

Shabbat Toldot 5784

November 18, 2023

Six weeks since October 7, the Israel Hamas War

Sylvia, thank you for showing us in your d'var Torah the very nature of Torah study. Torah study is an exercise in peeling back layers from the surface, of digging into complexity. Throughout your d'var Torah, you tried on different perspectives about who and what was right, even wondering if maybe the twins should have been able to share the birthright. And Talia, you spoke in gratitude about the march for Israel on Tuesday, the march which your own mother helped organize, at which you could see 290,000 Jews come together in defense of our right to exist, in defense of our right to be safe, in defense of our birthright. And you found that it was Jacob's valuing of the birthright in this parasha that made him the proper inheritor of it. Seeing so many Jews come together to claim our birthright gave you hope.

I came across an interesting teaching about Parashat Toldot by Rabbi David Kasher of Hadar this week, in which he points out the relationship between the word bechora, birthright, and the word beracha, blessing. These two words in Hebrew, birthright and blessing, have the very same letters, bet chaf resh hey / bet resh chaf hey.

Today I want to talk about the relationship between bechora and bracha, between birthright and blessing. I am going to make the case that our birthright can become our blessing if and only if we break the binary. What does it mean to break the binary? I will explain in a minute, but first I need to talk about pain.

It has now been six impossibly long weeks since October 7. We have gathered innumerable times – to pray, to mourn, to sing, to remember, to support each other, to support our kids, to march – we just took 150 people

on three buses to Washington – to learn, to listen, to fundraise, to connect with communities in Israel.

Six weeks in, I see your exhaustion. I see your continuing grief, fear, anger, despair and confusion. I see your ongoing feeling of isolation, your feeling that no one cares when Jews die, that no one cares that Jews are currently captive in tunnels under the earth. I see many of you in your feeling of guilt, shame, and anger that Jews are the perpetrators of oppression, settler violence, land theft, racism, and mass killing of Palestinians before and especially since October 7. I see your feeling of abandonment and betrayal by those who you thought shared your values. I see your shock at the speed, magnitude and ferocity of the hate against Jews. I see your feeling of existential threat. I see your feeling of prolonged agony. Certainly that is true for those closest to the atrocities, and closest to the hostages. As Rachel Goldberg, the mother of hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin said at the march on Tuesday, hostage families are in “slow motion torment.” “We have third degree burns on our souls,” she said. “Our hearts are bruised and seeping with misery.”

I am aware that I am about to speak about an abstract idea — breaking the binary— in the context of acute pain, in the context of war, and so I need to say first that if you are in pain today, I see you.

For many years here at CBE, our fifth grade class studied the Jacob and Esau story through a mock trial. Everyone in the class was either on Jacob’s side or on Esau’s side, and both sides were assigned the task of studying the parasha to come up with arguments about why their side was right and the other side was wrong, as you would in any court case. We’d even have parents who are lawyers come in and help the students prepare their arguments for the trial. And the outcome was that one side won the case and one side lost, just like Jacob won the birthright and Esau lost it.

It was only in recent years in my study of the parasha that I realized that at the end of the story, both sons receive a blessing. I found that confusing, because the whole setup is that only one of the twins will receive the

birthright/blessing. But Jacob receives a blessing of abundance, and when Esau protests, “Have you only one blessing father, bless me too father!” Esau receives a blessing of abundance as well. It’s true that Jacob’s blessing includes the line: “Be master over your brothers,” whereas Esau’s blessing includes the line: “You shall serve your brother.”

This is also confusing, because that’s not what happened. When Jacob and Esau reunite years later, they kiss and embrace, they meet each other’s families, and then they go their separate ways. No one is the master and no one is the servant. Turns out there’s enough birthright and blessing to go around. The whole family dynamic is based on a false binary, the idea that either Jacob or Esau will receive the blessing, and everyone else has to pick a side.

In recent years, the transgender community has taught us about the perils of the false binary. Binaries are when the world is split into two categories, like male and female, for the purpose of social convenience. It’s often easier to divide things into an either-or, than to consider the complexity of both-and, than to admit to a spectrum of possibilities, than to see the overlapping nature of things— the in-betweens, the middle spaces, the fluidity of reality. The trans movement has taught us that the binary actually does damage to people who do not fit. Further, the binary harms us all by over-simplifying reality, and in so doing impoverishing thought, erasing experience, stifling imagination, and depriving us collectively of our wholeness, and of the dazzling complexity of life.

