

LOVING OURSELVES TO DEATH: THE PERILS OF DENIALISM

*Only when we confront the challenges—honestly and lovingly...
when we open our eyes and our hearts, will new paradigms of possibility emerge.*
Yom Kippur

Denial, they say, ain't just a river in Egypt.

I recently read that “The mind doesn’t follow the facts.” Confirmation bias leads us to ignore evidence that challenges or contradicts our beliefs, and as a result, it’s nearly impossible to convince someone of something he doesn’t want to hear.¹

So the likelihood is that hearing a sermon that challenges our views will not change our minds, even if we’re here because, on some level, we yearn for change. As Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai once said, when wrestling with whether or not to speak publicly about a particularly fraught communal issue: **אוי לי אם לא אומר** -- *Woe unto me if I speak, and woe unto me if I stay silent* (Bava Batra 89b). He chose to speak, and I will too—in the hopes that I’ve earned enough good will over the past many years that you know my heart and my intentions. (And woe unto me if I anger my hungry congregation today.)

Let’s start with the easy stuff.

Maybe you saw the video of an 11-year-old girl in Colorado Springs standing up at her senator’s town hall in August, begging him to initiate a climate solutions caucus in the Senate. To her Senator, a well-known climate denier, she said: “You have to act now. If the carbon polluters money is holding you back, I can organize kids and adults [to raise] money. We can use social media and grassroots. If all you need is more information, I can come visit the energy committee and do a PowerPoint for you.” At around the same time, at a town hall for a Utah congressman, a 10-year old girl from Salt Lake City stood up and said: “Do you believe in science? Because I do.”²

There is an absurdity to national policy being shaped based on a resistance to empirical fact. It is farcical for children to have to remind grown-ups, especially those charged with creating the legislation to protect this nation and its people, that science is real.

And yet, our country’s stubborn dependence on fossil fuels has led to a fierce denialism, one that has quashed the national climate conversation over the past many decades. This, despite freak weather patterns effecting us daily—hurricanes, droughts, wildfires—and despite the overwhelming scientific consensus that climate-warming trends over the past century are clearly due to human activities.³ And we know it’s going to get worse, with climate scientists warning that “record-breaking global temperatures and a stunning decline in sea ice... will cause catastrophic changes to Earth’s ecosystems

¹ <https://heleo.com/facts-dont-change-peoples-minds-heres/16242/>.

² <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2017/08/teenagers-keep-going-to-town-halls-and-owning-republicans-and-its-amazing/>.

³ <https://climate.nasa.gov/>.

and wreak havoc on human populations, including famine, mass migration, and war.”⁴ We also know that developing countries, low-income communities and communities of color will feel the effects of climate change disproportionately.

If the scientific consensus is clear, and the damage of inaction will be calamitous, why do we see senators and representatives so insistent on ignoring reality that they’ll stumble over their own two feet to frantically exit stage left when elementary school students confront them with the truth? Why, when the outcome is nothing short of *catastrophic*, do we insist on playing political football with this issue?

And speaking of football...

I know, you love your football. And as of this past Sunday, I now kind of consider myself a football fan as well. I have been warned by many of you (including some of my closest relatives) never to speak about the prevalence in football players of brain damage linked to repeated blows to the head—CTE—because people *really* don’t want to hear about it. But the fact that we don’t want to hear about it doesn’t mean it’s not happening.

A neuropathologist recently examined the brains of 202 deceased football players, finding CTE in *all but one* who played in the NFL. This is no joke. CTE is a degenerative disease that causes memory loss, depression and dementia, and often leads to overdoses of pain medication, and even suicide.⁵ Yet for years, even as evidence has accumulated that former players are exhibiting signs of brain damage, the NFL, its advertisers and many fans remain in active denial.⁶

It’s easy for the Jewish community to talk about climate change; we tend to have a healthy respect for science. It’s a little harder to talk about football, and now even harder than before, as NFL players are literally standing on the front lines of the battle for racial justice.

