

This.Is.Not.Normal.

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Rabbi Sharon Brous

To my daughter on her bat mitzvah in a time of moral crisis for our nation: Practice resistance. Step up. Speak out. Live not from callous political calculations but from deepest moral commitments. Remember that this is not normal.

We are a people that makes sense out of chaos through telling stories.

Here's a story from Rabbi Nachman that I learned many years ago, which I have heard several colleagues cite this past week:

A king once told his prime minister, who was also his good friend: "I see in the stars that everyone who eats from this year's grain harvest is going to go mad. What do you think we should do?"

The prime minister suggested they should put aside a stock of good grain so they would not have to eat from the tainted grain.

"But it will be impossible to set aside enough good grain for everyone," the king objected. "And if we put away a stock for just the two of us, we will be the only ones who will be sane. Everyone else will be mad, and they will look at us and think that we are the mad ones.

"No. We too will have to eat from this year's grain. But we will both put a sign on our heads. I will look at your forehead, and you will look at mine. And when we see the sign, at least we will remember that we are mad."

Rabbi Nahman, "Tainted Grain," Sipurim Niflaim

I can see why this story resonates for so many today. It truly seems that the world has gone mad, and I can understand why some would conclude that the only way to survive is to go mad with it. And what would that really mean? Either that we'd have to 1) hold our breath and play along; or 2) pretend things aren't as mad or bad as they seem.

I hate this story.

I want to talk today about why we cannot, why we must not eat the tainted grain in days and weeks ahead.

As we try to wrap our heads around our new reality, which defied the predictions of everyone from our political leadership to our faith leaders and non-profit leaders to journalists to regular

citizens, we need to determine how best to respond. Some are choosing to pacify. "Congratulations on your victory," some leaders are saying. "We appreciate the conciliatory tone of your acceptance speech and look forward to working with you."

Others are getting to work.

The ADL (Anti-Defamation League)-- hardly mouthpiece of the left-- put out statement this week criticizing the choice of an alt-right/ white supremacist purveyor of racist, Islamophobic and anti-Semitic propaganda as chief strategist in White House. The response from some in the Jewish community was harsh: "The ADL has put itself potentially in a compromising position going forward, in terms of its ability to interact with the incoming administration," they said.

Their concern? The ADL jeopardized its standing with the incoming administration. As if the purpose of the ADL or any civil rights organization or any faith leader or journalist is to curry favor with those in power, rather than stay honest and speak truth to those who misuse power.

Eva, you have been so taken by the story of Abraham, challenging God about the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah. Where does a person get that kind of hutzpah?

יח ואברָהָם הָיוּ יְהִיָּה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְעַצּוֹם וְנִבְרָכוּ-בּוֹ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ: יֵט כִּי יִדְעֹתַי לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוָה אֶת-בְּנָיו וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשִׁמְרוּ דְרָוֹה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבִּיֵא ה' עַל-אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר עִלָּיו: כּוּ וַיֵּאמֶר ה' זַעֲקֵת סֹדִם וְעַמֹּרָה כִּי-רַבָּה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כִבְדָה מְאֹד: כֹּה אֶרְדֶּה-נָּא וְאַרְאֶה הַכְּצַעֲקוֹתָה הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ | כֹּלָה וְאִם-לֹא אִדְעָה: כּוּ וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֹמָה וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדֵנוּ עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי ה': כּוּ וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֵּאמֶר הָאֵלֹהִים תִּסְפָּה צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע: כּוּ אוֹלָלִי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הָאֵלֹהִים תִּסְפָּה וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא לְמִקְוִים לְמַעַן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְדִיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּה: כּוּ חֲלָלָה לָךְ מַעֲשֵׂת | כִּדְבַר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כִּצְדִיק כִּרְשָׁע חֲלָלָה לָךְ הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא מַעֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

And the Lord said: Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very serious, I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry which has come to me. If not, I will know. And the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. And Abraham drew near and said: Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are only fifty righteous inside the city. Will You also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous are treated just like the wicked. Far be it from you. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?

