewish community. We who know Jewish history and believe not only in the legitimacy, but in the necessity of a Jewish state, we who see the rise of violent antisemitism in this country and around the world, the shift from marginalized voices to the mainstream before our eyes, we who remember how the world failed to protect our own people again and again when we were stateless and powerless, we who believe in the vision of a state that is both Jewish and democratic as envisioned in the Declaration of the Establishment of that State, we who understand the fragility of this beautiful, miraculous, complicated dream... we don't want to fuel those who would do us harm. I never, ever want to say a word from this pulpit over here that will fan the flames that could endanger the lives, God forbid, of my nieces and nephews over there.

And yet, I know that Dr. King was right, that there is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution. And a revolution is happening today, one that demands a new mental outlook, a new language, a new discourse. I know that there is great resistance among our American Jewish community to opening our hearts and minds to a new approach, and yet we must. For the love of Zion, we must.

Awakening to the revolution means—in the language of my friend Leibel Fein, from the early 1990s—*smashing some idols*. It means being a kind of honest that will make us all uncomfortable. It means walking into the future with hearts that are broken and simultaneously hopeful.

Today, there are four idols that we need to smash.

First, the myth of the past discontinuous. *This is not who we are! This is an anomaly.* Some of Israel's self-appointed chief thought leaders would like us to imagine that this illiberal, ultra nationalist regime emerged ex nihilo. This government, with its overt racism and homophobia, with its commitment to gutting the judiciary and undermining the High Court of Justice, traditionally the great defender against human rights abuses, these ministers, with their promise to annex the West Bank and rule permanently over millions of Palestinian people, depriving them of basic rights and dignities. These leaders who speak non-metaphorically of the Third Temple.

But this didn't come from nowhere. What we are witnessing today is only the natural next step in the march toward illiberalism, ultra-nationalism and extremism that is taking place around the world and has been building in the State of Israel now for decades.

The march toward illiberalism began when we—victims of vicious, genocidal racial hatred—got comfortable with the language of *us* and *them*:

We love life. *They* worship at the altar of death.

The only language *they* understand is force.

We will only have peace when *they* love their children as much as they hate *ours*.

The march progressed when we—we who care about every baby caught under the rubble after an earthquake in Nepal, failed to bring ourselves to shed a single tear for a Palestinian baby caught under the rubble of an apartment building in Gaza.

It progressed when we whose Torah demands 36 times that we not oppress the stranger, that we legislate equal justice for the stranger, that we love the stranger, found ways to twist ourselves into halakhic contortions to explain how those sacred principles simply don't apply now that we wield the power of a sovereign state, with millions of human beings living under the control of that state.

No, this government is not an electoral accident, and it is not an anomaly. This moment of extremism has been a long time in the making and *our silence has made us complicit*.

Second, we must counter the myth that there's no such thing as Jewish supremacy.

About a half a decade ago, I started to notice the words "Jewish supremacists" migrating from neo-Nazis and KKK members into my own racial justice circles. I bristled. I challenged. I argued. Yes, there's always been a small, fringe group of Jews ideologically committed to the notion that Jewish people are fundamentally deserving of privilege and status over others. But this was a marginal group, and the attacks, even the use of the language of Jewish supremacy, felt overtly antisemitic. It felt dangerous, intellectually lazy, and morally irresponsible. An attempt not only to misrepresent, but to map a charged American rhetoric on to a complicated, vastly different political reality in Israel.

Some years passed, and now what was in fact a fringe group of Jewish supremacists has fully stepped into the mainstream. These most visible adherents of Jewish supremacist ideology are now not hiding in the dark corners of the internet or whispering in the back of shul. They now hold the most powerful ministerial positions in the government. As painful as it is, we must affirm that Jewish supremacy poses a real and present danger to the Jewish State and to the Jewish people.

Pretending that Jewish supremacy doesn't exist, or that anyone who names it is definitionally antisemitic, is as disingenuous and morally bankrupt as banning AP African-American studies. It doesn't make the history not true. It just makes us complicit in the lie that tries to hide it.

Third, we must lay to rest the often-repeated trope: *there is no moral equivalency*.

Last Shabbat, a young Palestinian man approached a synagogue in Neve Yaakov, and murdered seven Jews as they walked out of shul on their way home to Shabbat dinner. This is a devastating, unjustifiable act of violence that was perpetrated against our family.

And, it came at the end of a month in which 35 Palestinians were killed either by settler violence or IDF raids in the West Bank. Six of those killed were children. One was a 61-year-old woman.

The perpetrator of the Neve Yaakov shooting, maybe you heard, was the grandson of a Palestinian man who had been murdered a decade ago by a Jewish extremist. That Jewish extremist *was never charged* for the crime because his lawyer, a young man named Itamar Ben-Gvir, was able to get him off scot-free. Today, the grandchild of the murdered man is now a mass murderer. And Itamar Ben-Gvir is Israel's National Security Minister, the person who authorized the bulldozing of the home of last week's gunmen, the man who called for the death penalty for all terrorists, even as he himself kept a framed picture of Baruch Goldstein in his home office for many years.

Again and again, whenever there are acts of violence against Palestinians, when we learn that a thousand people died in the Gaza War, or 35 Palestinians died in the West Bank in the month of January, we are told that *there is no moral equivalency*. They, we hear, are targeting civilians, while *we* do everything in our power to avoid killing civilians.