But today is the day for the hardest conversations, is it not? Isn’t that the challenge of Yom Kippur: to press pause on our lives one day a year so that we can do the critical work, look at the hard edges and see where the healing might come? So can we not also acknowledge today—because it’s Yom Kippur and this is what we’re here to do—that the very same self-destructive denialism has permeated Jewish public and political discourse on Israel?

אומר לי אם אומר אוי לי אם לא אומר-- *Woe unto me if I speak, and woe unto me if I stay silent.*

Don’t leave the room. Please. This conversation is always hard, and harder than usual this week, after three Israelis were killed in a terrorist attack a few days ago. My heart is with their grieving families, who enter Yom Kippur this year bereft. And my heart is also with my many Israeli friends and family—some with us here today—kind, soulful, wise and patient people who work and fight every day to bring more love and light to the world.

It’s probably because of my deep love of Israel and its people that I *really don’t* want to talk about this. I’d much rather talk about climate change. Or football. Or, if we’re talking about Israel, I’d much rather talk about the work of IsraAID—real Israeli heroes—Jewish and Arab—who put themselves in grave

⁴ This, according to the Pentagon’s 2014 Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/02/the-new-rhetoric-of-climate-denial/516198/>

⁵ https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/07/25/sports/football/nfl-cte.html?mcubz=0&_r=0

⁶ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/nfl-board-paid-2m-to-players-while-league-denied-football-concussion-link/>

danger bringing desperately needed humanitarian aid to the hardest hit regions in the world. (Their director came to speak at IKAR a couple of weeks ago.) I want to talk about Save a Child's Heart and pluralistic yeshivot and the many extraordinary NGOs working to transform Israeli society. I want to talk about the Jerusalem shuk at night and the *Tahana* and the *tehina*. And Startup Nation, and breathtaking Israeli advances in science, technology and medicine. Maybe next year I'll be able to do that. But this year, 50 years since 1967, I'm worried sick for Israel's soul and its future, and I can see no way to avoid this conversation.

How has denialism shaped Jewish communal discourse on Israel?

In 2003, something stunning happened. Ariel Sharon, hawkish Prime Minister of Israel, said: "You may not like the word, but what is happening is *kibush*—occupation. To hold [several] million Palestinians under occupation—I believe that is a terrible thing, for Israel and for the Palestinians." After 36 years of occupation, Ariel Sharon of all people insisted that we speak honestly and unflinchingly about the reality of life under the Occupation, some of which I witnessed firsthand this summer. I went on an Encounter trip, a four-day intensive in the Palestinian Territories with a group of American Jewish leaders: educators, organizational heads and rabbis (Reform, Conservative and Orthodox). The goal of the trip was simply to give us an opportunity to hear from Palestinians and be exposed to the reality of their lives. This was a challenging and in many ways painful trip, as I saw how the Occupation Sharon was warning us about continues to affect nearly every aspect of the lives of Palestinians: from access to water to the rights of citizenship (they don't vote in Israeli elections), to the fact that they often cannot get from one Palestinian city to another without crossing through Israeli checkpoints, which can range from a nuisance to a profound humiliation, depending on the day. For Palestinians living in East Jerusalem or other areas under Israeli control, we heard about how they can't get permits to build additions to their homes, and how sometimes—as we saw just a few weeks ago—their schools are demolished the day before the school year begins.

We're all well versed in the justifications for this reality: the real security needs evidenced by the ongoing threat of terror, and the failure of the Palestinian leadership to accept a peace deal when Israel has repeatedly attempted to achieve one. There is truth to both of these arguments, but it's not the whole truth. The thing we don't like to admit, the heart of our community's denial, is that beyond real security concerns and failed peace efforts, the settlement enterprise is *the driving force* of the reality in the West Bank. Several hundred thousand Jewish Israelis now live in that territory—with full rights of Israeli citizenship—amongst 2.3 million Palestinians who do not share those rights. The settlements are supported by an extensive infrastructure—what some call a matrix of control—established to preserve and expand their presence. This effort is fueled by messianic and nationalistic aspirations shared neither by the majority of Israeli or diaspora Jews.

