

Fighting Antisemitism, Reclaiming Conflict

There's an old Jewish joke, maybe you've heard it before:

There's a Jewish man who survives a shipwreck and lands on a deserted island, where he manages to survive. Many years later, when a rescue crew finds him, he proudly shows them how he's survived, including the two synagogues he's built.

Why two synagogues, asks one of the rescuers. "Oh, well of course, I needed two synagogues," says the man – "this is the one I attend," and *that* one – pah! [spits] – I wouldn't set foot in there if you paid me!"

[pause]

You laugh! But – not to be a killjoy – *why* is it funny? Is it funny because of how often we express our Judaism in reaction to other Jews that we don't like – do we think that despising other Jews is so inherent to being Jewish that a Jew will figure out how to do so even in the absence of any other Jews!?

So before I go any further, let's do an exercise about antisemitism, with my fellow Jews in the room, that some of you have already experienced with me. Ideally, I'd have us get into a big circle that we step into and out of for this, but we are – Baruch Hashem – a bit much for that this evening, so I'm just going to ask you to raise your hand if the prompts I say apply to you, and we'll witness and acknowledge each other as best we can.

Please raise your hand if you have ever

- been in a space or situation where you didn't want people to know that you were Jewish.
- Felt like you were "too Jewish"
- Felt embarrassed because another Jewish person around you was being too loud, too demanding, or too opinionated (too Jewish. . .??)
- Felt yourself to be hyperaware of the presence of Jews or even Jewish sounding names in the media or finance
- Heard someone express either subtle or overt antisemitism and said nothing
- Wanted to prove, or felt like you had to prove, that you are not like "those . . . Jews (fill in the blank – whatever those Jews are)."
- Judged a Jew who had different politics than you as somehow lacking in their Judaism

In case it isn't clear, tonight I want to talk about antisemitism – but not the fun kind to talk about, where we talk about how terrible other people are. I want to talk about our own

antisemitism – yours and mine, which we all carry. It isn't our fault – this world has been steeped in antisemitic tropes for at least twenty times longer than any of us have been around. It's unavoidable that we would have internalized a certain contempt in our bodies and in the stories we tell and in our reactions to other Jews. So antisemitism separates us: one Jew, two Jew, bad Jew, good Jew.

Here's the thing. While we're not responsible for that gut reaction, we are responsible for what we *do with* it. Acting on the impulse to reject and deny the wrong kind of Jews, you can get away with that in a big city with many synagogues, or by yourself on an island. But here in Eugene, there's just not that many of us. Which means each of us has to figure out how to be in relationship with Jews we sometimes disagree with. Jews who sometimes embarrass us, or worse, take stances that are different from our own on issues that seem both moral and existential.

Let me be clear: that *doesn't* mean we're supposed to figure out how to agree.

We are supposed to figure out how to *disagree* – honestly, passionately, and constructively. Lucky for us – wait for it – there is a beautiful teaching in the Torah. Shocking, right? Hang on through some technicalities with me, okay?

Twice in the Torah, at the end of Numbers and the middle of Deuteronomy, we are taught that the Israelites were supposed to set aside *arei miklat* – cities of refuge, where someone who has accidentally committed manslaughter can flee so that they will not be killed in retribution. (Example: chopping wood and the axe-head flies off and strikes your friend and he dies.) In both cases, Torah is explicit that this are not to be used for the case of willful murder, but only – as written in Deut. 4:42, “one who has slain another unwittingly, without having been an enemy in the past.” Literally, the phrase that idiomatically means “in the past,” is *mitmol shilshom*, “from yesterday and the day before.” This is important. It has to be someone who wasn't an enemy *mitmol shilshom*.

How can we be sure that a person hasn't been harboring enmity against another? Midrash Hagadol on Deuteronomy 4:42 teaches, “Who is considered to be one's enemy?” One who has refused to speak to another for three days out of enmity, as the verse teaches – from yesterday and the day before.” *Conflict* is not the definition of enmity – yelling at each other – not the definition of enmity – refusing to speak to someone is! And when we refuse to speak to someone because we disagree with the kind of Jew that they are – oh look, we're back to internalized antisemitism.