Gen 18:20-25

Look closely at what happened: Abraham and the three angels/ men hear God's designs on Sodom and Gemorrah, cities full of evil people. The punishment is severe, but the three men nod and carry on their way. **וַיִּפְּנוּ מִשָּׁם הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּלְכוּ סְדֹמָה**. They acquiesce. Maybe they are uncomfortable with the decree, we don't know. But they go along, walking toward Sodom to do as they are told. They are, after all, just following orders.

But not Abraham. **וְאַבְרָהָם עֹדֵנוּ עֹמֵד לִפְנֵי ה'**. This is a man who refuses to eat the tainted grain,

who refuses to sacrifice his moral intuition, even when everything is at stake.

Abraham is not the target of this decree. His wife, his home, his wealth will all be intact when Sodom and Gemorrah burn. But even still, he insists that the world be fair and God be just. He will risk everything-- everything-- to fight for it. Everyone else nods consent to the decree; Abraham stands in protest. He knows that he may not win, but he cannot go home and watch Sunday Night Football and pretend this isn't happening to his neighbors.

What does it mean that our tradition has transmitted this story for generations? Why has this story sustained thousands of years? Our Rabbis know that we will be tempted to eat the tainted grain. To quiet the intuition and play along. Even angels sometimes are.

But we, we must resist.

Eva, I have been thinking for about two years about what to say to you at your bat mitzvah. I decided that I'd tell you about what happened in the spring of 2004, when you were just six months old. The world was on fire, and I picked up book by Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. He shared two competing visions of the world in the year 2020:

First... 2020. *Dawn breaks on a world of global prosperity and peace.* Somehow we manage to harness technology and medicine and in the space of only 20 years, we have put an end starvation, improved education worldwide, and ended the spread of preventable diseases. No more sweatshops, child labor, inequity, exploitation. Humanity is in midst of new golden age.

And the second vision... The time: 2020. Coordinated terrorist attacks rock NYC, London, Paris, Munich, Rome. Government collapses in Africa have left the continent reeling from vicious wars. Revolutions across the Middle East have left the region dominated by fundamentalist regimes. The global economy is in a state of collapse. Hundreds of thousands die annually from freak weather conditions – drought, floods and typhoons – brought about by global warming. *The world is in the midst of a new dark age.*

“Two scenarios, equally possible,” Sacks writes, “and between them defining what is at stake in the years ahead...”

Eva, you were six months old. I wondered: what kind of world had we brought you into? If all went well, you'd be applying to college in 2020. What kind of reality would I be sending you out into? What kind of country were we raising you in? What kind of Jewish community? Would you get that to be a Jew is to live from a moral core, to work for the dignity of *all* people?

And what was I-- as a mother and a rabbi-- willing to do to turn the tide toward that new golden age?

This was the birth moment of IKAR-- the moment we realized that we had to *dosomething*.

You know the story: several weeks later abba and I met Melissa and Adam. For years, Melissa

called that first meeting a shot-gun wedding, which is a way of describing a wedding that happens before anyone finds out that the bride is already pregnant. That may not be the best metaphor for our origin story, but there was definitely a sense of immediacy. We decided that night to cast our lots with one another and we launched IKAR.

We have been working every day for past 13 years to build a Jewish response to crossroads Sacks situated us in:

What could we do to bend arc of moral universe toward justice?
How could we reclaim LOVE and GRACE and SOUL as core Jewish ideas and practices?

For all this effort, I must admit that I never predicted that we'd be where we are today. I never predicted, when I dreamt of and worked toward that mythic year 2020, that 2020 would be would be fourth year of presidency ushered in not by force of great dreams and moral fortitude, but by the perverse elevation of a rhetoric of white supremacy, the targeting of vulnerable populations, the cynical and deliberate disintegration of civility and decency for the sake of political gain.

Now, it is both you and I who have a choice to make, along with the rest of our country. Will we allow this to be our new normal?

I believe that we must take people at their word. If they proclaim hate, we must not downplay or rationalize it. If they promise to register Muslims and round up and deport Mexicans, we must assume that those are their real intentions. If they threaten to deprive LGBT Americans of their basic dignities, promoting legislation that would strip our friends the right to sit at the bedside of their loved ones in the hospital, we must take them at their word.