What ought we—American Jews—do when Israel's right wing ultra-nationalist government pursues policies based on aspirations we don't share and values we can't abide? Today, a decade and a half after Ariel Sharon's declaration, those who are troubled by the growing dissonance between our Jewish values—human dignity, justice, compassion—and the actions of Israel's right-wing government are lambasted, shamed, threatened and sometimes fired. Woe unto us if we talk about what appears in plain sight to anyone who looks. One Orthodox rabbi, after recently visiting Hebron, wrote that his challenge was to figure out how to return to his congregation and talk about the Occupation without

mentioning the word Occupation.⁷ Our American Jewish community is wedded to a strict denialist script, and anyone who breaches the established protocol—even if she speaks from a desperate love and concern for Israel—is seen as an enemy of state. “Blood on your hands,” they say. “Kapo whore.” “Judenrat.” (All of which I’ve been called just in the past 48 hours.)

This is evidenced most recently by the witch hunt against my friend Professor David Myers, accused of being a radical anti-Israel leftist, despite his years of dedication to the Jewish people and the State of Israel and despite his opposition to BDS. As Yehuda Kurtzer wrote last year, “Our community is ailing, and its primary symptom is the toxic shock resulting from the ongoing vilifying of the best of our leaders with accusations of insufficient loyalty to the Jewish people, based on crude interpretations of their politics.”⁸

It’s when you realize that it’s as treacherous for a Jewish leader to speak publicly about the Occupation as it is for a Republican Presidential candidate to broach greenhouse gas emissions that you see that the Occupation is the Jewish climate change. This is our CTE.

I find it strange, in a community that so prides itself on debate and dissent, that ideas like dignity and equality can be considered so threatening. That a community that holds up *tokheha*—loving rebuke—as a central and affirmative obligation, would so mercilessly savage its justices, journalists, rabbis, academics and activists who challenge or even question the ultra-nationalist agenda. Is that who we are as a people now?

I understand: we don’t want to say anything that might jeopardize or endanger Israel, especially when ISIS is on the border and Iran remains a serious threat. We don’t want to add fuel to the fire of those predisposed to hate Israel, those who single out Israel for opprobrium on the world stage, who treat Israel like a rogue state, irredeemable and illegitimate, all while ignoring gross abuses of human rights from other state actors. But do we not understand the danger of our silence? When we remove ourselves from an honest, self-reflective assessment of Israeli policy (compounded over decades) and only react with defensive outrage to each and every criticism, we create a dangerous and potentially destructive vacuum in which the conversation is framed by only the most extreme voices.

One of the folks our Encounter group heard from is a Palestinian-American businessman named Sam Bahour, who moved from Ohio to Ramallah years ago, and built a large and successful telecommunications company there. He shared the daily challenges of Palestinian life, including having his US passport invalidated by Israeli authorities and suffering the indignities of passing through Qalandiya checkpoint every time he has a business meeting in Jerusalem.

As we were leaving Ramallah, someone asked Sam what we can do to help. “Be JEWISH,” he said. “Don’t leave your Jewish hearts on the plane when you land at Ben Gurion Airport.” I can’t get that line out of my head. After 2000 years of profound, collective, psyche-shaping trauma, Zionism was a chance for Jews to reclaim our humanity. Our agency. The Zionist dream was to build a strong, secure, Jewish State in which a Jew could defend himself and his family and *be Jewish*—live out his Jewish values—on the public stage. And we’ve gotten so much right. But whether we talk about it out loud or not, the current

⁷ <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/1.799419>

⁸ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-the-witch-hunts/>

reality—resulting from years of Israeli policy—is antithetical to the teachings of our tradition and irreconcilable with both our Judaism *and* our Zionism.

Denialism is as pervasive as it is pernicious. While it's not easy to honestly discuss systemic failures in Israel or in the US, which we talked about on [Rosh Hashanah](#), there is something even more personal and even more agonizing: the denialism that permeates our homes and sometimes tears at the very fabric of our families.

