

We come to Rosh Chodesh Menachem Av - the beginning of the month of Av.

Av is the most mournful month in the year. But as Dolfy Freinquel is teaching in his series leading up to the High Holidays, Av is a necessary step toward the High Holidays, towards *zman simchateinu*, the season of our rejoicing, with Sukkot. In order to get to the joy, our tradition teaches that we need to go through this time where pent up fear, anxiety and grief surface, where things fall apart, before they can be put right.

The universe, I am afraid, is obliging in this regard.

Some of you have no doubt followed the news of the new Black Lives Matter platform publicized this week, and its widely publicized inclusion of a critique of American military funding of Israel as “complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people,” and their reference to Israel as an apartheid state.

Let’s let that sink in. Let’s take a deep breath with that.

As described in the “about us” section on the platform’s website, it was written by “a collective of more than 50 organizations representing thousands of Black people from across the country. . .” The platform calls for sweeping changes in American policing, the prison system, the education system, trade policy and tax policy - to name a few. And in one section, it criticizes American military funding and involvement in many regions of the world. Within that section is that accusation of America as, I repeat, “complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people,” and the reference to Israel as an apartheid state.

Various Jewish institutions have rushed to publicize responses to this. The flagship Jewish Community Relations Council in Boston publicized a statement that said, “We cannot and will not align ourselves with organizations that falsely and maliciously assert that Israel is committing ‘genocide,’” and “We reject participation in any coalition that seeks to isolate and demonize Israel singularly amongst the nations of the world.”

Okay. Rosh Chodesh Av. Things are falling apart.

I want us to take a moment of self-reflection. What are we to do with this? Dare I ask: what does God call us to do with this?

In this week’s double Parashah, Mattot-Masei, at the end of the book of Numbers, there is an admonishment from Moses that might prove useful to us. The people have not yet entered the land of Israel west of the Jordan, but they have conquered lands east of the Jordan, in what is present-day Jordan. And Chapter 32 of Numbers tells us: “The tribes of Reuben and Gad owned cattle in very great numbers. Noting that [the lands they had conquered] were a region suitable for cattle, the Gadites and the Reubenites came to Moses, Elazar the High Priest and the chieftains of the community, “It would be a favor to us, they say, If this land were given to your servants as a holding; do not move us across the Jordan.”

Moses’s response is one of outrage. “Are your brothers to go fight while you stay here?” he asks incredulously. He reminds them of the punishment the people received the last time they were reluctant to enter the land - a whole generation was sentenced to perish in the wilderness.

The Gadites and Reubenites hasten to assure Moses, “We will settle our flocks and our families here, but we pledge to fight in the front lines of the Israelites, until we have established each of the tribes in their holdings. We will not return to our homes until every one of the Israelites is in possession of a holding.”

Moses relents, but with a subtle correction. “If you do as you say,” he promises them, “you will be clear before God and before Israel. But if you do not do so,” he warns, “you will have sinned against God.”

As commentator Nechama Leibowitz notes, “The two tribes saw it in light of a quid pro quo between themselves and the rest of Israel; they would contribute their share in helping to conquer the land, and in return, would be allotted the region they desired. Not so Moses. He stated everything in terms of responsibility to and dependence on God. . .”

We don’t just hang together when it’s convenient. We don’t just hang together when we can get something out of it. We have a Divine obligation to loyalty to our people, to loyalty to our fellows in the struggle.

During this season where so much is falling apart, it feels necessary to me to drash this in two directions. Neither would be sufficient on its own.

First of all, we do not live between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea, but our people, our fellow Jews – and many other people – do. There is much to criticize about Israeli policies. If we love Israel, if we are committed to Israel’s future, the fight to end racism and discrimination there - against both Palestinians and Jews of color, by the way - must be our fight.

And. . . We have a Divine obligation, and this may be hard for some of us, to stand with our fellow Jews in Israel, to call out the false accusation of genocide which muddies the possibility of legitimate, informed critique, and which plays into an anti-Semitic pattern of holding the Jewish state to a higher moral standard than the nations of the world. There is a lot to critique, but there is no genocide, and to call it that is vicious libel. It is all of our jobs to name that, no matter how leftist we are, no matter how uncomfortable we are. As Moses asks, “Are our siblings to fight while we sit comfortably?” Shame on us, if so!

And. . . When I say we have a Divine obligation to loyalty to our fellows in the struggle, that cannot just refer to Jews. We have a divine obligation to the struggle for Black liberation, to point out, strongly, that this accusation against Israel is absolutely unfair, incendiary and plain inaccurate, but also to recognize that this is part of a first attempt of a movement that is finding its solidarity and finding its voice, to articulate a sweeping platform that is deeply ambitious and ultimately not about Israel. Black liberation and Jewish liberation are not at odds with each other, certainly not for Jews of Color, or for any of us. The fact that this coalition printed those incendiary words does not change that.

It seems that on the national scale, the anti-Israel movement has quite effectively allied with the Black Lives Matter movement, and it is on all of us to fix that. Shame on them for crying genocide, yes, but let them learn. The movement, like all growing movements, deserves the opportunity to make mistakes and be corrected. We do not get to use this as an excuse to wash our hand of the Black Lives Matter movement, to claim a false opposition between Black and Jewish liberation. Are our siblings to fight while we sit comfortably? Shame on us, if so!