In the very center of the Torah, the “Holiness Code,” the last Torah reading we'll do on Yom Kippur afternoon, teaches: “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kin, and incur no guilt on their account.” This is in fact, a mitzvah, a Jewish commandment, and Maimonides in his medieval code, frames it as such: “When one person wrongs another, the latter should not remain silent and despise him. . .

Rather, he is commanded to make the matter known and ask him: “Why did you do this to me?”, “Why did you wrong me regarding that matter?”¹

I want us to take up Maimonides' challenge and see conflict as a *mitzvah*.

So – as an effort to reclaim a value at the core of Jewish history, and to fight antisemitism, I want to do teshuvah with you, my community, for my own failures of conflict.

I have realized, in this terribly difficult past year since October 7th, that as I have tried to hold the tent for all of you, I have often shied away from the demands of Jewish tradition, and succumbed to the temptation to emphasize places of agreement with each of you, rather than challenging you. I have not offered the conflict that would help this community grow.

With my outrage at how the Israeli government has conducted this war, the excuses that get made for the Israeli government, my conviction that one cannot stamp out terrorism with bombs and forced dislocation, my outrage at Netanyahu for putting his own political agenda above the lives of the hostages and Palestinian civilians, and my sense that none of these can be addressed without truth telling about decades of inhumane Israeli policy towards Palestinians – I have expressed this mostly to the members of TBI whom I already know to share those sentiments, implicitly siding with “good Jews” who get to judge other “bad Jews”.

With my disgust with the moral equivocation of the far left, the excuses that get made for Hamas, my fury with the notion that everyone including Palestinians but *not* Jews should have the right to self-determination, and my outrage at the untenable position that Jews – especially Jewish youth – are being put into having to defend or condemn Israel as the price of their belonging in coalitions with their friends and allies –

I have expressed these feelings mostly to the members of TBI whom I already know to share these sentiments, implicitly siding with “good Jews” who get to judge other “bad Jews”.

What I should have been doing all along is asking some really challenging questions. The first question I should have been asking all of us is, “How is internalized antisemitism coloring how we are willing to think about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?” In other words, how are the negative tropes that we have each taken in about Jews playing out in our reactions?

Consider an easy case: There is a tendency among some of us to categorically reject Israel. If you feel the urge to show that you are a good Jew – in contrast to the majority of bad Jews in the world who are Israeli or support Israel – I do ask you to notice the internalized antisemitism at play. To stay in the centuries-long Jewish conversation, we have to figure out how to be in relationship with our fellow Jews in Israel, and that means being in relationship with Israel as a multifaceted place, rather than wishing it away.

But, you know it's too easy, too common, to accuse any Jews who critique Israel of antisemitism. Consider how many of us seek to throw our fellow Jews out of the tent for breaking rank - say, “they don't belong here.”. When we are unwilling to face the hard

questions and critiques that our fellows Jews offer, that too is internalized antisemitism. I think we are strong enough to take it.

We internalize antisemitism when we leave coalitions when things feel uncomfortable, as if we secretly agree that we do not really belong.

We internalize antisemitism when we insist that we are powerless – because the antisemitic trope of nefarious Jewish power is so very frightening – even, often as we do wield institutional power to protect ourselves not only from true harm but from challenges that makes us uncomfortable.

We do this when we conflate Palestinians with the historical persecutors of the Jewish people. The Crusaders in the Middle Ages, the Castilians in 1492, the Nazis: the Jews were stateless and at their mercy. The Jews had less power – politically or militarily – than their oppressors. I hold in my body the historical inheritance of that sense of real powerlessness in the face of accusations of power, which makes it natural to conflate Palestinian terror with earlier persecutions. But I want to push against it, to try to heal, not *only* for the sake of the millions of Palestinians who *are* directly and indirectly in Israel's power.

Because we also internalize antisemitism when we get so attached to a narrative of Israel as an innocent victim, as morally exceptional, that we *cannot* believe that any criticism of Israeli policies, the Israeli government, or – God forbid – Israel's soldiers – could ever be valid. And I mean – is there some part of us that believes that we have to be morally exceptional in order to be worthy of existence? Do we get attached to seeing ourselves as morally exceptional, because somehow, we have internalized that we don't have the right to exist unless we behave better than everyone else? Unless we are inherently better than everyone else? And so it just has to be true that we are.