We talk a lot on Yom Kippur about our culture's most prevalent form of denial: the denial of death. The way that we develop elaborate mechanisms to avoid thinking about how close we—and our loved ones—may be to the end. The way that we fill our lives with trivialities—inconsequential conflicts, irrelevant distractions—as if we'll live forever. We do it with illness too, papering over a family member's addiction, eating disorder or mental illness, desperately avoiding talking about what's happening. Some things are just too painful to talk about.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells a story about a patient she had when she was a first-year doctor: a 15-year-old girl name Gloria who had terminal leukemia. Hospital policy at that time was not to discuss the illness or prognosis with a patient without the parents' permission, and while Gloria was clearly dying, the parents were emphatic that she not be told. Even as her condition worsened, the door of honest communication had been sealed shut—for all the right reasons. Her parents didn't want her to suffer more, to live her last days in terror, to feel psychic pain on top of all her physical pain. There was a wall of silence between patient and doctor as Remen cared for Gloria but avoided speaking with her... until one night, when Gloria asked her pointblank: "Dr. Remen, am I dying?" "When I reached for the professional words of denial they just wouldn't come," Remen wrote, years later. Instead, she explained that they were doing everything they could, but if the cancer continued to grow, she might die. Gloria closed her eyes and said that she already knew it, but didn't want to tell her parents, because she knew they couldn't bear it. For the next several weeks, Gloria feverishly engaged Remen, asking endless questions about death and dying: will it hurt? Could life go on after death? Finally, when it was clear that Gloria was in her last days, Remen encouraged her to talk to her parents, all the while afraid she'd get fired for violating hospital protocol. Gloria spoke with her parents, they cried, they laughed, they even planned her funeral. And after she breathed her last breath, with them all by her side, Gloria's parents turned to Dr. Remen and simply said, "Thank you."⁹

אוי לנו אם אומרים אוי לנו אם לא אומרים - *Woe unto us if we speak, and woe unto us if we stay silent.*

A recent episode of Hidden Brain explored a form of denialism known as Information Aversion or the Ostrich Effect. An old theory of economics says that we should always be willing to learn as much as possible, particularly about our finances or our health. "Less is never more when it comes to information." And yet, studies show that when people perceive that the information will be anxiety provoking or depressing, we go out of our way not to hear it. It's called the Ostrich Effect because we'd rather put our heads in the sand than confront uncomfortable truths.

The Ostrich Effect can be deadly. On a college campus, researchers found that a significant percentage of students actually paid to *not* receive the results of their Herpes tests. They simply didn't want to know. Counter intuitive as it is, another study found that when a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, it dramatically reduces the likelihood that her female coworkers will get mammograms for the

⁹ Rachel Naomi Remen, [Kitchen Table Wisdom](#), p. 119.

next 1-2 years. Our brains are hard-wired to avoid information that's painful or scary, so we actively shut out what we don't want to hear.

I think this is why Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was reluctant to speak. The people couldn't hear him anyway—they had a brain block against taking in what they didn't want to hear. So why talk about it? It will only make them angry with you, and it may even feed their enemies, the ones looking for any way to harm the community. I can relate to his reticence.

Denial is the unrealistic hope that a problem isn't really happening, or that, if ignored, it will go away on its own. But while denial may distract us, or divert our attention, it doesn't stop the icebergs from melting, it doesn't keep the settlements from expanding, and it doesn't magically make our loved one well. It doesn't actually make the problem go away—it only leaves us ill-equipped to address it honestly, lovingly and proactively.

Maybe that's why it's so painfully ironic that it's often the most strident supporters, those who have the most to lose, who are most guilty of denialism.

It is, after all, elected officials from Florida and Texas—whose cities were underwater last month—who are among the least willing to admit, let alone take political action to address climate change. It's the most passionate fans of football who refuse to acknowledge, let alone demand action, to reduce the risks of the sport to their beloved athletes on the field. It's the proudest and most ardent supporters of Israel who are least likely to talk about the devastating impact of years of anti-democratic and frankly un-Jewish policy in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. And of course, in our families, we engage in denialist acrobatics not out of cruelty or ignorance, but to protect the people we love most from the hurt, shame or pain we fear they'll suffer were we to face the truth.

Call it the perils of loving something too much.

