

Shabbat Bo 5784

January 20, 2024

15 weeks after October 7

Bnei mitzvah of Robert Wenger and Sammy Bolotin

Thank you so much for your teachings, Sammy and Rob. Rob, given that the Passover ritual is described for the first time in our parasha and imagines a future where Jews are free, you asked: what was life like once the people were free? How did they go forward from here? It's a question I've been asking myself about the Jewish people in this time, during the dramatic and devastating events of our generation.

How do we go forward from here?

Fifteen weeks after October 7th the war is still going on and people are still dying. Israelis are still terrified, wounded and mourning, and facing signs of a wider war on all sides. 24,000 Palestinians have been killed, and the Israeli government estimates that only about 8,000 of those were combatants. 2 million Palestinian people are starving, homeless, and in danger of famine. More than 100 Israelis are still languishing, undergoing who knows what torture, in Hamas's massive labyrinth of underground tunnels.

Meanwhile, American Jews are isolated, shocked at the degree and ferocity of the antisemitism that has been laid bare in this country and by the polarization that has divided almost everyone into two camps: for Palestine against Israel or for Israel against Palestine.

Since October 7th, week after week, over the course of twelve sermons, I have called upon all of us to reject that binary thinking. I have acknowledged that as Jewish people many of us have family in Israel and are family with Israel, and it is natural for us to grieve and care first and most about our own family, and I have also urged us to remember that two peoples live in the land and there is no future of safety, or freedom, or peace that denies either one of them their history, their home, their humanity, or their right to govern themselves. I've urgently called on

Hamas to release the hostages, and on the Israeli and the United States governments to do everything in their power to protect innocent Palestinian lives. At the end of December and again last week at the vigil marking 100 days of captivity, I called for an immediate prioritization of the return of the hostages, and immediate negotiations for an end to the war. I continue to make that call now.

As the New York Times reported this morning, four senior Israeli military leaders are now saying that the twin goals of freeing the hostages and eradicating Hamas are incompatible. With 450 miles of tunnels operating at multiple depths and 5,700 shafts connecting to the surface, Gaza has proven to be a quagmire. Continuing to fight will only lead to more deaths, including the deaths of the hostages. Gadi Eisenkot, a member of the war cabinet who used to be the IDF chief of staff, (and who lost his own son in this war) said publicly on Thursday, "For me, there's no dilemma. The mission is to rescue civilians, ahead of killing an enemy." Netanyahu's refusal to consider a Palestinian state is making matters much worse. According to the Times, three senior IDF officials said that they cannot go into Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city where Hamas's leadership is most likely now hiding, without coordination with Egypt, but Egypt will not coordinate unless Israel will talk about the postwar plan, including the question of a Palestinian state. We now have very clear evidence from the leaders of the IDF that the right-wing politics of this government are both stymying the effort to defeat Hamas and endangering the lives of the hostages, not to mention causing an extreme humanitarian crisis for 2 million people.

The darkness is real, and not only over there; also right here.

Sammy, you talked about the plague of darkness and you talked about Pharaoh's hard heart. You argued that Gd should not have hardened Pharaoh's heart, and that the plague of darkness was only possible because of Pharaoh's hard heart. The plague of darkness is such a good metaphor for us right now. In the Torah (Ex 10:23) it says, "לֹא-רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אָחִיו וְלֹא-קָמוּ אִישׁ מִתַּחְתּוֹ" [The darkness was so severe that] No person could see his brother, nor could they get up from where they were seated."

It was a darkness caused by a hard heart. It was a darkness in which the average person could not see his brother or her sister or their sibling. It was a darkness in which a person could not get up.

The Hasidic masters tell us the true problem of Mitzrayim was the exile of awareness, in Hebrew, da'at. Da'at is awareness of Gd's presence within every living thing. We are living in a time when people celebrate the deaths of innocents, and are indifferent to the deaths and captivity of innocents. Regarding this week's parasha, Or Ha-Meir writes that "when awareness is lacking, there is great darkness." Or Ha-Meir continues: "Scripture tells us what this darkness is: people did not see their brothers...they didn't consider them... they didn't take to heart how much they could learn from the goodness of the people around them...This led them to walk about in darkness and to see no light. People like that cannot progress from one rung to the next; no person could rise from where he was seated."

So many of us in this time feel that we cannot see each other or be seen by others. For many Jews, I know, it sometimes makes us want to close off from the people around us, to isolate from non-Jews who we think don't understand, or from Jews on the right or the left or both who we think might not agree with us. It makes us want to hide and close off and protect ourselves, so we won't get hurt if others aren't considering our feelings or our full humanity. I know that there are people I have not called, people I have not spoken to since October 7th, because I'm afraid of hearing that they do not care what happens to us, that they're ok with my people dying or that they've got us cast as only the bad guys, they do not see any goodness in us anymore. And I think for many of us, it's making us unable to metaphorically get up from October 7th, to get back out there into our diverse communities, to figure out how to go forward in this society.

It's going to take an incredible amount of courage to make those phone calls, to have those conversations, starting with the courage to not assume we know what any other person thinks. To remember that there are no monoliths, and an experience of bigotry, bias, hate, hard heartedness or indifference with one person does not mean that the next person will feel or behave similarly. It's not our job to be friends with people who don't care whether we live or die, but there are a lot of people out there who may have more nuanced perspectives, who do still have the capacity to see us, people with whom we can start a conversation. Because this society needs a reckoning, and we need to be part of it.

Last weekend, Martin Luther King Jr weekend, about 25 members of CBE got on a bus with about 25 members of Antioch Baptist Church, the Black Baptist church we've been partnering with for the last several years, to travel down to Washington DC together, to visit the African American history museum and the Holocaust museum together, as well as the Lincoln memorial and the King memorial, so that we could better understand each other's histories and each other's pain, so that we could better walk forward together to address racism and antisemitism in this country and in Brooklyn. Now, our partnership has not been easy over the last three years. Painful things have been said and done, and there were times when we didn't know that we'd come to this day. But we keep at it. And little by little we are knowing and seeing each other in our goodness. It was a beautiful, beautiful trip, at a time when we otherwise as Jews might feel so very alone.

It's time to consider all forms of old and new partnerships, friendships, relationships, coalitions – with Jews and non-Jews. None of them are going to be perfect, all of them are likely to include pain or at least discomfort. But we have to open ourselves to them. Because we are a tiny people, and we cannot go it alone. So even in this incredibly dark time, let us not give up on other people, just as we hope they will not give up on us. Let us strive to see our sisters and brothers and siblings even through the darkness, so that we can get up from October 7th, so that we can move forward together.

Shabbat Shalom.