Haven’t we learned from the trans community that the ability to see complexity is a gift? That there’s a whole world between the either-or? And that that world between those poles, between those categories, is where so much beauty and truth can be found? That nuance gets us closer to understanding life? Has that not been one of the most important lessons of the last decade?

So if we have learned that, what are we doing in this country with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? How have we allowed this unbelievably

complex reality to be reduced into the binary of Pro-Palestine or Pro-Israel? How have we allowed the extremists to tell us all that we need to pick one side and hate the other or deny the history of the other, or delegitimize the existence of the other? How have we allowed those voices who insist on erasing nuance, on radically oversimplifying a profoundly complicated situation, to define the conversation about it?

Those who fit in the binary on both sides are the minority. But they are so loud and so well-organized, and so certain, that they have effectively silenced the majority. The majority, who look at this conflict characterized by so much pain, who often lack the knowledge or background to make sense of the complexity for themselves, who often simply want to do what's right, to be appropriately loyal or in solidarity, and find themselves pressured to pick a side. Often, the side they choose will be the underdog, whoever they see as having suffered more depending on their lens. If they're looking at the last 75 years between the river and the sea, it's Palestinians. If they're looking at the last 2,000 years all around the world, it's Jews. Many people are just trying to do what's right, they think they *are* doing what's right, by picking a side.

Now add the overlay of antisemitism, which has been revealed to be both rampant and not understood, Islamophobia, which has been stoked for 30 years in our country, and racism, which is always widespread, and we have a toxic set of forces pulling people to one side or the other.

As the binary displays its slogans on social media, the algorithms direct people to one side or the other, and the sides get more and more entrenched. Big, heavy words like genocide, ethnic cleansing, settler colonialists, beasts, animals, are thrown around, distorting the picture and numbing our empathy.

In a previous sermon I said, and I still believe, that it is natural and good and right for a person to love and care in concentric circles. That it is natural and good and right, to love and care for one's own family first and most, and to love and care for one's own people first and most. We're not

expected to love everyone in the world equally, and in a time of war especially, in a time of existential peril, we're not expected to love our enemy. We're never expected to love those who are coming to kill us or our people. But we are expected to differentiate between those who are coming to kill us and others of their nation who are not. Not all Gazans support Hamas. Many of the Israelis who lived in the Gaza envelope were peace activists who did not support the Netanyahu government. We are expected to find empathy for, and to call for the protection of, the innocents on both sides, the hostages, the non-combatants, and the children who are suffering and mourning and terrified and starving and in harm's way. We are expected to pray for peace, to work toward peace, to dedicate ourselves to peace, even in a time of war. And when the war is over, we are expected to widen our concentric circles until they overlap with the concentric circles of the other, until they overlap and make a venn diagram, and there you have the breakdown of the binary. We can start with us, but we do not ever end with only us.

And now I'm speaking to the Jewish people who, when faced with the binary, feel that our Jewish values require us to always pick the side of the oppressed, because we know our Passover story well and the verses and values that come out of it, "Do not oppress the stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Obviously that's the right answer, right? We know the heart of the oppressed, we stand with the oppressed, right? In this situation, the binary seemingly demands a choice between one's Jewish values and one's Jewish people. What a terrible, demoralizing and destructive choice. To have to stand against one's own people in order to be true to one's values. That is the tearing, the splitting, the rupture that the binary has been foisting upon our people.

How many of the children of our people, middle schools students, high school students, college students, 20-somethings, not just young people but people of all ages, are shattered by the mass killing of Palestinians, 40 percent of whom have been children, are shattered by the racism and Jewish supremacy and messianic ideology that has taken root in the Israeli

government, are shattered by the settler agenda, the violence, land theft, cruelty, domination, and dehumanization of Palestinian people by our people in the West Bank, are shattered by our people's willingness to live with the status quo, to look away from the humiliation and deprivation that 56 years of occupation has wrought. No wonder so many of our people feel torn between defending their values and defending their people. How many of our children have chosen their values over their people? How painful, how broken are we. How many families have been ripped apart in that choice.