Friends, this language, this logic lets us off the hook. It is the ultimate excuse to fail to interrogate why so many people are dying. And it numbs us to the immense pain and suffering that our neighbors are experiencing. I don't ever want to hear again that there is no moral equivalency. Instead, I want to see a real moral reckoning.

And just to be clear, I am not saying that any two acts of violence are necessarily morally equal. But I don't accept the excuse that we need not interrogate all actions openly and honestly.

Finally, for years, we have quietly accepted a false and dangerous binary that a person must either be pro-Israel or pro-Palestine. We have been taught that the mark of Jewish commitment is loyalty to the Jewish state, and this requires full throated support of even policies and practices that are antithetical to our own deeply held Jewish and democratic values. We are expected to mute any criticism, to hide our grief and to shun those who speak out. When we fail to comply with this script, we are called traitors. We are viciously vilified. Sometimes we're fired or our lives are threatened.

But here's the truth: *there's only one future. It is a shared future.*

If you care about the future of Israel, and I hope you do, then you must care about the future of Palestine.

If you are invested in Jewish people thriving and flourishing, and I hope you are, you must care about Palestinian people thriving and flourishing.

This is a mental shift, one that we all must make—not only because we fear that our kids are going to get harassed on college campuses, not only because we fear that periodically some gunman is going to show up at a synagogue and raise holy hell, but also because the status quo is not just unsustainable, but it's morally wrong. It's un-Jewish, and it is undemocratic. Our history and our Torah demand more of us.

In his book *In the Land of Israel*, Amos Oz writes the story of a drowning man who sees a plank of wood before him. The drowning man is allowed—by all the rules of natural, objective, universal justice—to make room for himself on the plank, even if doing so means he must push another aside a little bit. But that drowning man has no right to push another off the plank and into the sea.

Imagine those two people, both desperately trying not to drown. Forced to share one small plank of wood. Neither has the right to kick the other off. Neither has an *eretz aheret*. Neither has anywhere else to go, despite all the fantasies that the Jews will one day pick up and move to Brooklyn, and despite all the fantasies that the Palestinians will somehow become absorbed into Jordan. Neither people is going anywhere.

If you're feeling helpless about what's unfolding over there, there is one way forward. We must follow the lead of Israelis and Palestinians in the streets who are speaking a language of shared destiny. They reject the false binaries of pro-Israel, anti-Israel, pro-Palestine.

Each of these four ideas requires not only a shift in language, but a shift in mindset:

Where we are today is the natural outcome of the messianic fervor of a movement that has grown over many decades.

There is a dangerous ascendant force of Jewish supremacy in our community, and we must fight it with all our might, or we will lose everything.

When we hide behind the guise of *no moral equivalency*, we fail to interrogate our own behavior and we numb our hearts to other people's suffering.

And the safety, security and flourishing of Israeli Jews—and arguably our own safety, security and flourishing as Diaspora Jews—is fully dependent on the safety, security and flourishing of the Palestinian people.

This is the alternative to the cancer of Jewish supremacy: the affirmation that Israel is the Jewish homeland. But it's not a homeland exclusively for Jews. The affirmation that Palestinians have lived in that land for centuries, and we'll continue to live in that land as our neighbors. The commitment to full political and social and economic equality for Arab citizens of Israel. The acknowledgment that our great miracle, the establishment of the State of Israel, was, for our neighbors, a Nakba. A destruction that is ongoing, a displacement that has led to incredible pain and heartache.

600,000 Israelite men left enslavement in Egypt. Including women, children and the *erev rav*—the mixed multitude of Egyptians who threw up their hands and said, “I've had it with this regime!”—there were probably two million who left Egypt in our story. Two million people stood at the edge of the sea.

The distance that they had to cross was several miles, some say between four and six miles. The width of the passage between the two walls of water that by miracle stood to their right and to their left was about half a mile. Imagine two million people pushing through a half a mile wide passage.

There's a reason that in our tradition, the crossing of the Red Sea is called the birth moment of the Jewish people, and the sea is likened to a birth canal.

I'm reminded of the words of my friend Valarie Kaur, who said on New Year's Eve, just before Trump's inauguration, that we must ask ourselves: *is this the darkness of the tomb or is this the darkness of the womb?* What awaits us on the other side? Is it the death cult of triumphalist messianism, which will lead us to our own demise while enacting profound human suffering on the other? Or are we passing through the birth canal, and once we withstand all the pains of labor, we'll be born into a new reality? We'll finally realize who we are in the world, and be fueled by the shared dream that we, every one of us, can do our part in building a shared future for our people and for our neighbors... *who are also our people.*

Many of us feel helpless today. Our instinct may be to sleep through this whole mess.

But our great birth story, in the Book of Exodus, began with two brave women, Shifra and Puah, the midwives of the liberation struggle of our ancestors, in an act of righteous defiance. I believe that we are being called to step into the role of Shifra and Puah. We are called to help midwife this revolution: to stand to the left and to the right of our Israeli and Palestinian friends, to amplify their voices and their calls for a just and equal society, to remind them to breathe and push, breathe and push, and then to stand with them on the other side, joining hands and singing together a song of freedom, liberation, love and justice.

That is the call of our time. May the tears of Zion nurture the soil so that triumphant song can one day emerge.

Shabbat shalom.