It may not be internalized antisemitism, but it's internalized Christian hegemony when we believe that there are inherently good people and inherently bad people, and forget the whole premise of this season of teshuvah, which is that we are all full of potential to do good and harm, all capable of transformation. As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg has written, we are all victims of harm and perpetrators of harm. Both things are true at the same time. It is our work to heal from the harm that others have inflicted on us – and to do teshuvah for the harm we have caused. *At the same time.*² And it's so hard.

We are not the moral exceptions to the human condition. And we want to be! Yes, Torah calls on us, over and over again, to strive to be morally exceptional. But not because we're inherently better than anyone else. On the contrary, Torah warns us that we are not: that we will fail, over and over again, so badly that we will be exiled – and that what will make us worthy again of redemption isn't some inherent superiority but *teshuvah* – our willingness to acknowledge our failures and then resume that striving. As Rani Keidar, a survivor of Oct. 7th from Nativ Ha'Asara, and a peace activist with Another Voice, told a group of visitors in May, "By blaming everything on the other and not trying to amend something

within myself, I can't move forward. . . . Now we both have to make amends. We both have so much to reconcile. As long as we always say that the other is the only one to blame, then we're getting nowhere."³

Rabbi Toba Spitzer has written,

"Jews have spent much of the past 2,000 years figuring out how to remain in the good graces of the dominant society, and either assimilating (if possible) or moving on to another when those good graces disappear. One of the explicit aims of the Zionist movement was to end this dynamic for good by creating a place where, in theory, Jews would no longer be threatened by erasure. Ironically, the creation of the state has given rise to a new calculus of who is a "good Jew" in the eyes of the American Jewish mainstream, and increasingly within Israel itself, as dissent from state policy is increasingly vilified. Sadly, this intolerance on the right is increasingly mirrored on the left. Today, American Jews are being told we need to "take sides" in a struggle framed, from one perspective, between Israel and her enemies or, in the other perspective, between Palestinians/the cause of justice and those who perpetuate oppression."⁴

I want us to escape from this internalized binary of good people who deserve to exist, versus bad people who deserve to die.

So the next question that I would challenge us all with is: "Who is the "them" that we're willing to throw away?"

Is it right-wing Israelis, who voted for Netanyahu? Is it their children? Do they not deserve safety, or freedom from fear?

Is it Palestinian children, Palestinian civilians? Or even more convenient, the story that "there are no Palestinian civilians, they all voted for Hamas?"

Is it religious Zionists, whose messianic zeal is "undermining Judaism"?

Is it left-wing Israelis, or Palestinian Israelis, whom we deny whenever we fall into the false choice of 'Supporting Israel' or "supporting Palestine"?

When we feel inclined to excuse terror (and I know I sometimes have felt inclined), whether we say, "oh, of course people who are desperate will be radicalized, we shouldn't judge?" or when we say, "We've tried land for peace, and the only language they understand is force..." we are condemning some terror and condoning other terror. When we insist that the context of the violence is important – because you can't expect people who have been occupied not to resist – or because you can't expect Jews who are living under terror not to crack down with force – we are condemning some terror and condoning other terror. We are deciding which victims are innocent, which victims we are willing to mourn, and which victims are not our problem.

But if context matters, then *everyone's context matters* – not just the context of the people we already instinctively side with. I want us to be relentlessly compassionate about the

context of suffering that we've *all inherited, and that we keep inflicting on each other*, that Israelis and Palestinians keep on inflicting on each other, and we keep inflicting on each other. AND I want us to refuse to excuse terror – whether it's committed by Jewish vigilantes in the West Bank, or by Palestinians, or – it sticks in my throat to say it – by the Israeli army. I want to demand an alternative to terror, to demand a new context.

As Mo Hussein, a Palestinian-American blogger that I follow, has written eloquently, “We are, both peoples, stuck on the world’s worst f---ing amusement park ride, an eternally shitty and utterly predictable carousel of suffering.