Of this I am certain: if we eat the tainted grain, if we quiet our resistance, if we accept this as our new normal, we will race headfirst into the new dark age.

But if we refuse to eat that foul grain, if we defy and resist, if we insist on living not from our most callous political calculations but from our *deepest moral values*, if we double down on the fight to realize the vision of an inclusive and just and fair society, one that protects the most vulnerable among us first and foremost... then we might be able to stem the moral decay of our nation.

I embarrassed you the other day in carpool when I ranted against Ryan's Roses (reality radio that is all the rage in middle school now), and connected the dots between our cultural addiction to voyeuristic public humiliation on TV and radio and the moral crisis facing our nation.

I apologize for being a carpool preacher.

But know this: I meant what I said. In a time of moral crisis, we must listen differently. Watch

differently. Read the news differently. Ask questions others aren't asking. Challenge authority when others are silent. We must be like Abraham: step into the fray, even when everyone else quietly walks on their way.

David ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel, used to stand on his head before every cabinet meeting. Someone once asked him why. When the whole world is upside down, sometimes I need to stand on my head to see things in proper perspective, he said.

The whole world is upside down right now. Sea levels are rising, glaciers are melting and a climate denier is going to head the EPA. Minority communities who have been in this country from its founding are looked at as outside agitators, terrorists, threats to America. Know that they ARE America. Hardworking immigrants who have come to this place to build a future for their families just like Grandma Eva did for you are treated today like parasites and aliens. We cannot stand for that.

Too many political leaders are driven by cowardice or political pragmatism. It's up to you, and your friends, and all of us, to stand on our heads, to refuse to eat the tainted grain and succumb to the madness, to remind each other today and every day moving forward that this is **not** the new normal, there is nothing normal about this... not unless we allow it to be.

My love, today you become bat mitzvah... old enough to take our tradition seriously, and to be taken seriously. Here is my message to you:

Practice resistance.

Don't stop thinking. Feeling. Raising your hand and speaking out.

Dr. King said that the ultimate measure of a person is not where she stands in time of comfort and convenience, but where she stands at times of challenge and controversy. Stand up *every time*. *Every time* you see a swastika in the bathroom. *Every time* you hear someone mock a kid with special needs. *Every time* you hear a racist joke.

A few days after the election, a 19yr old psychology student at Baylor University, Natasha Nkhama, was shoved off the sidewalk on her way to class and called the n-word by another student who said he was "just trying to make America great again."

The next morning, Natasha walked out of her building for class and was met by more than 300 people-- students and faculty, who burst into applause when they saw her. As she cried with gratitude, they walked with her, arm in arm, to her class. "I know that things like that on campus won't happen again because there's so many people that won't stand for it," she said.

Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church in Mississippi was burned and spray-painted with pro-Trump graffiti just before the election. They posted a call for donations hoping to raise \$10k for repair and got +\$200k in donations from around the country in only a few days.

Montgomery County, Maryland, has already declared itself a sanctuary city, saying it will publicly defy orders of deportation of its immigrant communities. New York's mayor says he'll delete a database of nearly one million undocumented residents to protect them from the administration and our city's police chief has indicated the same, as have leaders in New Orleans, Oakland, Seattle and others.

These acts of solidarity and defiance don't come from folks who eat tainted grain, who conform their moral compass to whatever passes as the current reality. Courageous acts aren't born out of worry with our standing with the new administration. They are born out of the fierce conviction of people who are driven, like Abraham, by a moral intuition that supersedes everything.

I will not get an invite to the White House Hanukkah party for the next four years... and I'm ok with that. Because God made a covenant with Abraham: *la'asot tzedakah u' mishpat*-- to do righteousness and justice. We're not here to traipse the halls of power or curry favor with the authorities. We're here to cry out against injustice. To fight the demagoguery. To challenge the insanity. To promote a vision of justice and inclusion and dignity for all.

That is what it means to become bat mitzvah today.

A little part of me wishes you a childhood of meaningless fun; no worries in the world. But that's not the real world.

Instead, I pray for you courage. Humility. Love. Moral clarity. And a sense that every act of love and defiance will help turn the tide toward the new golden age. It is in fact the only thing that will.

Shabbat shalom.