This binary hurts everyone, but it hurts Jews the most. Jews who live outside this binary get blamed by both sides. Jews who see both sides get dehumanized by both sides. Jews who support both sides get attacked by both sides. We are often the first targets of hate. The Brooklyn office of Rep Dan Goldman, our member of Congress, was just defaced yesterday with hateful, blood red graffiti, because he displeased one side of the binary.

But it is a false binary. We must reject the false binary. It is possible, it is necessary, to stand for our values *and* for our people. It is possible, it is necessary, to be Pro-Palestinian and Pro-Israeli. To demand an Israel that comports with Jewish values. In fact, that is the only moral choice. Because Jews and Palestinians both live there and neither have anywhere else to go.

And to all of the many Americans who are neither Jewish nor Palestinian, this is my message: do not pick a side. Do not get trapped in this false binary. Either-or is a disaster. The only way forward is to choose both, to work toward a just and moral solution for both.

As Sally Abed, the Palestinian co-director of Standing Together, the organization of Israeli Jews and Palestinians working for justice and equality that we honored last Yom Ha'Atzmaut, said, "We recognize that our existence on this land is dependent on the other. And the fact is that none of us will be equal and safe without the other being equal and safe."

Alon-Lee Green, her Jewish co-director added, “There are forces in Israel using the fear and rage of this moment to advance their agenda, [which is] to resettle Gaza. [This is] the most extreme far right government of Israel ever. There are people on TV every evening saying “it’s either us or them”, saying ‘the children of today are the terrorists of tomorrow’ ....

But “There is only one option ultimately to achieve security,” he said.. “it is working for Israeli Palestinian peace. It is the recognition that millions of Palestinians are going to remain on the land, and millions of Jewish people are going to remain on the same land. Both peoples think of it as their homeland. And that’s a fact. If someone questions this fact they’re delusional,” he said, continuing “If ...you’re asked to ignore the suffering of the other people, if you’re asked to be blind to the fact that on the other side innocent people also want to live, you are part of the problem and you are not part of the solution.”

Sally and Alon-Lee were here in New York last week, and said this about America: “We are shocked at what we saw here. Here people have to pick a side: “I stand with Israel” or “I stand with Palestine,” with no ground in between. Both people deserve life, both people deserve security, both people deserve the ability to survive this moment. How about “I stand with the lives of the people who live there. ”

Alana Zeitchik, who has six cousins who are being held hostage in Gaza, said this at the Israel march on Tuesday. “I am here with you because I love my family.... For too many it feels like to care about one family, to love one child, is to diminish the suffering of another. But the simple human truth is that you don’t have to choose. You can abhor the suffering of Palestinian families and the suffering of Israeli families like mine. You can call for peace and the immediate return of the innocent men, women, and children who were violently taken from us. It doesn’t need to be political to share in my grief or in the anguish that the Israeli people are feeling.”

It is not easy to break a binary. But it is our job to find ways to do so. We are the silent majority. We have to use all of our creativity, all of our spiritual authority to make the non-binary reality visible. To show it, to name

it, to unearth it. So people aren't feeling so desperately alone, so people aren't feeling so terribly confused, so our kids aren't having mental health crises in college. We American Jews deserve to live in the wholeness of our persons, the wholeness of our peoplehood and the wholeness of our values.

This is an incredibly fragile and dangerous time. But there are good-willed people all along the spectrum, and more of us in the middle, who reject either/or thinking, who are both/and thinkers. It's going to take all of us. We have to find each other, and together we must raise our voices to end this binary. This is holy work. This is healing work. And it is how we will find our way through this time.