The turning point moment of Moses's life was when he grew up and went out of the palace to his brethren, the enslaved Israelites. וַיֵּגְדֵל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו. He must have known what was happening just beyond the palace gates his whole childhood; he must have heard the cries of the slaves and witnessed their suffering. But he was in denial. Didn't want to know. Recognizing the cruelty of slavery would have made everyone he loved complicit: his Egyptian mother, Pharaoh, the whole Egyptian court. He, himself, would have been implicated. He simply couldn't see it, until he grew up and went out. And then he saw. The verb "to see" is repeated: וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֶּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו—he sees the Israelites suffer, and then he sees again, this time witnessing an Egyptian strike one of his Hebrew brothers (Exodus 2:11). The first act of seeing opens his eyes, the second, his heart.¹⁰ It is then that he can no longer deny it. And that's the moment that changes everything. This realization for Moses is excruciating, but it's also what saves his life and brings about the redemption of our people.

You see, *there is another way*—a way of wakefulness, honesty and compassion. It requires a willingness to expose the vulnerabilities and to fight through the discomfort and shame. It also demands of us that we give up some of the righteousness that comes with the victim narratives that feed our denial. It requires a willingness to see—with our eyes, and then with our hearts—at precisely the moment we want to put up a giant protective wall around our hearts. It's entirely counter instinctual and often very painful, but it does offer us a way forward.

¹⁰ See Rashi, Ex 2:11.

Because our Jewish community's denialism around Israel-Palestine is so deeply rooted, because the stakes are so high and this conflict seems so impenetrable, I want to close by sharing a story of one person who was able to break through the denial, to see with her eyes and with her heart, to begin to engage differently.

My friend Yakir Englander, a professor of philosophy who spoke at IKAR in the spring, grew up in a Hasidic Israeli family. His mother was the daughter of Holocaust survivors. His grandparents were forced to watch as the Nazis murdered their parents and their newborn son. After the war, his grandmother never hung laundry since the images evoked her parents' hanging. And even many years later, she never once hugged her children.

As a teenager, Yakir left the Hasidic world. To his family's consternation, he became interested in interfaith dialogue and nonviolent social change. He writes about a life-changing experience that occurred a few years ago when he received an award for his work with Kids4Peace and his Hasidic Israeli parents surprisingly decided to attend the award ceremony. "Not unexpectedly," Yakir remembers, "they sat on the other side of the hall from where my Palestinian friends sat."

In my talk, I spoke about how my Hasidic theology helps me in my peace work. My parents were so excited to hear that everything I do is because of them, that at the end of the ceremony, my mom came to say hello to my Palestinian friends—my other family. One of our directors, a Muslim woman wearing a *hijab*, hugged my mom. I saw the face of my mother become totally white, since subconsciously she was sure that this Muslim woman was about to put a knife in her back. When she saw that she just got a warm hug, she had tears—remember, she was never hugged by her own mother. This Muslim woman told my mom that I am like a brother to her, and my mother replied that this means that she (the Palestinian Muslim lady) is also her child.

Several months later, at a Shabbat dinner with his family, one of Yakir's relatives began ranting about "dirty Arabs." Yakir watched in amazement as his mother stood up, pounded the table and shouted: "How dare you? Don't you believe that they too have the image of God? Did you ever speak with the Palestinians? I hugged them with my body and saw how many lies I was told all of my life."

"Since that night," Yakir writes, "no one can speak even one bad word against Palestinians and Muslims in my family."¹¹

I'm afraid that in our silence, in our denialism, American Jews have become complicit in the erosion and undermining of the very things we love and the very values we hold dear. We have failed to advance critical, even lifesaving conversations; instead, like ostriches, we've tried to will away the reality.

I don't blame us for the denialism. We did it for love.

But I believe that same love is strong enough to help us face the truth. I hope that this year we'll find the courage to talk about it, even with people who don't want to hear what we have to say. To affirm, with love and conviction, that only when we honestly confront the real challenges, only when we open our eyes *and* our hearts will we be able to see what we couldn't see before. I pray that our love will guide us as we work to create new paradigms of possibility for ourselves, our families, Israel, this country and the world this year.

¹¹ <https://www.juancole.com/2014/07/israel-palestine-root.html>