There are only three ways off the carousel:

1. We k*** all the Israelis.

Or

2. We k*** all the Palestinians.

Or

3. We somehow figure out how to live together.

That’s it.

There is no Option 4.

I might humbly suggest that for anyone with a picogram of human decency, there is actually only Option 3.”⁵

Option 3 is hard to look at! It can be easier to get activated and distracted by the ways that somebody is using the wrong words or the wrong context, and let ourselves off the hook from visioning option 3.

So the third question I should have been asking relentlessly is: What’s your vision? What do you hope for the millions of Israelis and millions of Palestinians living and dying there right now, and what are you doing to promote that vision? Because every time we get stuck in an argument about why someone else’s analysis is unfair or just plain *wrong*, we let go of responsibility for our own vision of *what actually needs to happen next*.

Going forward, these are the three questions I want to keep bringing us back to:

How is our antisemitism showing up?

Who are we choosing to throw away?

What is our vision? What is our vision?

And when I think about why I haven't challenged you as much as I might have, it comes back to that definition of enmity – it comes back to silence.

I'm not afraid that you'll yell at me. I'm afraid that you'll just stop talking to me and leave. And I'm not afraid of what that will mean for TBI: it's a large synagogue, people come and go all the time. But I worry about what that means for *you*. If I alienate you so much that you leave – we're not a big city - and I worry that means you *won't have a synagogue community anymore*, and it will be my fault. And that possibility breaks my heart.

But going forward, I want to expect more of you – of us. Because we're grownups, and my God, if we can't have a conversation with people that we disagree with – in the synagogue, in Eugene, OR – about what a vision could look like, how could we ever, ever expect our Israeli and Palestinian cousins, living in terror there right now, to come to a place of shared vision?

I want to trust that you'll stay. I want to trust that we can say things that piss each other off, that challenge each other's deeply held beliefs and identities, and that we will *stay*.

I want to trust that when you think I'm wrong – including, possibly, in this sermon - that you will tell me. And I want you to expect of me, as your rabbi, that I challenge you. And we won't always get it right. And sometimes you'll send me angry emails, and sometimes I'll grit my teeth, and then we'll get together, and try to listen to each other, and if necessary, one of us, or both of us will apologize to the other. I want to trust that you'll do that with each other, not just with me.

I want to trust that, just as we try to do this season of repentance, we will keep finding our way back to each other, over and over again. Even when it hurts. Healing is not palliative. Healing hurts, whether physical therapy after a broken leg, or debriding a wound, or thousands of years of intergenerational trauma. And we are not going to heal from centuries of trauma all at once. But we can do our part. We can start to admit the ways we've hurt others, and hurt each other in our woundedness, and we can commit to our healing.

So, I never like to leave you with abstractions, and without practical assignments. So if you want some practical assignments, here they are!

1. Come to our October 7th commemoration this coming week. Honor our unique Jewish grief - even and especially if you have critiques of the Israeli government's response. Don't let your political position negate your humanity, or the humanity of the people who were killed on that day. Grieve it. Feel it.

2. Ask yourself what your vision is for the people of Israel and Palestine, and commit to working for it. Not just against the people whose vision is wrong, but positively toward your

vision. Find some organization doing the work and support it with money, with amplification, with advocacy. Rabbi Yitz and Oriana Kahn-Hurwit discussed several amazing organizations in their presentation at Selichot on Saturday evening, or I would be glad to suggest some to you if you're at a loss.

3. Get into an argument with another Jew. A real one, about something that feels important, where you don't just talk at each other, where you disagree, and you listen to each other, and perhaps you try and fail to persuade each other, but you commit to staying in relationship and conversation.

I want to help you with this. Together with a small advisory team, after the High holidays are over, we'll be putting together a series of events "for the sake of argument" where we practice expressing disagreement and sticking with each and perhaps being transformed other over issues of both small and great import. I hope you'll join us.

And when it gets hard, I hope you'll stay.

And whatever your politics, I hold you'll stand now, if you're able, and join me in reciting Acheinu, the traditional prayer for captives, that we've been saying this past year, both for our Jewish cousins still hostage in Gaza, and for the millions of Palestinian civilians also trapped there.