Many people are fervently pleading with me to call for a ceasefire, but even far left groups of Palestinian and Jewish Israelis working for equality and justice are not calling for a ceasefire. Raluca Ganea, who heads Zazim, an Arab/Jewish Israeli civil rights organization, wrote in Haaretz this week that she is always quick to call for ceasefire but not this time:

"A return to the status quo of October 6, namely to what we're used to calling a "cease-fire," simply isn't an option, not for Israelis in general, let alone the residents of the Gaza border communities. The only ones who would profit from a return to the status quo are Hamas and Israel's messianic right which is already poised to send in settlers ...to ... serve as the front line in an endless war. In addition to immediate demands to release the hostages and prevent the killing of innocents in Gaza, the left-wing camp and rights groups must raise the flag of peace once again. This is the flag we lowered to half mast with the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and later Prime Minister Ehud Barak's "there is no partner" motif. The flag was taken down for good in 2009 when Benjamin Netanyahu replaced Ehud Olmert as prime minister. To rise up from the terrible disaster of October 7, we must toss out the concepts of conflict management and immediately demand negotiations for a peace agreement based on mutual recognition by two peoples."



Israelis will fill the streets again tonight in a return to the popular protests against this government. We stand with them as they reject and defeat the cynical, Jewish supremacist, racist, messianic agenda, as they seek to unseat Netanyahu and his government.

In the meantime, I'm joining with New York Jewish Agenda's elected officials who, with Secretary Blinken, are calling for a multi-day cessation of hostilities as part of a hostage release agreement with Hamas. This cessation would first and foremost bring the hostages home, and it would allow critically urgent humanitarian aid to flow, the injured to leave, and civilian protection measures to be put in place to curb unacceptable levels of civilian death and suffering. Israel has the right and responsibility to incapacitate Hamas so that October 7th can never happen again. But Israel also has the responsibility to ensure that humanitarian aid can reach the Palestinian people. And the time is now for the United States to assert its will about the future of Gaza and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The United States must not allow Israel to reoccupy Gaza or to continue its settler violence and agenda in the West Bank. Instead, the United States must use all of its influence, all of its power, to ensure the conditions for, and establishment of, a Palestinian state now.

The way forward is to break the binary. Isn't that the whole innovation of monotheism after all? That is the genius that Judaism brought to the world, the idea that the world is not run by warring gods, not by oppositional forces of good and evil, but instead that underneath all of the seeming oppositions, conflicts, and binaries there is a fundamental interconnectedness, a unifying reality, a great transcendent Oneness.

In our parasha, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, and even God, were caught in the narrow bind of the birthright binary, the idea that there wasn't enough blessing to go around, the idea that they had to choose who got the birthright. We can learn from the suffering that caused, and we can learn from the outcome in which there *was* enough blessing for all, and choose in our time to transform bechora into bracha. Just like Jacob and Esau reunited, Isaac and Ishmael, long after their father Abraham had to choose

between them, came together, and reunited to bury their father. We too can come together to bury the binary of the old generation. There is actually enough land for both people. There is actually enough of everything for both people. And both people have a birthright to the land.

The way to transform birthright into blessing is simply to share it.

I will close with the words of Ghadi Hani, a Palestinian Israeli friend of Vivian Silver, the beloved peace activist who was murdered by Hamas on October 7. Ghadi Hani, wearing her hijab, delivered this eulogy at Vivian's funeral this week.

"The tears are coming and never stopping. I wish you were here to comfort, to give light and hope like you always knew how to do. We are all here hurting.

Vivian, I met you more than twenty years ago. I saw in you mother and sister. ...you were a beacon to all of us. I loved you as if we knew each other from childhood despite our age difference. You taught us all the most important lesson - to be a human. To see the other, the weak, the one whose voice is not heard.

Vivian, I stand here, and I have no words. In the most threatening nightmares we never thought we'd reach such a day. [that] you be taken from us so cruelly.

...What would you tell us to do now? How do we move on from here? ... You always knew to say the right thing, ...You, who were there under every rocket, experienced more than any one of us the rounds of fighting, you continued to believe, you knew that there was no other way... Did you know that it does not matter if we speak Hebrew or Arabic, it does not matter whether we were born in the Gaza envelope or the Gaza Strip - you knew that our future and the fate of the people of Gaza are connected to each other; that people who live a few kilometers away from you are also entitled to a better life.

Dear Vivian, if you could hear, I would like you to know that Hamas did not kill your vision.

You cannot kill the compassion, humanity, solidarity, and the aspiration for a secure life. We must continue your path, the way in which everyone can live a good and safe life in this homeland.”

In the name and memory of Vivan and all the peacemakers, may we continue the path by which everyone— Israeli and Palestinian – can live a good and safe life in their homeland.

Shabbat Shalom.